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Books I collect

It's horses for courses, each method has its own strengths and advantages, on the whole I'm not biased for or against any method in my collecting.

I have books made using: Inkjet, laser printed, letterpress, linocut, woodcut, screenprint, etching, lithography, altered book, photography, hand-drawn/Letraset, offset, hand written, hand coloured, blank books, mixed media.

ABTREE

I have indicated all those that I collect/have collected but I don't collect in terms of these categories. I would suggest the shown categories are not mutually exclusive anyway. I would find it very difficult to classify many of my books by this scheme of classification.

I am mainly concerned myself with artists' books of all kinds. There are many other ways of classifying these as is done for making interesting shows/exhibitions by themes, type of organising ideas/contents, binding method etc.

And what about empty (blank)/white books (a whole conference last year was devoted to these), books mainly about paper and mark making, diaries, drawings/sketchbooks/notebooks. Many artists' books have elements of many different bits of this diagram. And we would argue about the definition of each of these categories.

Technology and Tradition

Over my 35 years of collecting I have moved with the times. In the early days I would have been collecting letterpress books and occasionally livres d'artistes. But then I moved to more democratic, cheaper publications: photocopied, offset...And moved on again.

I don't see collecting books that are mainly traditionally printed as an issue. Each printing method has its specific strength and it is for the artist to choose the appropriate/right one, and make it work. Some digital printing of images in pamphlets is quite superb, e.g. by Colin Sackett.

The advances with computers and technology have enabled almost anybody to print their own books –

'table-top publishing'. It has lowered the threshold of resources and skills / abilities required, with the result that a lot of indifferent work is produced. Fewer good books now than in the 70s?

If you have collected books that have used a variety of production methods, which do you feel have been successful/unsuccessful and why?

I could give examples of books that have used each of the methods of printing to perfection in the past. I am struggling a little with digital recent methods, as the real classics/masterpieces are probably still waiting to be made.

As for new technologies influencing my purchasing – well, I can only collect what is being produced and inevitably the trend will continue to move towards digital production methods. I am not against that at all and not biased against this: just looking for great works! I have not considered buying work that is viewed or listened to solely on digital equipment. To me, the joy of the book format is that I can handle it, turn the pages, feel the paper, use all my senses. I don't think purely digital equipment will ever do this for me in the same way. I just don't like the idea of the 'book' existing only in digital format. I am not a computer geek and would not be sure that I could ever see the art/books in the exact format the artist envisaged.

Purchasing

I buy books mainly from the artists/publishers directly but without using their websites: they are people that I'm in touch with anyway and often have known for decades. Also from: AbeBooks - I trawl this regularly and extensively, and it perhaps accounts for 50% of my spending or more! At fairs (but rarely new to me artists), it's mainly my 'regular' artists I meet there. At a few shops (Koenig, Boekie Woekie, bookartsbookshop, Tate Modern).

I don't purchase via the Internet. I hate print-on-demand websites, I don't like Amazon links at all, and I have never purchased anything from EBay, nor from gallery websites. I only use artists' websites for reference/lists of books made, as a follow up on people/artists I've met at fairs. I have hardly ever bought this way directly but the websites are useful for information.

Bookshops and galleries will find ways to turn anything digital back to something more portable/traditional by boxing it up, turning it into a traditional

publication, the way they managed to sell the work of minimal/conceptual artists in the end like conventional art. The market for collecting purely digital media will be very limited. Collectors will be few. It will circulate mainly between like-minded artists and a few college libraries will feel compelled to support their courses!

It is always said that the greatest problem for artist bookmakers is the distribution of these books. However this is also the problem for collectors: where to find them, how to know who makes the best books, how much to pay, how to go about building a collection: passively (what you happen to see) or actively (seeking out the best ones anywhere).

I may enlarge on all this in talking separately on how I currently/in recent times have gone about acquiring books and how this compares with my practice of collecting say in 1995 (before the proliferation of digital media), when I wrote some notes on this same subject on the occasion of a talk I gave at an ARLIS conference.*

The Future of the Book

No, I don't think there is any limit to the definition of an artist's book. If an artist says, this is an artist's book, it is – for me at any rate. (Not so sure though, if what Book Works produces now, are artists' books at all!)

I would say that an artist's book is any publication that is not *about* art or the artist but is to be a work of art *itself*. I still think many of the best artists' books defy the rules of any classification we can devise.

I am not worried about the future of the book and retaining artisan skills at all. I am more concerned that with all this proliferation of bookmaking, discrimination and critical engagement is getting lost.

* See the second download JanssenII.pdf:
Artists' Books: Still Collecting ... further thoughts, update 2008, John Janssen - a self-interview.

This case study forms part of the Centre for Fine Print Research's AHRC funded project 2008 - 2010: *What will be the canon for the artist's book in the 21st Century (In an arena that now includes both digital and traditionally produced artists' books, what will constitute the concepts of artists' publishing in the future?)* <http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/canon.htm>