

Kevin Concannon, "Books by Artists," *Art New England*, December 1984, p. 8.

Books Made by Artists

Kevin Concannon

Since the early 1960s the artist's book has proliferated as one new medium among many which offers both artists and public greater accessibility to each other. Artists' books, which range from cheaply printed, massproduced publications to unique hand-worked objects, date back to the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, a tradition greatly affected by the introduction of the printing press.

Boston book artist, Frances Hamilton began making books while traveling through Europe in 1968. While her original intention was to use the book as a portable studio, she soon found her interest in illuminated manuscript and Persian miniatures manifesting itself in her books.

What exactly is an artist's book? Well, if it was made by an artist, is intended as a work of art unto itself, and takes the form of a book, there you have it. Within this broadly defined category, however, specific works may contain drawings (reproduced or original), photographs, and/or text. This still, however, doesn't cover everything by any means.

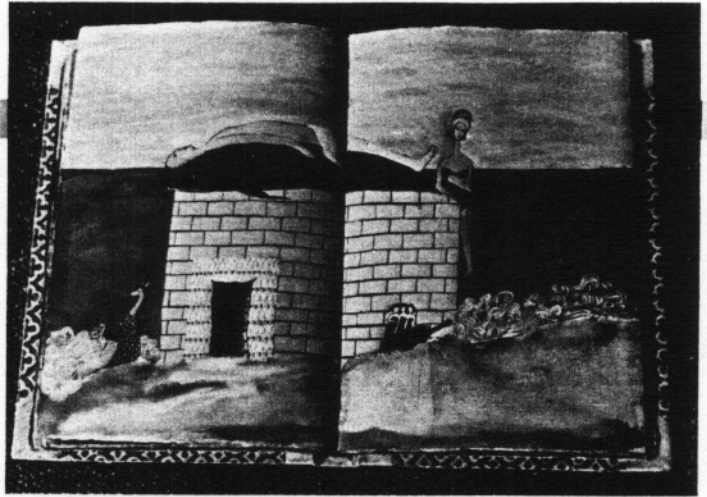
One notable exception which wonderfully illustrates this problem is Bruce Nauman's *Clearsky* (1969). *Clearsky* is composed of eight pages of blue paper in various shades (the cloudless heavens). By organizing the pages and tilting them, Nauman created a work which is at once conceptual and representational, yet involves no drawing, no photographs, and no text other than the title.

Artists' books, like any other medium, often reflect the social climate of their times. In the late 1950s, during the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop, the clubs and bars of Lower Manhattan attracted kindred souls in poets and painters. These interactions often resulted in works of art which fed directly off each other. Dealer Tibor de Nagy became very active at this time, publishing pamphletlike books which were collaborations between poets and painters, a very unrevolutionary concept, but something of surprising renaissance nonetheless.

One such book, *A City Winter*, included poems by Frank O'Hara and reproductions of drawings by Larry Rivers. This tradition continues even today. David Mamet and Donald Sultan collaborated recently on *Warm and Cold*, published in a limited edition by Joe Fawbush Editions and Solo Press of New York. *Warm and Cold* began with a poem of the same name written by Mamet, best known as a playwright. Sultan contributed a series of lithograph and pochoir prints which more or less illustrate the poem. The front and back covers reproduce photographs of both artists' young daughters, one in summer, one in winter. *Warm and Cold* is included in this month's Marcus Gallery exhibition of book art, which offers a sampling of recent limited edition works.

For many artists, however, the book's great virtue is its democratic reproducibility. This is particularly true for performance artists whose work might otherwise remain unknown to everyone but the small audience which witnesses it. Chris Burden uses the book format in this way. His self-published 74-77 (1978) documents thirty-one performances from a three-year period with brief descriptive texts and photographs.

Painter Ida Applebroog considers her books as performances themselves. Each book in her several series contains the phrase "a performance," indicative of the artist's belief that the everyday events which they portray are themselves worthy performances. Applebroog began publishing her pamphlet-format books when she was without gallery representation. The booklets are simply photographs of her peculiar, cartoonish serial paintings, which repeat images successively and generally include only one line of text, less illuminating than puzzling



Frances Hamilton — Two pages from *The Venetian Book*

While Applebroog's books serve to get her work out to a lot of people, she considers them works of art independent of the paintings which they reproduce. She has recently stopped producing books because of prohibitive costs. Contrary to popular belief, a book is often more expensive to produce than a single, unique work of art such as a painting.

Unique works of art, however, have also taken the form of books. Anselm Kiefer constructed his *Johannisnacht II* (1981) of painted black and white photographs pasted to sheets of cardboard bound together in book format. The pages are meant to be "read" (again, the only text is the title) as a book, and make sense only within such a context. By altering a series of photographs with representational and gestural markings, Kiefer successfully seduces the reader into a misreading of the text (book). The fraud is revealed at the end of the story, which betrays the notion of the photograph as a true document, suggesting the equal capacities of both media for illusion. What first appears as a surreptitiously documentary war, complete with camouflaged tanks, is actually a backyard set-up with a toy plastic tank, further manipulated with paint. Kiefer's book refers to and questions the very processes and media of art while operating as an art object itself.

Sometimes artists' books refer to and add dimension to specific works of art. Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors (Even)* (*The Green Box*) is reproduction of Duchamp's notes for his seminal piece of the same name (originally known as *The Large Glass*). Here, the book is really a sketchbook, but not in the traditional sense. While sketches and working drawings for the original unique object are included, the primary information is the text which illuminates the many levels of understanding the work. By subverting criticism in this way, Duchamp paved the way for conceptual art, in which information alone constitutes many works.

In the realm of pure texts by artists, manifestos are an obvious place to begin. In this case, it is clearly the democratic reproducibility of the press which determines the form. Manifestos are designed to attract maximum attention to the art and theory of individual artists and groups of artists. The Italian Futurists were perhaps the greatest exploiters of this form. Most of their major contributions to the history of art were first issued as manifestos. And not surprisingly, their leader was not a painter but a poet. More recently, artist Joseph Beuys has used the manifesto format, focusing often on subjects outside the traditional realm of the arts. Beuys's numerous manifestos deal with politics and education as often as they deal with art. Nonetheless, Beuys sees every work he produces as sharing equal status as art.

Other local artists who make books include Janet Zweig and Laura Blacklow. Zweig's current project is titled *Heinz and Judy*. *Heinz and Judy* is somewhat of a cross between the classic *Punch and Judy* and a standard children's morality test story about Heinz and his dying wife. The dilemmas which Heinz faces are designed to test children's moral development, and in the context of the more frivolous *Punch and Judy*, Zweig raises questions of her own about popular media. Superimposed over the collage story are scenes from a shadow play which adds yet another element to the text. Zweig's books are offset printed and professionally bound.

Laura Blacklow's handmade books incorporate collage, text, and various photographic processes. While her works have generally been one of a kind, she editions Xerox blow-ups of certain pages. Her current project on surviving deals with her experiences following the death of her mother. Blacklow hopes to produce a large edition of this work to be distributed to hospices and nursing homes for the benefit of others who face similar losses. Blacklow feels that this type of material is a necessary complement to the standard clinical texts which are occasionally provided, she is currently seeking funds.

Finally, there are now a number of books by artists which are both cheap and widely available. Laurie Anderson has documented her ongoing performance of *United States (I-IV)* with a substantial new book of the same title. With notes, photographs, and drawings, *United States* presents the sensory-overload multimedia event as a comprehensive plan available to those created by the limitations of time and place which the medium of performance imposes. Also of note is Eleanor Antin's *Being Antinova* which documents her other life as Eleanora Antinova, the black ballerina with Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. In *Being Antinova*, the artist describes her performance from the artist's (not the ballerina's) point of view. Also included are a series of faked photographs of the ballerina in her great roles. While a few of these books are available locally, New York's Printed Matter in Tribeca carries more than you could imagine. And if looking is all you have in mind, Franklin Furnace (also in New York) is the place to go.

Kevin Concannon is a freelance writer and curator. His most recent curatorial effort is *On the Wall-On the Air: Artists Make Noise*, December 14-January 27 at Hayden Corridor Gallery.