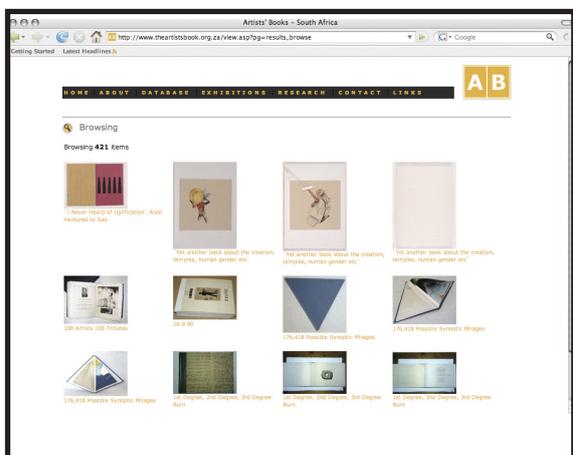**Case study interview with David Paton**
Artist / Academic
Senior Lecturer: Visual Art
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

www.theartistsbook.org.za

David Paton is the creator of this research website, made to share information, development and ideas around the South African Artist's Book over the last 15 years. It shows a vast range of the prolific artists' books production in South Africa, with a searchable database of artists, including images of their books. We met in July 2008 in Bristol to briefly discuss some key pointers of the state of the contemporary artist's book in South Africa.

History

In South Africa, there is still little public appreciation of the field of artists' books and the artists making them and there are, still, no formal graduate courses in the book arts at Universities in South Africa. However there is still a traceable history of book art production in South African universities and there exist a number of artists who are committed to the book arts in the country. The internationally renowned Johannesburg-based collector of artists' books, Jack Ginsberg, has tried to provide people with a sense of the difference between an artist's book and other art forms, through public access to his massive collection. Through my association with Jack, and the production of the website we have worked for an awareness of the artists' book and a more readily understanding of its vitality in the country. Now that more people are aware of and visit Jack's collection of artists' books for their own research, the subject is becoming more accepted. As more people explore and make artists' books, we are also seeing extremely interesting related work: book-objects, textual work, and box-based works.

Teaching

In their first year, Fine Art students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ, formerly the Technikon Witwatersrand) have a project in printmaking to produce hade-made books based on the Bill of Rights. This involvement with the book has its roots in an interest in the book arts by current and former staff in the department who include, Kim Berman, Philippa Hobbs, Sr. Sheila Flynn and Willem Boshoff. Many important book artists in South Africa: Giulio Tambellini, Flip Hatting, Sonya Strafella and Carol Hofmeyr amongst others, received their introduction to the genre as students of the Department. UJ's Graphic Design students undertake book-design in their 3rd and 4th year, but they print and bind them outside of the university.

At the Michaelis School of Fine Art (University of Cape Town) their printmaking department has, for many years, included tuition in fine press and artists' books, with post-graduate students sometimes producing artists' books as part of their output. Some of these books can be found in the School's *Katrine Harries Print Cabinet* (KHPK – found at http://cca. uct.ac.za/collections/print-cabinet/). Most Fine Art Departments of Universities of Technology (formerly 'Technikons') such as the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) have, over the years, taught aspects of papermaking, book-binding and the rudiments of the book arts. Some senior students from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, have, from time to time, explored the book as a means of conveying their ideas and body of practical work: Paul Emmanuel and Jonah Sack are two who have gone on to produce fine artists' books.

Some presses and books by artists

Pippa Skotnes and Malcolm Payne ran the Axeage Private Press in Cape Town in the 90s, (there are 10 examples of Skotnes's books on the online database at http://www.theartistsbook.org.za/view.asp?pg=pub_ item&ItemID=DP/129&show).

More recently, Skotnes's books include academic studies of the Cape San or Bushman such as the important *Claim to the country: the Archive of Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek*.

The master printmaker Malcolm Christian has run the Caversham Centre for Artists and Writers, in KwaZulu Natal, since it was founded in 1985 to give South African artists access to a professional collaborative printmaking studio (www.cavershamcentre.org). The centre has worked with important local artists who include: William Kentridge, David Koloane,

Zwelethu Mthethwa, Deborah Bell, Mmakgabo Sebidi, Robert Hodgins, Bonnie Ntshalintshal, Wonderboy Nxumalo, Ezekiel Mabote, Vulindlela Nyoni and Sarah Tabane.

Kim Berman and Nhlanhla Xaba founded the Artist Proof Studio (APS) in Newtown, Johannesburg, in 1991. Kim Berman is an Associate Professor specialising in Printmaking at the University of Johannesburg and Director of the Artist Proof Studio which works with artists and the wider community (http://www.artistproofstudio.org.za), she has produced many artists' books, collaboratively and individually (you can see examples of her work online at: http://www.theartistsbook.org.za/view. asp?pg=pub_item&ItemID=GB/10063&show).

The Artists' Press, founded by Tamarind Master Printer, Mark Attwood, in White River, Mpumalanga produces limited edition prints and artists' books using lithography, etching, monoprint and letterpress (you can see some of the books produced by The Artists' Press online at http://www.artists-press.net/artists-books.htm).

Perhaps the most committed South African book-artists include: Giulio Tambellini (who now resides in the UK), Paul Emmanuel, Stephan Erasmus, Cecil and Pippa Skotnes, Kim Berman, Peter Clarke, Chris Diedericks, William Kentridge, Judith Mason and Elizabeth Vels, but a glance at the number of entries on the database will indicate how widespread the artist's book has become in South African visual culture (view the list online at http://www.theartistsbook.org.za/view.asp?pg=pub_results&producers=yes)

David Paton's own research into South African artists' books

The www.theartistsbook.org.za website is a wonderful tool for research dissemination which includes:

A database of all South African artists' books researched to date.

Essays, journal articles, conference papers, talks and information of interest in the field.

A full online catalogue of the first exhibition of artists' books held in South Africa: *Artists' Books From the Ginsberg Collection*, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1996.

A digital catalogue of *Navigating The Bookscape: Artists' Books And The Digital Interface*. An exhibition curated by David Paton at the Aardklop Arts Festival, September 2006 and the University of Johannesburg FADA Gallery, October 2006.

Texts from Paton's dissertation: *South African Artists' Books and Book-objects Since 1960* with downloadable essays:

* A BRIEF HISTORY OF SIGNIFICANT PRECURSORS OF INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS' BOOKS

* TOWARDS A HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS

* WILLEM BOSHOFF AND THE BOOK

* TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL DESCRIPTION OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS

Many other downloadable essays including:

* IDEOLOGIES AND IDENTITIES IN DIGITAL ARTISTS' BOOKS: PARALLELS BETWEEN CHARLES SANDISON'S CARMINA FIGURATA AND WILLEM BOSHOFF'S KYKAFRIKAANS

* A CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AND THE ARTIST'S BOOK: TRACING SHARED AND UNDERMINED CONVENTIONS IN SELECTED EXAMPLES OF BOTH

* THE SOUND OF A BOOK: SOUND AS GENERATOR OF NARRATIVE IN THE RECEPTION OF SELECTED NEW MEDIA OBJECTS AS BOOKS. This is an article, published in *Image & Text*, 2007 Number 13. ISSN 1020 1497(pp 66-79) by Paton, about specific works in the exhibition: *Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface*. It explores sound as a narrative device in these digital artists' books, which fundamentally enhances the reading and reception of these works within the conventions and experience of the book. You can download the whole article as a PDF at: www.theartistsbook.org.za/view.asp?pg=research

For the *Navigating the Bookscape* exhibition, Paton selected seventeen artists' books from the collection of Jack Ginsberg:

These 17 books facilitated an argument that many of the conventions of the digital environment or electronic screen, i.e. scrolling, multiple page openings, hypertexts, interactivity and navigation, amongst other phenomena, have been presupposed, suggested or in fact achieved in the 'phenomenal' or Artist's Book and that the book, in the hands of the

artist, becomes infused with what Johanna Drucker (2003: np) terms "interpretive acts".

And so I attempted to explore the suggestive ways in which these 17 South African books were already virtual, where the codex, as an interactive and dynamic form, was grounded in what it did rather than what it was.[1]

(1. The reading of a codex remains one of the most interactive and hypertextual of experiences evidenced by a reader's ability to flip from place to place in a book and consult the index – itself a remarkable example of a hypertextual database.)

Paton also commissioned five artists who were given a brief to explore the relationship between the traditional codex and digital print, production or output through a range of options which included production of books through projected/electronic/web means, to creating a conventional book through digital means:

Kim Lieberman, Andre Venter, Paul Emmanuel, Giulio Tambellini and Marc Edwards to each produce a work which, while exploring elements of the digital environment, also attempted to acknowledge the conventions, and experience of, negotiating one's way through a book.

You can view the works produced for the exhibition and read the complete text online, where Paton makes some really interesting points about sound bookworks and digital media, one of which is:

A question which may be asked of technology, is where exactly its information, and by extension its content, resides when the machine is switched off? With the advent of digital memory which is internally calibrated through clocks, default memory settings, tiny batteries and other devices, information is (usually) stored and kept safe from loss. We have come to expect this every time we reboot our PCs and laptops, each time we switch our cell phones back on. In today's sophisticated software environment, an ability to remember every detail of data at the nano-moment before a power failure, and its ability to return that information without loss has become more than simply an advantage, it has become critical!

This ability to preserve and retain is, in my view, founded upon the printed page, upon the book's role of recording, retaining and redelivering the exact information again and again, faithfully and without corruption. It is perhaps this infallibility which caused the book to be burned and destroyed when deemed a carrier of corruption, while as a material object, it remained neutral and constant.

Yet it is perhaps a question one may begin to ask of the codex. If the digital clock keeps 'ticking' and updating, in the case of the computer or cell phone when switched off, while the book remains dormant when closed, does the digital not have some other advantage[2] in the manner in which its technological self can constantly update and thus change – a notion internationally acknowledged in that remarkable 1-second duration between 31:12:99:23:59:59 and 01:01:00:00:00:00 when so many people believed that their world would be traumatically transformed. (2007:4-5).

(2. Notwithstanding the fact that the purpose of *Navigating the Bookscape* was to undermine conventional notions of the advantages of the digital over paper-based books, the point here is to acknowledge the potential advantage of digital update as a space of change.)

The notes and further reading also offer invaluable background and pointers including, for example: *The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space* by Johanna Drucker, 2003 was a lecture presented to the Syracuse University History of the Book Seminar, April 25, 2003. The text and some images can be viewed online at: http://www.philobiblon.com/drucker/#johanna

Paton's most recent artist's book project, titled *Speaking in Tongues* (2009), is an installation incorporating a small format, 308-page unique hand-bound, digitally printed book, accompanied by a video projection.

Of the installation, Paton states:

The book is divided into 2 chapters: The 1st, *Speaking Digitally* comprises an annimated series of my yongest son, Liam's, subtly moving hands while gaming on-line. The 2nd chapter, *Digitally Speaking* is an animated series of my mother, Shirley's, dynamically moving hands while conducting a conversation with the artist. The book is designed

for multiple openings and multiple ways of
negotiating the narrative: it can be paged through
page by page or it can be opened in such a way
as to allow both chapters to be paged through
simultaneously. It is possible to open the book in its
entirity so that every page is visible; very unbook-
like. The concertina-fold structure hints at being a
possible flip book, given its small size, facilitating
the ability of the pages to be flipped so as to
pass like the video. But its structure hinders the
successful flipping of the pages in order to replicate
the video images which are intimately projected
ahead of it. Being difficult to handle, it refuses to
keep a stable form: a book with a mind of its own
is an idea that appeals to me.
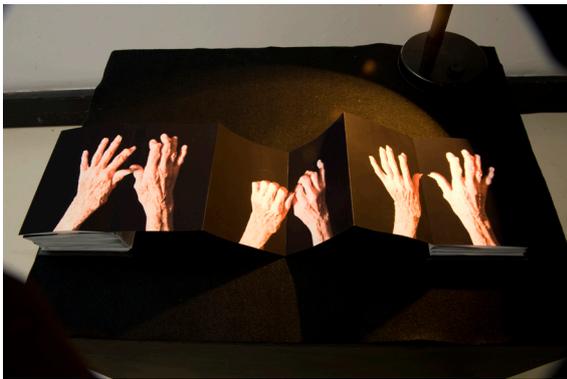
The many still drawings of my son's hands for
the rapidly animated 'sliced' section of the video
are locked onto a double page spread and given a
slower, more contemplative duration which they
do not receive in the video. Likewise, the long
contemplative sections of the video, which detail
my mother's hands, are reduced, in the book, to
a manageable size which can be haptically and
quickly manipulated. A book of active hands,
held in the hands and manipulated seemed like
an interesting idea. By avoiding a spine, the hands
pass across the gutter without visual and structural
interruption. The title refers to the faith I need to
make art in a space and time which actively fights
against this very activity as well as the faith I have
in a visual language which does not communicate
conventionally. My mother, who speaks in tongues,
and who has probably read more books than most,
might like this idea, while the idea of 'the passing of
clock-time' vs. psychological *duration* is, of course,
Henri Bergson's.