

LIQUID LANGUAGE

September 15 - November 1, 2002

*The Liquid Language
of Artist's Books*

American Heritage Center and University of Wyoming Art Museum

EXHIBITION CURATED BY
BOB EBENDORF AND KAREN KUNC

THIS EXHIBITION HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE MID-AMERICA PRINT COUNCIL CONFERENCE "FISSION/FUSION:
COMING TOGETHER, MOVING APART", UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING, LARAMIE, OCTOBER 2 - 5, 2002

COLOPHON

*Published by Karen Kunc/Blue Heron Press
to accompany The Liquid Language of Artist's Books
Exhibition as part of the Mid-America Print Council
Conference "Fission/Fusion: Coming Together, Moving
Apart", University of Wyoming, Laramie, October
2nd-5th, 2002*

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*Catalog designed and typeset by Kate Bingaman,
Obsessive Consumption Design at the
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Printed by Printing Services, UNL, in an edition
of 750 copies*

*Type Style(s): Mrs Eaves roman, petite caps and italics,
Paper: French Durotone 80# text, Cover is Kraft
Blankote with inkjet sticker*

LIQUID

*flowing, fluid, fluxing,
co-mingling, converging, ever-changing
and impossible to contain.*

LANGUAGE

*conventions of communication that
articulate the senses; a means for expres-
sion; the repository of memory, culture,
meaning, associations.*

The Liquid Language of Artist's Books means to evoke metaphors to describe the lively phenomenon of artist's books. Rather than seeking to define this fluid field, we mean to recognize the amazing breadth of work that comes from so many diverse streams and spheres of influences.

There are many interconnections within this collection of artists and works brought together at this place and time, and we hope this will be an enjoyable quest for viewers.

As curators of this exhibition we collaboratively selected the artists represented here with each inviting half the participants. From the initial long lists, with only a few overlapping names, we selected from a wide group. Included are: some long admired artists of stature, known peers and friends, emerging newcomers, the self-taught and the progeny of influential teachers. Included are: printmakers, digital artists, letterpress printers, jewelers, sculptors and designers - all book artists in their own way; with



attitudes that range between that of the aesthete of the "crystal goblet", where design serves to further content, craftsman with their working skills infusing materials with meaning, to the irreverent deconstructionist playing and rearranging, even destroying, the physical icon of the book.

We wish to thank the University of Wyoming Art Museum for their generous assistance with the exhibition. Many thanks to Mark Ritchie for his encouragement and enthusiasm and for the many conversations that lead to the initiation of this fluid project. And our sincere gratitude to the artists for their spirit of generosity in sharing their works.

*Bob Ebendorf and Karen Kunc
September, 2002*

BRAIDED STREAMS

By Karen Kunc

Now I seek to address the question - of why artist's books? - because it is posed to me so often by students, curators, university administrators, librarians, friends of the book, printmakers. Perhaps I am not exposing anything new but my own viewpoints can see broad interrelationships to help clarify why I think this is happening and describe the various streams out of which this movement has grown.

There is a sense of this medium having "arrived", with museum interest, traveling shows with catchy titles, trendy themes for publications and craft books, workshops and maturing educational programs. And still the burning question "why book arts?" We all must be seeking our own understanding by asking everyone else for their justification! And yet from my reading of artist's statements, very similar explanations are offered by all - primarily these always include the tactile qualities of work made for the hand, the control of pacing and the "reading/viewing" as an experience, an interest in storytelling, and strong, important historical and cultural associations.

Obviously to me, the book arts movement that we have now accepted grows out of a number of postmodernist approaches. First is the issue of sequentiality - a way to present an idea that relates to other parts, that grows and evolves, requiring more than one part to make the point - a process of moving from one to the next, as a form of 'reading' and saying something. Related to this way of thinking, I believe we have grown accustomed to a 'cinematic' flow - the saturation of our culture with video, film and TV, with media controlled sequence and narration; the book can play similarly with physical movement, as a non-static form with simple technology. Next, the acceptability of 'appropriation strategy' in art, which recognizes and uses the artifacts of our printed world -

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such as pre-printed images from commercials, illustrations and throw-away sources are re-examined, re-contextualized, through a collage aesthetic, which acknowledges the printed source as primary communicator of truth and illusion. Also, the postmodern era has adapted current technological means - all new methods are used for a simulacrum, a standing in, allowing for a 'slickness', the evidence of 'reality of making' that blends into the larger world - digital imaging possibilities, offset availability, copy machine access, even the authenticity of the hand-printed mark - which produces convincing publication values and tests reality and meaning. Another point is the postmodern examination of text and meaning, text as image, with questions of the most essentialist distillation of communication, with books historically the carrier of textual mysteries. Finally, this era has led to the examination of all communication means - written, visual, audial, tactile - and media sources as the means of dissemination. The book sits squarely with the other technological forms of film, video, tape, vinyl, computer, light and wire transmissions, while it is the most historical.

Yet still fresh for many are the traditional book issues that artists are experiencing, examining and deconstructing. First, is the narrative structure, as a physical sequence of pages, controlled pacing and reading by the maker, yet open for "random access" for further relational and unexpected experiences - the book falling open for a portentous reading. Second, is the idea of the book as a container, holding artifacts themselves, archaic information, preservation of memories, stories, images and object collection - a selected whole world. Important as well, but discredited in this age of "ironic attitude", is the love of materials discovered in the making of book objects - an awareness of paper, ink, proportion, color, relationships, finish, detail, all parts to the whole, with evidence of craftsmanship; making an aesthetic object, even a beautiful one, as a carrier of important ideas, worthy of preserving, with reverence, meant to enhance the intimate experience of 'reading'. Significant is the personal relationship to this book object - a controlling of time, space, movement, involvement in a physical place, in a physical way; unlike other art objects, books "feel right" in the hand, and it is a known

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relationship from our earliest days of learning, reading and discovering. Finally, there is the issue of image and text again, but perhaps without skepticism or questioning of meaning, but as a conveyor of ideas, with an appropriateness of design and readability, in context with images for decoration, embellishment, even illustration.

The larger art historical backgrounds that should be cited in our search for the source of the artist's book movement include: the fine press or private press movement and the 'beat' era poets which offered a literary emphasis and alternative publications for select learned readers; the elaborate *livre d'artiste* works of the early modernists; the arts and crafts movement; graphic design and typographic constructivists; the Fluxus artists' ephemeral collections of detritus; and pop art send-ups of low popular arts vs. high art. However, I believe the recent manifestation of book arts derives from additional feeder streams.

One such stream is obviously sculptural object making, with artists using the book as a cultural icon, with books that cannot be opened, which are bound up, literally wired or pasted shut; book forms carved from solid stone. These works are uncommunicative as books, but powerful as metaphor. Another stream comes from current fascination with personal identity issues - books that work as journals and scrapbooks, offering a self-identity examination that is decidedly "diaristic", revealing. As an outgrowth from the feminist art movement, such "writing of one's own story" often gives voice to the "other" in society and perhaps has even initiated the present day celebration of multicultural pluralities. These identities are hidden inside books yet revealing in content, where artists/authors can tell their own narrative without editors and publishing houses. Also, book arts are a beneficiary of the search for alternatives to the "exclusiveness" of the art scene, and of the development of alternative sites for exhibitions and work sites, as well as the artist's cooperatives of the 1980's, with the book form as the ultimate self-contained exhibition alternative, bypassing publishers, curators, jurors;



with portability, easy transport, exchange, reasonableness in scale and cost; artist's books are seen as an alternative form itself, yet understandable, one in which everyone can relate to the playful changes and challenges made to an intimately known form. Finally, there is a stream that I call "retro-humanistic," which is an instinctual acknowledgment of the need for hands to "make," to construct objects from scratch, to have power in one's hands to make a form that we know is culturally significant and classical. This ability is directly counterpoint to the distance of the machine, the screen, the increased immobility and illusion of our computer age and the contrary isolation and depersonalization of our disjointed mobile society. It acknowledges a strength that is in our being to shape the world with our hands.

I know of the impossibility of keeping up with all that is happening around the country, to know all the new practitioners, and the wealth of work being done. My impression is of the global interest in artist books on many levels of involvement, that has grown out of so many streams, feeding the soul of artists and audiences, raising compelling contemporary issues, and firing up initiative, possibilities, integration of disciplines. This is the burning excitement and the ultimate rationale that renews the book as art for me and so many others.

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