Sarah Bodman - I don’t know how long have you got to spend with us?

Doro Böhme – I have plenty of time; it’s already past the mid term in our semester and it slows down in terms of class visits to one or two per day. Now I mainly have to deal with individual students who visit with specific projects, whereas at the beginning of the term traffic is crazy. Every fall we think we can’t possibly top the number of visitors and then we do. We have all freshmen come through here.

Tom Sowden – From every course?

D – Each and every one. Each class visit takes about one hour. It’s mandatory in their first semester that they come here.

S – From any course?

D – Yes.

S – That’s brilliant!

D – So everyone will, at one point or another in the first semester, come through here. If the instructor has a specific focus for their class, which they usually do, they send me the syllabus in advance and then I select appropriate material, or the instructors select material themselves, and then the class looks at that. The visit also allows us to tell them about the collection, tell them about self-publishing as one possible vehicle for their future endeavours that they should be aware of.

T – Does that mean that every course engages with books in some way?

D – It's really a special collections tour that brings them here. There are a few special collections in the school, and this is one of them. Most of them also visit the Video Data Bank, a fabulous resource which collects the history of video as an art form from the ’60s onwards. They are one of the largest video art distributors in the world, but what they also have is a series of artists’ interviews, so the students can go there and listen to other artists speak about their work - it’s really beneficial for them.

S – Is the interest in books here because of you?

D – I don’t know if it’s because of me, but I hope my work is at least contributing to it. We tried to make sure that they insert us into the first year programme and the person who oversaw first year programme and curricular activities at that time was receptive to the idea.

S – It’s brilliant though, isn’t it.

D – I’ve been working here for eleven years, and Sally [Alatalo] worked here before me, I think for about two years. She was also faculty in printmaking at the time so obviously she could only make the room available on a very limited number of hours and mainly to printmaking and art history students, mostly by appointment only. Currently I’m the only staff member responsible for this collection, in addition to other special collections. I have been able to enlarge the collection’s audience with programming events and exhibitions, and by inserting myself into other on-campus activities. For example because of the readings I host here in collaboration with the writing department, people come in who might otherwise not think of the artist’s book collection as something that has anything to offer for them.

S – And then they realise that it’s totally appropriate for them.

D – Exactly, so now it’s writing, fibre, of course art history, visual communication, painting and drawing, etc. Except for maybe historic preservation pretty much every department of the school uses our material. Even the fashion students; they come for structures, one instructor brings them to look at folds and a book’s architecture and then they translate that into fabric. Film and New Media classes come in. The official name is a bit of a misnomer. It’s called artists’ book collection but there’s really a lot of other material too. It’s always been a collection that goes beyond the book format in whichever way you might stretch the definition; there are objects in here, sound art as well, zines, mail art, many types of formats. I don’t have to worry at all with “is it still book or is it not”, because I can collect it anyway if it benefits my users.

T – Who started the collection?

D – The library. They started to buy material in the ’60s as it was being produced and had the books circulate within the main collection. So all our Ruscha books have a library stamp and look quite used - they have no market value. I think sometime in the ’70s staff realised that these books should not be checked out, then pulled them all from the main collection and prepared a title and author list. The material was then separated and housed behind the reference desk. Already there was one librarian who got really involved in book making, wanted
Joan Flasch Artists’ Books Collection, at the John M. Flaxman Library
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA
to do more with this collection and started to think about a database. He then worked out a list of descriptors specifically tailored to this type of material that was later used by a lot of other libraries, and he started to design and implement a very helpful database. Unfortunately he migrated it, over the course of decades, across various platforms and it eventually grew into something no one else knew how to work with. He then died unexpectedly and we couldn’t transfer these records into our online database.

S – Oh no!

D – We ended up creating the interface we’re using now, the one you can access on the web, but we still have his database because we haven’t been able to transfer all the records over. We’re still in the process of transferring them manually, with the help of volunteers.

S – It does look really good, the database.

D – Oh, thank you, I like it too. It was mainly the work of our digital resources librarian who just left - for a better job.

T – So you were saying you collect anything around the book?

D – First of all I have a fairly limited budget. There are other places in the city [Chicago] that I can rely on, for example the Newberry Library, which is a private research library that collects along the history of printmaking and fine press printing. So already that’s an area I don’t have to worry about at all. The Museum of Contemporary Art has a fantastic artists’ book collection. I’m not quite sure who keeps adding to it and what. The Art Institute of Chicago has a prints and drawings collection, so I don’t need to worry about broadsides. I just keep our curricular departments in mind, and Columbia College and other neighbouring institutions, since everyone in the city and beyond, many other institutions use us.

S – So if you were a student at Columbia you’d be more likely to come here?

D – Oh, definitely, they all come here since they don’t have their own in-school collection.

S – And you collect ephemera around books as well?

D – Yeah, everything anyone ever sends me that is remotely connected to the collection I will keep. Unfortunately at this point there is no web access for our ephemera files, that’s one of the next projects.

S – That’s a huge project though, isn’t it?

D – Yes, but even if we just had a generic record for each artist’s or publisher’s file which says it may contain such and such material. Right now we don’t have anything even though there’s such great stuff in there.

T – Is that available to people as well?

D – Yeah; if they come in and want to find out about a specific artist, we check to see if we have something. If so we’ll just give them the file.

S – They’re so lucky!

D – I think they are! For example with material on Printed Matter in New York, institutions like that who have been in existence for a long time - we have a nice timeline of their activities.

T – So are you collecting any digital artworks?

D – Well, sometime around 2000, web art was just coming to my attention and I was worried about specific works I had seen disappearing again, and I contacted the artists directly; this was still at a stage where they could burn the work onto a CD for me and sent me that. And then shortly after that the medium basically exploded with interactivity and from that point on all I could do was take snapshots of it since there were no longer finite pieces. But then I’m just too small of a one-woman operation here to have the time and means to concern myself with preservation of electronic works. Other people are doing it, and with better expertise and resources. I’m sure you’ve seen it on the website – we have this link to web and net art, our “archives” now consist of just bookmarking interesting works. Once the links are dead…

T – That’s it, right.

D – I still have these early pieces on CD, but I just couldn’t keep it up.

T – No.

D – I rarely buy something that is just in digital form, usually work that’s in conjunction with a book, but if it’s an artist whose work we have and now he or she has a project that ends up as a DVD, then yes, I buy it too.

T – OK.

D - I’ve really found it so rewarding for visitors to not worry at all about definition issues, but to have this mass of different approaches and formats and see it bounce
off of each other, and they start feeling like ‘I can really do anything, I can really select the medium that’s most appropriate for this specific concept, no matter what it is’. They benefit if, in addition to books, they can also listen to sound works or see work on the computer. However I have noticed over the last years a definite desire to make something that they can touch; with all the digital overload, it’s so clear.

S – Part of what we’re looking at is how things like e-books will be collected, or if they’ll be collected. We were with Maria White, from Tate Britain last week and we asked if artists’ starting publishing more and more on e-books would they collect them? She was just like no – it’s not part of anything that we do and if it was it would be the responsibility of the gallery to collect that, it’s not the responsibility of the library at all.

T - And I think she was saying, a bit like you’ve been saying as well, when you start collecting that, trying to preserve it, to keep it in a format that is still readable in the future. It’s not a route she wants to go down.

D - I just can’t, you know?

S – But I suppose it’s different here because you’ve got digital collections elsewhere in the school, with film and stuff, so…

D – Right, and ideally I’m hoping for that.. And we’ve just got a new president here at the school - there are new presidents all over this country - who’s very interested in getting more collaborations going with the museum, because the institution is still unbelievably divided, these two parts: school and museum. We are under one umbrella administrative layer on the top, but I don’t think the museum sees that relationship as being very beneficial for them. The school maybe more so, especially the art history department of course.

S – Does the museum belong to the school?

D- Yes, and for the students it’s great. It’s really great for them. I’ll show you our main library later, very small, but the school can keep it that way because there’s the fifth largest art library in the country just across the street in the museum and the students have access to that.

S – Wow, oh, imagine that, that’s lucky.

D – That library has everything, it’s unbelievable! I used to work there while I went to grad school, it’s fantastic. There is collaboration between us librarians, but for example digital works – the museum department for contemporary art would obviously concern themselves with that.

T – And they are doing that, are they?

D –I would hope so. By proxy I would delegate it to them.

S – It’s not your job, no.

D- However I should think more about how to make sure that digital works stay accessible. For example the exhibition catalogue for the ‘Consistency of Shadows’ exhibition, I recently put in the CD but it didn’t work any longer on my newest Mac, I simply couldn’t open it. I can still open it on my PC and that show was, what, only five years ago?

S – I suppose you think that, with a little CD, it will keep you going for about twenty years.

D – Yeah. I was more worried about the CD decaying, but of course the software changes so quickly.

S – It’s what they said at the V&A, in the summer we were talking about changes in digital and where do you actually stop. If someone had done an artwork on a cassette and then you don’t have a machine to play a cassette on anymore, do you transfer it to a CD? Has that ruined the authenticity of the piece or is it more important to keep it playable?

T – And then do you collect a machine for that work?

D – Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, we need to keeping everything: record player and cassette player.

S – Well, it’s having the space though isn’t it? To house all of those things and then what happens when they break? Do you get another one? Is there even another one?

D – That’s what made me worry about web art in the first place. I have books in the collection that include these big floppy discs. I called Apple’s archives, but even they can’t play it anymore. One is in a book by Paul Zelevansky, and I thought I’ll transfer it so that at least I have the data accessible somewhere, somehow but sofar I have not been able to.

S – Someone, somewhere must have.

D – I’ve even contacted the artist; he says he is in the same predicament, he has no record of it.

T – But then aren’t some of these things meant to be ephemeral? Like web art, isn’t it meant to just have a short lifespan?
D – Maybe, but still the librarian part of my heart bleeds. Fluxus ephemera was made to be ephemeral and maybe no one was really worrying about them but now it’s really good to have them around. All the Futurists’ little leaflets - would be great to see them. Things will die and for the better, sometimes, but at least I want to keep a few examples.

S – Yes, so people can see a pattern in publishing. The fact that it is so easy for people to publish on the internet or to produce e-books, or even using Blurb, anyone can do anything now, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that everything that is made is good.

D – No!

S – It could mean a lot more to sift through before you find the good stuff.

T – But I suppose with collecting, you have to have some form of quality control so you choose what to collect and what not to.

D – Yes, and many artists in the past have been such bad archivists of their own work. I think that might have changed, but even today they often don’t keep good records. Now that forms of researching and archiving are one of the hot topics in contemporary art, maybe it’s going to be different.

S – Yes, and also I think with computers, people are a bit more willing to type up. They have records of things buried in their computer, but they are there.

D – Yes, I know. It was the same with my own work - I couldn’t care less; once a piece was done someone else could worry about keeping it up. That’s very foolish.

S – So are you seeing many artists sending you, or showing you, books that are published through services like blurb or lulu?

D – Yes, not a lot yet, but it’s definitely coming. Clif [Clifton Meador], that’s all he currently does on the lower end of his production. Again, I haven’t had much time to figure out what that means for a collection like ours in terms of longevity or preservation issues. I’m not even sure what the printing process involves.

T – It’s a form of laser printing that they use.

D – And I have to assume that neither ink nor paper are archival.

S – Probably not, no.

T – But then the Ruscha’s books, they weren’t particularly archival, just mass-produced.

D – Right, right. But he offset [lithography printed] his.

T – Yes.

S – But you’re OK with that?

D – Yes. This is a teaching institution, and an instructional collection. I’m as much worried about longevity as I am about making it available.

S – You’re not saving for the nation.

D – Yes. For the visitors to see what’s currently being produced, how people make their ideas and concepts available, that’s my main overarching topic.

S – But you’re ok with those kinds of publications? Because there was a discussion on the Book_Arts-L the other week about whether books published by print on demand services are artists’ books? Some people were saying ‘no, of course it isn’t’, then many others were saying ‘well, of course it is’.

T – I think the thing that some people objected to was that there was no hand of the artist in the physical production.

D – But we have so many great examples of that type of work. There is such blurriness between disciplines and increasingly so. If Roni Horn says this is what I want my book to look like, but then a graphic designer helps her with the layout, who am I to say that this is not an artists’ book, that the graphic designer’s contribution makes it less artistic. I mean, I’m just not concerned about this as a dilemma. If it’s a work of art, in any published format, and not simply documenting art then it falls within my parameters of collecting. I think I’m not a very good example of an artists’ book collection for your project!

S – Oh no, you are, you’re a brilliant example because you are progressive in the way you collect things, and you’re very supportive of artists as well.

T – And inclusive.

D – I’m definitely inclusive! I missed one talk at the conference last Saturday [New York Book Fair 2008]. It was about institutional collecting, which of course I would have loved to hear but I had to fly back [to Chicago]. From what I know, other institutions have a very different approach, and are more concerned with the craft aspect. But that sometimes does us no favours.
ABTREE diagrams by Andrew Blackley (above) and Doro Böhme (below), 2009
S – Yes, it almost turns it the other way, because there may be no content, or the content might not have any value. There’s so much effort put into producing this beautiful object that it doesn’t even actually matter what goes into it, does it?

D – Right, right, and also consider just the type of access we have. People come in, they wash their hands, and then they can look at whatever they want, for any length of time, any amount of material, without much intervention or restriction on our part. Beautifully crafted and delicate books could not support this type of access.

S – And they also cost a fortune.

D – Yes, I would have to restrict access, and I just don’t want to do this. I’d rather leave it open. We love it when people know nothing about the format or the collection, sometimes they don’t even know what they want to look at, and then we talk with them and eventually find out a very specific concern of theirs, or maybe they’ve done some sort of printing, and then we start pulling material and they get all excited and we keep pulling more. We really enjoy this moment of liberation for them, when they see what all is possible and available.

S – So when you’re cataloguing something, do you say it is just an artist’s book, or do you have other subcategories?

D – I have a pre-cataloguing worksheet that I fill out when I get the item, which then goes on to the cataloguer. I don’t create the actual record, but I formulate a notes field that describes the piece and I assign from the descriptors that we have established.

S – So essentially everything is a book when it comes in?

D – It can be a book, it can be a multiple, a ‘zine, a poster…. Only exhibition catalogues and reference books are catalogued separately.

T – So, roughly how many books do you collect a year?

D – We’re a little behind. Well, we’re not a little behind we’re a lot behind in our cataloguing. I already inherited about 1,000 books or so in the backlogs and we’re barely getting through with what I buy on an annual basis. There are only two cataloguers for the entire library. The pre-cataloguing is rather time consuming, then the work gets photographed so that we can put the cover up on our website, then it goes on to the cataloguers and they have so many other things to deal with in the library. For this collection, we are adding maybe 300, 350 titles a year.

S – That’s a lot.

D – In the years that I have worked here the collection, its size has more than doubled. We have well over 4,000, and it grows pretty rapidly. Others, MoMA for example, are of course much bigger.

S – Yes, but that’s their job, isn’t it!

D – (laughs). There are times during the semester I can’t do anything other than patron services, I wouldn’t even have time to buy anything and deal with the paperwork, but now [in November] I can buy and catalogue. Then, during January, traffic picks up again. The public service is really intense for a few months every fall and every spring, and during that time it has complete priority.

S – It’s a pretty demanding job, really.

D – Yeah, it’s a good job.

(Andrew Blackley, Ramon Cartwright and Elissa Papendick enter the room and join in the discussion)

T and S – Hello.

S – So what are your jobs here?

Andrew Blackley – We are the assistants to the special collection. We monitor classes and individual visits, but also work with the cataloguing, scanning and…

D – …everything else! They help with shows, they work on other archives, correspondence,…

S – We’re doing a project for the next 15 months and what we’re trying to do is publish some ideas that will help unify the Book Arts a little bit. To say that this is a really big field and everybody is a part of it. So what we’re doing is trying to bring everyone together who are disagreeing about what is and isn’t an artist’s book, I suppose is the simplest way of summing it up. So we’re just trying to find some ideas of what people think are and aren’t.

T – We were keen to come here because it’s such an inclusive collection. We were just discussing how the selection policy doesn’t have a very narrow definition of an artists’ book, it just seems to be lots of different things all based around the book.

A – I think there’s also separation between an artist’s book and an artist’s publication. A book doesn’t have to be a codex, but I think there’s something really beneficial achieved when you have an editioned, produced, disseminated, distributable product, versus something
that is playing upon the medium of the book. I’m not sure if one is better than the other, but I think there’s a separation that could be identified. I don’t think it would be – I think it might be beneficial actually.

S – We made this diagram (showing a copy of the ABTREE diagram classifying all branches of artists’ books under the term Artists’ Publications) to try and get people to think about how artists’ books are classified. We were trying to think of a word that you could use that wouldn’t be artist’s book necessarily, if you were going to include things like podcasts and screen based work? Then could you still say artist’s book or could you say artists’ publishing?

T – The term publishing didn’t go down very well.

S – It went down like a lead balloon.

Ramon Cartwright – A huge umbrella under which all this exists?

S – Yes, but a lot of people were really against that, because once you took the word book away then it changed everything. Even we believe that the word book should still be in their somewhere as the main header.

T – But we’re not putting this out as definitive, it’s there to be talked about.

A – I also think there’s a lot of other lateral moves within this. For example under the artisan umbrella, how does a hand made book work with that.

S – So the zine could be in both?

A – Absolutely.

D – Yeah, I think it will become much more of a web.

S – That would be nice, if that could be our final diagram, it would just be a crazy jumble of everything and then just put books on top.

A – I’m also really interested in how books, artists’ books and publications function in 2008, as opposed to say, the 60’s. With a lot of information coming from the Internet and digitally, books while they’re finite they also don’t have to worry about being updated and deleted. I think that the finite or materialist character, or I guess nature of a book is important. We relate to books in a particular way today rather than we do a web page. But then that brings in things like the e-book and the digital book and printing-on-demand in general. That really changes the traditional method of printing books where you print 200 of these and they sit as inventory, until you distribute them or sell them.

S – Have any of you published through blurb or lulu?

A – I have, yeah.

S – Did that work out?

A – Yeah, I it was OK. I print myself so I would rather do it myself. Not as a creation of labour, but it was not really good printing, and it’s also very expensive.

T – Do you also find it’s quite constricting? Because you really have a limited choice.

A – Absolutely, they set up a template or two or three and that’s all you have to work with.

T – Going back to what you were saying about a book in 2008 as opposed to one in the 60’s. The idea that they were talking about, with conceptual art in particular, was the democratic multiple. Is that not now the Internet, because it’s so much more democratic than a book can ever be? Just distributing a book is pretty difficult.

A – I think we automatically think that the Internet can be more democratic than it may actually be, and a book once material and printed, doesn’t have the fear of being deleted or regulated, or falling under searching laws. Or only available to those with, I mean most of us have computers at home, but when we say most we’re talking about the community which we live and work in, not everyone has internet access at home.

R – But what I do agree with is the idea that the Internet, or work that exists in a digital format invites participation, it’s a heightened level of participation. Books you handle them, it’s an intimate situation at the same time. But at the same time I think the artists’ book, largely those from the past, have become in some way fetishistic. Objects that were this subversive act outside of the gallery system, but now these things have been appropriated and they are part of the gallery system.

S – Like with the Ruscha books, they were like three dollars originally, but now they’re so expensive.

D – The publisher in the end went bankrupt because he couldn’t make money; he literally had to stop publishing Ruscha’s books.

S – And we saw them, how much were they at Frankfurt at the book fair?

T – One was 3,000 Euros, around about that sort of price.
An updated ABTREE diagram sent by Doro Böhme from the Joan Flasch Artists’ Books Collection in 2010, which can be cut and folded to make a reversible book. See page 14.
A – Whereas I think at least the philosophy of conceptual art still exists within the means of digital format. Here’s this thing you can’t necessarily put a price tag on. It’s sort of ephemeral information.

Elissa Papendick – I wonder what happens though when you print it out, how has that changed the form. Is that successful as a printout or is it only successful in the art form that an artist made it, which was online?

T – Yes, we also met a Polish artist, Radosław Nowakowski, who is working with hypertext, so really can only exist online. He particularly likes it because he likes that unpredictability of it, there’s no set pathway through the text, and really he can only achieve that with hypertext – he couldn’t achieve that with the printed book.

S - We were saying it was impossible to print out. His friend tried to do it, and he had one sentence that just went right across for ever and ever and ever.

E – Ah, see that’s good, because that way you can’t have a permanent copy of it.

S – No.

E – I like that.

T – And he’s also distributing it for free, because it’s just available on his website, which is quite a nice

A – That’s another thing, the artists who let you download pdf’s of their books, that’s exciting.

S – So does anyone have any opinions on what they don’t think an artists’ book is? Anything that some people are saying are artists’ books and you think, no actually they’re not? For instance we’ve been looking at things that people with phone, Bluetooth, phone, texts, e-books, hypertext. Does that still fit into your world of what a book is?

R – I think it has to and I really think that that’s one of the most beneficial experiences of working here. My vocabulary has broadened in some way, you know, just through experience and helping to catalog material that falls under this umbrella – as you have it defined in artists’ publishing, but we’ll just say artists’ books, for the sake of eloquence. I think that there has to be some flexibility in terms of a definition, in order to progress. In order to leave a pathway open for change in the future.

A – I think there should be a definite relationship with media. In the 60’s books were a commercial, cultural production, which is a cultural production of it’s time. We still obviously make books and printed publications currently, but I think a relationship to, as media progresses, Bluetooth, the internet or whatnot is an appropriate relationship. I don’t know if this is a preference of mine or if this is my definition of artists’ books, but I think that the individual hand made book occupies a really awkward space. I don’t think it carries the same spirit of publishing and artists’ books than somebody who embraces media. I’ll probably leave it at that being a preference, but I stand by the fact that I think that this is printed material, or printed media, and that could be just two or it could be two thousand or the internet, but I think that it should be an immediate process.

S – We heard somewhere that because of internet publishing and e-readers and everything else, the pressure has been taken away from the book as a physical object, to be the carrier of the world’s knowledge, so that it could be just a book again and people could really think about which book they wanted or whether the book was worth being made. It made the physical book much more special because then you didn’t get all the terrible books being published, they could just be on the net and you could download them.

T – One thing I’m interested in is what are your backgrounds in? Are you all students?

R – Currently students in the printmaking department, in the print media department.

A – I’m also a graduate student in the print media department.

E – I’m in the art history and arts administration dual-degree programme, and I was a cataloguer before I came here; there’s definitely interest in libraries but specifically in artists’ books.

S – It seems like the print media programme is a really strong course to be on for books.

R – On that course, just as we’re discussing here, there’s a lot of different opinions of what a book is or what a book should be, or what’s a good book or what’s a bad book. There are courses in publishing and offset printing, there’s also bookbinding, which is very different. Whereas letterpress is in a completely different department.

S – Really?

A - Right, that’s part of the visual communications department.
D – There are four courses offered within Printmaking and labelled ‘artists’ books’. Depending on the instructor they really teach practical skills as well as the history and concept, some more skill-focused than others.

R – There’s also exploratory thematic classes like a course called ‘book material-form and structure’, Sally (Alatalo) taught that. And you’re right, the fibres department teaches courses in book making and zines and screen printing.

A – There are two or three art history classes that have a relationship towards this, with artists’ books as art, text as art or related phenomena.

S – That’s good.

D – In general I get to see more books that have been made in the visual communications or in the writing departments than in the printmaking department.

R – I think so too, yeah.

A – Yes, I agree.

E – There was a woman who was just in here who was taking a painting-bookbinding class. I hadn’t heard of that class before.

T – So are books a feature across most of the courses here?

A – Well, I know that in the first year programme, as a freshman, there’s a research studio class where they all come through here (the Joan Flasch collection in the library) and they all have to fulfill a book related project.

T – So that’s more about the research side of it than production.

R – Right, they do accomplish a book project in that class, but it’s a research studio class.

S – But you do actually learn about the contextual history of artists’ books as well, it’s not just that you learn how to make them, you also learn why they exist and everything, that’s good.

A – We have a really open curriculum, no one’s going to force you to make a book, but you could spend four years only making books – it’s really open.

S – That’s really nice because you’ll find in a lot of places you’ll be taught how to make it, how to print it, how to bind it, but not necessarily anything about why it’s there in the world in the first place.

T – But then also you’ve got such a fantastic resource here to refer back to.

S – Yes, that’s true – how could anyone not know what an artists’ book was by the time they’ve come through – it’s a good way to do it, get them in the first year and then keep…

E – Yeah, and then a lot of the classes just keep coming again and again.

R – It is pretty fascinating, it becomes this crash course in what special collections is, it creates a really great mood of research and practice, knowing what’s available to you as a student.

S – I think one hour in here as a first year and I’d have just been in here all day every day.

E – With some of the first years who come in here, they don’t know what it’s about or how to interact with the books - it’s very surprising.

S – So when you come here as students, do you come straight from high school to university?

R – That’s pretty normal, that’s not an unusual way of doing it.

E – There are people who do take a few years off, but they are usually an anomaly.

S – But then they’re taking their years off to go and do anything, not to have a foundation.

R – But I think what you’re discussing is like a core studio practice maybe. As a freshman or a sophomore you’re taking really general classes within various modes of practice and by the time you reach your junior year, at that point maybe you branch out and have a focus. As Andrew already pointed out, this school is interdisciplinary as a philosophy, so it’s not really guiding you in any way or holding your hand, in the sense that who will be a sculptor, and who will be in fashion. You do have some flexibility in terms of what all your practices will include.

S – So really I suppose there’s no reason to think that anybody, before they get that first year research class through here, would know what an artists’ book was. You wouldn’t know that when you’re at school or anything?

D – You could, if you had a really good high school teacher. We’re teaching summer programmes for high school teachers, we’re having high school classes come in here during the semester, and I’m going into public
schools with selections of books.

S – So it is a possibility then?

D – Yes, definitely.

S – Because I think in Europe that probably isn’t.

T – I think it’s quite alien to a lot of people when they first encounter them, and they don’t really encounter them at all until they reach University level.

S – No, although they do at Minnesota.

T – Yeah, that’s great. We’ve just come from Minneapolis and at the centre for book arts there they work with kids from three, upwards. So they know what artists’ books are from quite a young age.

D – Chicago doesn’t have anything like Minneapolis and New York, a centre for book arts. Columbia (College Chicago) offers community classes, and I’ll be teaching one in the spring as part of the continuing studies programme here. Anyone can take such a class, but there is little else in regards to artists’ books specifically.

S – But then you’ve got a lot of universities here, haven’t you? I mean we noticed that, walking around yesterday, there are so many departments of every college, every other building is a university, so I suppose you don’t need a centre if you’ve got your collection, the museum’s got a collection…

D – Except that it’s hard for the general public to take classes in these institutions. They can come in here to view work, but they don’t have access then to any printmaking facilities.

S – And it’s whether they know. I think obviously the centre at Minneapolis was so big and successful because there wasn’t anything else like it.

T – I think they’re quite exceptional as well; I haven’t come across anything else like it that does that.

A – With Microsoft Office and Creative Suite, we’re all printers and publishers and designers and editors, and about twenty years ago maybe that wasn’t the same relationship people had to printing. Like the fact that we have a printer right here and that I can just print something on a whim is really different than it used to be.

R – Do you have a written definition of an artist’s book?

S – I think it’s an artist’s book if the artist who made it says it’s a book.

T – Actually there’s a bit of an argument going on, well, a very small argument. We’ve got a forum running as part of the project we’re working on, and we’ve been talking about this and both of us, I think, come from that viewpoint of if an artist says it’s a book, it’s a book. But there are a lot of people who don’t like that.

S – But we’re just trying to start lots of arguments, just to get people’s views because obviously not everyone agrees, but sometimes if you’re talking to people and they do all agree there’s not really much point in doing it. When we have it up online we can’t really say some generic statement that everyone’s going to go ‘yeah, yeah that’s fine, that’s broad enough to fit me in and them in’, so we’re trying to be a bit more argumentative on the forum, hoping that we get some strong reactions for and against so that it actually makes more people join in and talk, although we’ve had a lot of people join the forum that these are not reproductions or evidence of some other art practice, but that this is the art. And then it becomes this different way of engaging with the work.

A – And you’re touching it, and you’re experiencing it.

S – Right. You’re not going to get this with any other kind of work, are you, especially in a gallery, you’re not going to go up and touch everything.

E – Yeah, I think that’s really important.

T – Do you think digital has freed up book arts in any way? Just the ease of producing a book now, you could do it at home, it doesn’t take that much equipment in order to be able to print?

R – I’m noticing that a lot more students are creating a lot more zines, and are creating their own artist’s book work, and removing the stigma of self publishing. Self publishing is becoming ever easier in some way.

T – Has the quality gone down, though?

R – Right, right, right.
and not actually say anything yet.

D – So you don’t think that for example sequencing or a few other basic book parameters will do?

T – I don’t often see artists’ who haven’t worked with that and are then calling their work a book, in fact I don’t think I have ever seen that. You often see that when someone is referring to it as a book, the origins are in the book. For example, sequence or narrative. I suppose you could argue then if somebody presented, I don’t know I can’t think of an example,

S – A potato.

T – Yeah, then I’d like to know why, I’d like them to explain it. And if they were convincing enough, I’d take it.

S – But at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, they were saying how the tray of cupcakes was a book?

T – Were they?

S – They were just practising explaining books. So the tray was the cover, and the covers of the cupcakes were the pages, and the contents were the cupcakes, and they were saying at this rate we could make anything a book.

D – On that panel about web art that I mentioned earlier [in New York], the first question was if these web works are artists’ books, and I think they are not. However, the work still has its value in a collection like ours for other reasons, but I wouldn’t think of it as a form of book art.

S – But is it that you wouldn’t think of it as book art for the collection, or you wouldn’t think of it as book art at all ever, personally?

D – I would think it has its place in this collection, but I wouldn’t think of it as book art at all, ever.

S – I think that there are variations on that, some I think, yeah, actually are quite successful web-based books, but some that you’re just like, no that doesn’t really need to be.

T – I suppose it depends on what it is, because Radoslaw Nowakowski, who we mentioned earlier, he comes from a book background. Originally, it was all done on a typewriter, and could only be produced in small editions, otherwise it would attract the attention of the authorities. From there it has built up and when we interviewed him it was almost like he’s been working towards this web-based hypertext work, this is what he’s really wanted to do, but he’s been waiting for the technology. So I would still class that really as book arts because of the origins of his work, even though it will only ever exist on the web.

S – But then there is a narrative running through it. It’s hypertext but it’s a hypertext, novel or artists’ book just without a clearly defined sequence.

T – Interestingly, he doesn’t class himself as a book artist.

S – No, he says he’s just a writer. We say you’re an artist. But then he doesn’t classify himself as a book artist because of the way other people in Poland perceive book art. When he comes to the UK he’s a book artist, and he’s actually done fairs alongside us as a book artist, but at home he’s a writer. So it’s those kinds of things we’re looking at for the project. Trying to have some kind of universal language I suppose, something so that someone can say, I’m an X, or that my books are this, and anyone anywhere would understand.

T – Perhaps an impossible task.

D – Yeah, maybe.

S – Well, that’s what we’re going to propose should happen, we’re not going to actually make it happen.

T – Actually if I was going to get rid of a classification from artists’ books, it would be the artisan book because so much of what I see there is craft. It’s somebody else’s text, it’s somebody else’s images, it’s just beautifully produced.

T – And that’s the least artist’s book to me, out of all of it.

S – But then you’re going to get the old school who disagree.

R – Yeah, that’s the major argument right there. It’s those two camps and what the philosophies were between the two. That is the source of contention.

S – That’s not saying if somebody made their own beautiful letterpress book you’d get rid of that, it’s just that it is fine press and not an artist’s book.

T – For me content is the most important part. In most of the cases the content is there but it’s not their content. It’s somebody else’s and that’s where I have the problem.

A – But then what about those whose artistic practice is that of publishing? Then that’s another interesting fine line.

S – What do you mean?
A – Like if a printer or publisher who sees their artistic practice as that of a collaborator. I mean I know that’s very different than these books, but there’s that too.

S – Yeah, yeah. That’s true, I don’t see anything wrong with collaborating.

T – No.

A – There’s a lot of good in it actually.

T – Yes, providing it’s not on a purely technical basis, it has to be a collaboration of ideas.