Review on ‘*Book Art Object 1’* (2009) and *‘2’* (2013) by Codex Foundation, Berkeley, California, USA

The publications are directed by Peter Rudledge Koch, a renowned book artist himself, who took since 2005 not only the trouble to build up Codex Foundation, but who is furthermore responsible for the symposiums and biennial fairs. Together with David Jury, an author, editor, and designer of books concerning typography, printing and graphic design, he has also organized the events’ documentation, just in time to be presented at the next Codex Fair. These books document three symposiums of the Codex Foundation in Berkeley, which were set up to define the state of the book art in 2007, 2009 and 2011.

*Book Art Object 1* is bound in black cloth, twelve by nine inches big. It contains 432 pages and approximately 735 color images and presents the work of the artists, designers and printers who came to California from all parts of the world for the very first CODEX 2007. The statements of the then held speeches encircle now the shown examples of book art.

*Book Art Object 2,* the follower-up 4 years later, contains 1133 images of 300 books by 140 artists-printers. It sums up Codex 2009 and 2011. There is also a selection of speeches delivered at the 2009 and 2011 Codex symposia to be found. The texts given are by experts in bookmaking: university teachers, curators of famous book art collections and book artists themselves. In all of these statements a lifelong devotion to books shines up. Although they differ a few centuries in defining the starting point of artists’ books, they agree in the open contents and forms of ‘artists’ books. Searching for a definition for artists’ books is something which is hard to do, because you may look from many different directions onto this hybrid media situated somewhere between book and theatre, picture and sculpture.

The artists’ books development is strongly connected with technological changes, e.g. either the Gutenberg revolution or the start of offset printing since 1910, the invention of easy to use Xerox copy machines since 1956, which lead to an availability for everybody, by the turn from lead letters to photo typesetting in book- and newspaper production around 1960. Private travelling started slowly after World War II leading to a mass phenomenon accompanied by a flood of photographs in this century. Printing machines were on their way to the private home as well as calculation systems, then called pc. The turn from analogue to digital lifestyles starting with the current millennium gave everyone the chance to develop own letter designs, private books, own photo assemblies and other gimmicks without any specialist’s help.

These two very heavy volumes on ‘*book art object*’ try to do the impossible: to show the wide variety of artists’ books worldwide and to give this development a theoretical and historical backing. Moreover they are looking for a proper definition of this genre, which started to blossom sometime around 1900 and shows approx. every 30 years periods of extra productivity.

1. If it is a book: what actually makes a book a book? The content or the form, the amount of original ideas regarding content and form?
2. Is the aesthetic demeanor to present a text as delightful as possible already art?
3. Are artists’ books a commenting technique (on society, on cultural changes, on texts)?
4. Are Books simply containers to be filled?
5. Books often have a rectangular form.
6. Books are two- and three - dimensional at the same time.
7. They have an innate timeline and offer – like much larger pictures - a free choice of where to look when.
8. Books may be made of poor or precious materials. Plants or animal sources, plastic and fabric. Be of small or big size. Light or heavy weight.
9. A book contains lots of text or none at all. Or anything in between.
10. A book may be unique or part of an edition.

As you can easily see, the above list may be prolonged nearly endlessly and each of these statements would call for further explanations: Is it possible to declare some aesthetic criteria to be more valuable than others? Does discussing on artist’s common attitudes towards their bookwork lead to a usable explanation of its characteristics or might this attempt tend to separate some artworks as belonging and others as being outside of the attempted set of definitions? Surely this won’t help the chosen topic. Maybe it is the other way around: the charactericis of artists’ books is the embrace of all these mentioned diverse possibilities and many more? Perhaps for now the best definition of book art is to accept this either-or, this belonging in between the introduced fields. Maybe this is the reason where all the openness to topics and styles and techniques in artists’ books starts from? Therefore Lucy Lippard defines artists’ books as that, what an artist declares them to be.Do these non-defined aspects build the bridge to the ‘reader’, who is probably a book addict, too? The reader in spe has soon learned only one thing about artists books: to expect the unexpected.

Artists’ books have a very personal touch. Each book is individual in its process of development and in its process of being found, understood and bought. Normally the artist is the one to offer his own artists’ books. There are no galleries or shops in between conaisseur und artist. I believe this direct communication and individuality to be one of the factors responsible for the risen interest in artists’ books recently.

Artists’ books are tradeable goods, which complicates the situation further, because - once again - the artists’ book is placed somewhere in between commerce and arts. It’s usually neither found in bookshops nor galleries. It often stays closely connected to its producer and will find its buyer in direct exchange on fairs or other forms of presentations. Buyers are usually allowed to take a close look and touch the book artwork to form their own impression. Thus the viewer’s or buyer’s contact to the object of art (and to its creator) is much closer than is traditional with arts.

Artists’ books are objects to love, to be handled with care. They offer their own little world to dip deep down into. They enjoy us with unforeseeable surprises. They provoke our respect for their cuteness, the diligence, the patience and the knowledge of human beings on making things work. It is a protest against consumption. Artists’ books are acquired to be kept and cared for – not for being traded. Often they are collected to be put into dialogues with other bookish statements.

Perhaps it is more helpful to compare the book artist’s attitude? Book artists are giving an enormous amount of care for, thought, work and time to each book, a dedication which is necessary to communicate one’s own cosmos of seeing and correlating. These pieces of art made by diligent research work in any direction (binding technique, typography, print, paper or other material, content, text) is - although convincing in itself - meant as a dialogue to someone, who can appreciate the way it is composed. It’s a form of communication.

There are further interesting aspects of book art making regarding the artists:

* The obvious advantage of a private press or a self publisher lies in keeping control over the whole production process (including distribution)
* The smaller sizes of book art objects make them easy to handle and to store
* The necessary investments into technical devices and other materials are possible with low budgets, this makes artists’ books apt for woman artists and persons starting in arts.
* There are no rules to be respected, the learning comes while doing
* A book is since many centuries a familiar domestic form
* Artists’ books circulation ways are open to non-art-educated bookmakers: Ccraftsmen, designer, architects, photographers are also deeply engaged in bookmaking
* Distribution via informal paths maybe a further sympathetic aspect: to take part in a rather familiar economic exchange to friends and collectors.

Therefore the sixties had many woman artists starting off with this genre, a fact visible still nowadays. *As Stephen Bury puts it: ’The book format in its one-to-oneness allows a degree of intimacy between reader and artist that has been used to explain the popularity of the genre with woman artists.’*

*Lilan Landes, curator of the Bavarian State Library, points in her new blog to the growing influence of pictures in our daily life. Images are also open to their surroundings. On the other hand they are more convincing than text. Text is nowadays being neglected in favour of photographs. ‘Now it (‘eg. the artistbook’) is being washed into a time that is less demanding than ever on definitions and that copes well with diversity, internationality, image-heaviness, fragmentation, idealism, sharing - and in which it is at the same time easy to fulfil the claim with which the artist's book began in the 1960s: art as a printable, easily disseminable message; accessible to everyone interested at a low threshold.’ Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator*

Lilian Landes, "Ein Blog über Künstlerbücher. Ist das wirklich nötig? Do we really need to blog about artist’s books?," in Kunst zwischen Deckeln, 3. Juni 2019, <https://bookarts.hypotheses.org/204>.

So far for the preliminary remarks. What do these two volumes of ‘*book art object 1+2’* actually offer? To give a vivid impression of what is possible in book art seems to be the main concern. The enormous amount of 1133 images of 300 books by 140 artists/printers on 314 pages is assembled in ‘*book art object 2’*. There is a section of 254 pages depicting 200 artists’ books by 120 artists in volume 1. I have no idea how the artists were chosen to assemble in the first Codex fair. But for sure the reader is offered a very impressive range of the multiple ways to tackle a topic in book art*.*

*The books’ many images are surrounded by a hundred pages of essays and comments to clarify working strategies, techniques and developments. Both books are delicately made. A wonderful quality of print and paper, well designed, spacy arrangements of the 450 pages each, overwhelming double-page-photographs by Douglas Sandberg to separate the chapters. They also possess are very informative appendices of some 30 pages listing all the artists having taken part in Codex 2007-2011. Other related institutions, workshops and shops are mentioned as well.*

*Vol. 1 (black cloth binding with white letters)*

Sarah Bodman from the Centre of Fine Print Research in Bristol GB describes very neatly several examples of artists’ books and thus introduces us into the theme. She sets our attention on papers and other materials, the working processes and the inert concepts of her chosen artworks to show a mix of new and old technologies, of artists and typographers, of limited editions and single pieces, individual works of art or collective ones. As she is an acknowledged book artist and a reasearcher at the same time, who is editing a bimonthly newsletter since many years, her knowledge is enormous.

She is being followed by an amusing speech of Felipe Ehrenberg about his founding Minuscule press in Mexico. His books tend to become installations and happenings with political content, his style of narration matches their spontaneous appearances.

Stefan Soltek as head of the Klingspormuseum in Offenbach, Germany, recounts the history of the Klingspor type foundry. He thus follows the steps from handcrafts to digital technologies and sees the turning point around 1980, when some German book artists started investigating the field of books and type anew, often in close relationship to the place where they had studied. Sullivans ‘form follows function’ was no longer valid, curiosity aroused to find new aspects in the book format and printing.

Robert Bringhurst article is named ‘spiritual geometry’ and discusses geometry versus nature to finally combine the two of them in the organic geometry of a snail or ants’ heaps. He looks deeply into the use of language and calligraphy. A quote of Yaqut al-Musta’simi enlightens the context of the three: ‘Script is spiritual geometry made visible by a material instrument’ (written around 1258).

The five shorter comments describe the situation of artists’ books in Canada, Germany, Mexico, Australia and USA. (On might miss mentionioning of eastern European countries or Russian states, glimpses taken to the states surrounding the Mediterranean or Arabic countries.)

*Vol. 2 (white cloth binding with red letters)*

The introduction by David Jury states all the differences in the field of artists’ books, which are typical for the genre: ‘vivé la différénce’ is therefore his stunning conclusion! Peter Koch tries - with the help of Sandra Kirshenbaum - to find some guidelines through this jungle. He discerns the enigmatic, experimental book object, the livre de peintre in the French tradition and the text loving printers’ book. Koch goes on digging into the problems of the book, which is a tool, an icon and an idea at the same time and tends to evade in any of those directions. He also offers a beautiful vision for the future: a place filled with booksellers, bookbinders, printers, researchers and papermills open to everyone to train one’s skills and awareness on book matters.

Did I miss a note on the situation of Dutch artists’ books in volume 1? Here it comes: Paul van Capelleveen, curator of the Nederlands National Library, offers a sparkling list of possible ways how to refer a book nowadays. He compares the Dutch situation with the English arts and crafts movement since 1890 and offers a profound introduction to the last 120 years of printmaking. Who wants to learn more, is invited to take a look at www.kb.nl/galerie/privatepress/.

Antoine Coron, curator of the department of rare books at the Bibliothequé Nationale de France, reviews the development of artists books in France starting in 1475, when the very first illustrated book appeared. The article describes the French way of making painter and author work together, which seemed to have turned the other way in the last 30 years. A famous example might be Michel Butor with his 1300 items of artwork containing texts by himself, mostly handwritten to enrich the offered artworks recently. In the end Coron takes a look on the collectors side, who seem to have dwindled in the last 30 years in amount and engagement. The French way did not open up until recently to typography or photography or advertisement’s attitudes of presentation. (Not even lithography was a much used technique).

Book artist Ron King explains all about why Circle press was founded by him and some friends and shows very different results of his intensive experiments. His books have a tendency to stand up and present themselves as a stage for action of all kinds. Colors tend to be clear or absent. The techniques chosen seem to explain the viewer how they were processed. Ron King did many collaborations with authors and artists. He developed his own silk print strategies and possesses a knowledge of unusual words to combine with his pictorial content, which is admirable.

Juan Pascoe’s narration of Mexican bookmakers and print shops since 500 years, is detailed and full of suspense. As if he had been friends with all of them, he discovers their contacts either personally or with the (mostly imported) sets of type they used. Many printshops were working for several generations, mostly inhabited by men. Only the 20th century begins to see women in the bookmaking field, for example Elena Jordana. Mexico being rather characteristic in its small interest in fine books for the rest of South America, Argentine seems to be an exemption. Maybe because of its Italian influences. Juan Pascoe is the owner of Taller Martin Pescador press and responsible for many a fine book himself.

Assistant director and keeper of the special collection of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Richard Ovenden, makes us see the 500 years of art related books by examples in his own library. He narrates on generous donations by single persons addicted to the medium book like William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, as early as 1630, already collecting even in Arabic languages. Ovenden takes a very practical view on artists’ books: they are useful to advance research libraries’ communication on whatever they do. The openness of artists’ books allows access from the humanities and historian sciences, for students of arts, to the curiosity of the public, meanwhile keeping cultural knowledge on bookbinding and printing in a digital age alive. They may even gain a little money to support themselves.

After the overwhelming 250 pages of artists’ inventions connected with books there follow five shorter comments to describe the situation of artists’ books in Germany, Canada, Australia, Great Britain and Italy. (No mention of other European countries, I’m afraid, no survey on the Asian state of the art. But a good amount of information on the introduced artists.)

I like the idea of showing the whole atmosphere of bookmaking. Volume 2 is thus enriched by glimpses into workshops and studios, which tell us a lot on the artists’ attitudes, the tools, the heritage of former generations using the same printing machines, the light on the tables, the location of the workshops (often remote and in buildings with a story of its own as well) and possible or impossible co-operations in the depicted rooms. Making books means the ability to solve technical problems and the peace to accept temporary failures as a means to make progress. There is also a deep appreciation for cultural heritage to be sensed in all the statements. A visual refinement. Patience. Hands enjoying the touch of all kinds of material. An air of contentment with what one does. Making books also means to become friends with other book artists, having partners to communicate with worldwide, as many of them come from America or English speaking countries.

Both volumes have very much in common: the size, the layout, the structure. All pictures were taken by Douglas Sandberg during the 3 days periods of the Codex events. There is a lovely description of how to organize the photographing of roundabout 10.000 pictures of 500 books by 250 artists. And why the artworks are presented without background. The books’ making shows the editors’ extreme dedication to and specialist knowledge about their topic. Douglas Sandberg has his own studio of photography and lectures at the [California College of the Arts](https://se.linkedin.com/company/california-college-of-the-arts?trk=public_profile_topcard_current_company). He has also added the winning double pages with atmospheric details of everyday processes in print workshops: some close-ups of letters and rusty machines, some misprints, colors spread and being prepared, which make me wish to start printing right away.

10 respectively 6 years since their release date these books point with an astonishing foresight to the future developments in book arts. The introduced artists are still going strong and the two volumes function very well as a who is who in the book art world of today. The Codex books take an active role in connecting book artists by listing addresses and websites. These two books document a proud assembly of a growing worldwide book art community. The power of the genre lies in its openness and diversity. It’s a pleasure to read about it and and to gaze in wonder at the abundance of concepts. The devoted diligence in organizing the events and compiling these books shows up on every page. These books will find a place on your working table for all their riches in stimulating ideas, they will be often checked for their great theoretical background texts on book matters and book history and for looking up contacts and where to shop seldom materials.

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