

Ann Tyler, Veronika Corzo-Duchardt, Justyna Palka, Mark Addison Smith, Heejin Kim, Renate Gokl, Bethany Armstrong, staff and students from the School of the Arts Institute of Chicago interviewed by Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden 3rd November 2008

Sarah Bodman – We are really interested in finding out what you feel about artists' books, how they're contextualised. Especially as here you have a college with artists' books running through many courses.

Bethany Armstrong – I think there are still quite a few people who are so in the traditional vein that they cannot see past a cover and pages and another cover as a book. I brought a representation of a book to a University that I had sewn to the skirt of a dress, where almost all of the pages were just photos, and they really did not like it.

I think it's gorgeous as an object, but I also told them that what was important to me was that in a situation this would be read by multiple readers at one time. So I suggested they go through this process, and they were going page to page to page, as if it was a race, and there was no implication that it should be a race. I expected it to be a much calmer experience. I think that there is an interesting stigma with artists' books just what makes a book. If it has a narrative arch, shouldn't it be a book?

S – Yes, well what was Jeff [Rathermel, director of Minnesota Center for Book Arts] saying? If it's got content?

B – If it's got content? Right, so if a picture is worth a thousand words, and I had three hundred and sixty pages sewn onto a dress, that's a whole lot of words – but apparently not everyone feels that way.

Tom Sowden – Was that students or staff?

B – That was staff.

T – Interesting, on a book programme?

B – It was a graduate interview.

S – At a college that didn't really get books?

B – They didn't really get me.

S – You found the right place to go. As part of your classes do you learn about history of artists' books and study contemporary artists?

Ann Tyler – We also do a lot of study and investigation of different types of narratives. For example non-linear narratives, as you were talking about, then what form should that content and that narrative structure take. Not letting that guide the form, or rather not deciding initially what the form should be. So I think there's a pretty big range of forms people up here have used. Veronika has a wood piece.

Veronika Corzo-Duchardt – Installation

A – Right, installation. Mark has slit pages – a more traditional book in terms of form, but in terms of content and imagery, the book's about perception and social content and various notions of perception.

T – Do you think all of these would still be classed under the book umbrella?

A – Probably, I mean here yes, but Veronika's installation – we've classified it as book or it could be a variety of things.

T – [Showing slide of altered books] That was part of a project that we ran last year, called Regenerator, where our library was getting rid of books because they didn't have the space for them anymore. We sent them out to artists to produce a series of altered books, who then sent them back to us and we did a swap. Names were put into a hat, two names were drawn and those two people they swapped their altered books. They couldn't go back into the library because they didn't have space.

S – It was a bit like the one they did in Portland except there they took the books away, altered them and then checked them back into the library so people could look at them, but our library said no – don't bring them back.

A – One other thing we do here is that in addition to a book can be image and text, it can be sculptural it can be all these things. Sources can be other artists' work and or taken from the media. We also use odd sources from literature and people who write with non-traditional literary forms, seeing how those forms can impact artists' books, constructing narrative.

B – In your ABTree, do you have artists' books as painting?

S – No, do you want to add that?

B – Yeah. I did a book, actually re-did it, it made me think of when you handed out these books to people sort of randomly and they ended up with this book. I actually did a similar sort of project on my own in Pittsburgh a few years ago where I took the book Atlas Shrugged by

Ayn Rand and I shredded it into pieces that I painted back into a picture. I was very purposeful about some of the text and how the text showed through the paint, so to me it was an interpretation.

S – Yes, it's still a book.

T – The discussion we had earlier today [with Doro Boehme and her staff] is that the ABTree is the wrong kind of diagram anyway because there is going to be far more crossing over.

S – So it might end up like a big plate of spaghetti or an airlines flight map. Has anyone been using the Internet or phones or anything to publish their work, or publish on demand?

B – I've looked into Lulu but I haven't used it yet.

S – We figured more people would be using it here seeing as it is based in the US. There are quite a lot of people in Europe using it.

B – I think the issue with Lulu is still the amount of money. It's still difficult to sell a book for more than ten dollars whereas it takes about ten dollars to make a book, so that's one reason why I haven't used it yet. That and because it is a very limited binding process.

T – Yes.

B – I've seen some Lulu books where almost always the cover has shifted and it's just not lined up.

S – Yes, sometimes they're great, sometimes not so great.

A – I more know writers who are using it.

S – Yes, it's got its place, definitely, but I don't think it's the be all and end all of everything. I think it's quite handy for people who don't have access to facilities to print anything.

T – Or with more limited binding skills who would like to work with the book, but the complaint I've heard a lot is that it's too constricting because you've got so little choice.

B – So little choice – even in the number of pages. You can create this beautiful book, potentially, even if it's bound the way you envision it, it sort of has this awkward page ordering system.

S – Who was it saying the other day that they get books from blurb?

T – Oh and cut them up.

S – Take them apart and re-bind them.

T – I've forgotten... I thought that was an interesting way around the constricting nature of it. Something I considered doing actually, just to make flip-books, you could just tile up the same book and chop it up.

A – In terms of the technology that you mention, one thing that I see happening at the school is that someone will get a piece of technology, like a laser cutter, and it can be in a particular discipline, but then the common thing is that all the technologies start showing up in different approaches to books. Both in introducing light, the use of light in books, because of the laser cuttings, as well as just notions of perforations.

S – So does anyone have any really strong feelings about what definitely is or isn't an artist's book?

V – I think we are pretty open-minded, open to form, as long as it relates to the content somehow. I think that might be the one thread that holds it all together, is that content or the form reinforces the content somehow.

S – Oh we feel the same.

V – Yeah, I don't think we're dogmatic, but that a book can take so many different forms. It can be verbal it can be visual, it can be sensory – you know sometimes it's not even words or images.

S – I think as well sometimes if you've got artists whose main practice is in the book format, then they do other things around it, and then you're looking at it and you still think that's a book. Then you think, well do I think that's a book because I know the rest of the way that they work, or is it just a book to me anyway? For example a series of badges in a box I bought as a book from someone they were said the box is the cover, the badges are the pages, and I was like yeah OK, I can do that.

V – It's a broader interpretation.

S – But then the rest of their practice was making books, so to me it seemed quite natural that they would have some badges in a box that actually were a book.

V – I know, and not all books are bound, and not all a set sequence.

A – Maybe I think it's a book if somebody calls it a book!

S – I think that's kind of my philosophy on it.

T – Is that the defining thing then, a bit like Duchamp?
It can be a book because I say it's a book.

V – Or does it need a container? Does it need a wrap?

S – No, I don't think so.

V – It doesn't? It can just be loose pieces and it's still a book, even if nothing ever holds it together?

B – For me, when I started putting together books it was about reinventing a particular idea, and that idea didn't necessarily mean it had to have a cover and a binding, it needed to speak in that voice, whatever that voice needed to be. So Ayn Rand needed to be shredded, re-ordered and different pieces of beauty in her writing started coming out to me, and I painted onto it a self portrait, which was an interesting process. To me the book was the process almost, but then something I had to show.

V – So then there's that question – is there always process in a book? You know like the puzzle that gets put together in a certain way or a book that gets read.

A – And there's so many questions about what is narrative now. Just that in and of itself has gotten so broad, about what is a narrative.

S – Especially with electronic books as well, there is still a narrative, and with page turning programmes you can actually make your book just on screen but still have that visual effect of turning.

B – Digital books are interesting because they are both tangible and intangible, they sort of live in an ethos. You can get to them and then they are gone. It's very interesting.

T – I'm quite fascinated by the growth of e-readers, and how they mimic the book. There could be a platform to do anything you wanted but they actually mimic books. We went to the Frankfurt book fair the other week and they even have them in cases that you open.

A – It's funny how this technology imitates old forms

V – We really need to hold onto some of that, like digital and see the page move – it's like why does it flutter across when it's a flat screen?

B – It's like that typewriter thing when you put the text in it does that...

Justyna Palka – To me the way I understand an artist's book is that it mostly comes in a small edition, so when it's digital isn't it something that is easily reproduced? So

how is it something sacred, is that the word? Like how is it still meaningful personally?

T – But then you can distribute it more easily. I'm thinking about conceptual artists and the democratic multiple, using the book as a means of mass distribution. The Internet and digital books is even better for distribution, it should be there available to anyone.

V – And then it's still a personal experience, a personal experience to the viewer.

A – It is true what you're saying that that was one way that artists' books have been defined, that they couldn't be produced en-mass.

V – Limited edition?

A – Yeah

V – It's an interesting idea.

B – Have you heard about the book where to be a part of the book you had to have a word tattooed on your body [Skin by Shelley Jackson]?

V – I was thinking that earlier, because that book only came together once.

J – Is that a book?

S – So they just have one word each tattooed?

B – Yeah. You don't know what you're going to get when you'd sign up to the project. She went through a process of elimination where she decided if you were really in to this idea or not, and then I think she may have even chosen the typeface.

V – It was all black ink, had to be. I just remember being really upset I found out after the fact, because I wish I had a word.

B – I know, because I would have done that too. Typography on my body – I'm for that.

V – And that I was part of a living book.

S – Yes, that's amazing.

T – Or a page.

V – Yeah, a page of a book, that's amazing.

B – Well hopefully not a whole page.

A – You don't think you'd forever feel fragmented and displaced? (All laugh)

B – I think it would give you a weird sense of connection to these people that you wouldn't otherwise know.

V – Yeah, I thought the project was really brilliant.

S – So they got their own tattoos, she sent them the instructions of size and shape?

B – She sent them everything, they had to apply to make sure they were really honest and the type of person who would go through with it.

S – Otherwise there's no point is there, you've got one thousand nine hundred and ninety eight words and the last two are missing.

V – Right, I mean it wasn't anything obnoxious either, it was very simple like black words, and the typography wasn't large.

S – Sure, otherwise you're not going to get two thousand people to do it are you. That's really useful actually.

Renate Gokl – I can see people classifying that as just performance art though, instead of a book.

B – But she intended it as a book.

S – Yes, book as performance.

B – Yeah, but she did intend it to be a book to be read that one time.

V – I'm not sure if she documented it and then it was.

S – Well I'd hope it was somehow documented and I'd say that was a book.

A – I wonder if she copyrighted it?

S – So back to actually being taught about the book, what do you learn if you have a, I don't know – are they called modules here?

A – The courses have credit hours attached, and a certain level of credit hours, and there are some courses that you have to be a particular year to take and some courses that you don't. Some have prerequisites others don't. Like one of the book classes I teach doesn't have prerequisites in order to draw people in from all over the school, and different years. It's nice to have those.

J – We actually have a course called artists' books in the

print department I think.

V – Yeah, in print media.

J – And it's my last year and I still haven't actually taken it, but I've made so many books in all the other classes like in typography and graphic design

V – But the problem with that class too is that it fills up immediately; you need to be like a second year grad student to get it.

A – People register from the most senior downwards, so then sometimes it takes a long time for someone to get a particular class.

S – And what kind of period in history would you cover if you were having theory in artists' books? Does it go right back, or is it a more contemporary?

A – No, it's a full whole range, more emphasis and exposure to the contemporary.

T – Is there a real culture of producing books in this college? Because it seems like so many courses do.

R – We would say so, yeah.

Mark Addison Smith – I think so, because it's a very interdisciplinary school. I've seen books pop up in just about every department I've taken a class in.

V – Yeah, and the popularity of the artist's book class is because it is something that is open to all disciplines, so you have grad students in every department.

J – Who made their books in animation?

T – Are they still classed as books if they are animated?

J – I think so, yeah.

A – Do you think that it frees people up from the discipline and turns the pressure of what something is, branching into artists' books, or not? Like a different opportunity.

V – I think it allows them to be able to do whatever it is they do, whatever discipline they have, and be able to put that onto an artist's book. It allows for their expression of whatever medium they decide to use.

B – I personally think that for me so far in this school, and I've only been here since August, that it's an important means for learning how to communicate an idea in a new way. So I think that that's how this school

as a whole looks at it, is that it is communication and it's attached to a specific method but that method is attached to the person, their means not any guidelines. So for me it's been about writing.

M – Certainly there is a through line that you have to establish when you're going from page A to page Z. If it's not linear then the whole typeset has to have some continuity to it. I think for me the attraction is the element of surprise in it, that I find I can't get in any other one stop shopping print piece. So there's an interactivity in it that I appreciate and that I want the viewer to engage with also.

V – Surprise, maybe exploration too.

M – Right.

A – You can force a longer time period, just through its structure.

M – Right, and so it becomes more intimate.

S – Do you think, compared to others colleges in the USA, that the amount of artists' books interest and teaching that goes on here is high?

B – There are certainly other schools that do embrace [the book], but like I said earlier, I found other schools that don't get it.

S – That don't get it and do you think don't even know what it is?

B – I think that they really didn't know what it was, no.

A – I think it's also particularly vibrant here because of the cross-disciplinary nature people talked about. Then everybody sees the possibilities in what other people are doing, whilst in colleges that are very segmented, then I think people would be less likely – because it is viewed almost itself as a cross disciplinary form – I think its less likely to thrive in those situations.

V – Or it's more isolated somehow. I think our Joan Flasch collection [of artists' books and multiples] helps reinforce our commitment to it too, because that's a vibrant growing collection.

T – Absolutely, it's also quite a broad and open collection in terms of books, so do you think that feeds into the perception of the book in the courses?

A – Yes, and it's very rare for a collection like that to be run philosophically the way it is. Which is that the books are going to run out because people want to use them,

not protecting them by keeping people out so you don't have the access.

B – I've gone with my class to the artists' books collection and writing, print media and art history classes have been there, so everybody from different classes do use that resource, and it is built into that class sometimes.

S – I think the way the collection works within your school is really amazing.

T – Well it's what you should have in a teaching college, to have a teaching resource.

S – Yes, every school should have one. Quite often books are collected by institutions for curriculum development but you're not allowed to actually touch them.

V – I think Chicago's a little bit unique too in terms of a strong tradition. Maybe not so much in terms of artists' books, but typographers and printers, you know it was a huge printing hub. Have you guys been to the Newberry library? Because that's an amazing resource too in terms of typography specimens and also their book arts collection. I feel like there's something in the city that nurtures that, and then Columbia College has a vibrant community as well, they think there's an historic underpinning here that does allow this to come up and be strong. Would you think that's right?

A – Yeah.

V – You know like typography is such a big part of this city, or the history of the city, so you think that all of the artists' books just grow out of that.

T – Yeah I've certainly got that sense. Talking to Doro today she was saying she's free to collect what she wants to collect, because there are other collections in the city collecting the typography and the fine press, so she doesn't need to do that.

V – Exactly.

T – It's quite an amazing situation to be in, within one city.

V – Yeah, and it's free to all of us.

S – That's amazing as well, the fact that you can just use any of the collections. You lucky bunch!

V – Do we take advantage of all of this? Probably not.

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
www.saic.edu