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The blind men and the artists book

Seeking a definition

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William Harroff, Roxana, IL. *10 Commands*, 1987, photcollage, 5.5 x 3 .5", 35" long fully extended

All illustrations in this chapter were taken from the traveling exhibit, *Books and Bookends*, curated by Carol Barton and Henry Barrow. I chose to use examples from this exhibit because it represents the expanse of possibilities that make this medium so difficult to define. It is also a good representation of artists and genres within the medium.

Seeking to define the term artists book reminds me of the children's fable *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, where six blind men discover the various characteristics that make up an elephant. Each man touches a different part of the elephant and develops a picture in his mind from this experience: The man who touches the belly thinks the elephant is like a great wall, the man who touches the trunk, assumes the elephant is like a snake, the one who touches and feels the breeze from the flapping ear thinks the elephant is like an enormous fan and so on. Each man brings his unique frame of reference to define the elephant, but only when they put all the components together can they form a complete understanding of what the elephant is really like.

In the case of the artists book, each artist brings their history, expertise and purpose to the medium and with it a strong belief of how it should be defined. The greatest strength of the artists book is this diversity the medium attracts. Creative individuals with backgrounds from many fields: fine binders, fine printers, calligraphers, graphic designers, conservationists, paper makers, etc. bring components from their expertise to the artists book genre and push and prod others to broaden their knowledge and definition. For example, fine binders bring expertise and concerns for the structural qualities; those trained in graphic design and printing bring knowledge of typography and formal design principles. When the art work, experiences and definitions from each artist are viewed as a sum of their parts, perhaps then we can grasp the full meaning of artists books.

Before I began this research on artists books, I realized there was some discrepancy over what artists books meant, but I was unaware of the fervor with which people would enter into this debate. Artists



Monique Lallier, Greensboro, NC. *The Birthday* by Emily Whittle, 1989, leather, paper, calligraphy, 9 x 16" opened

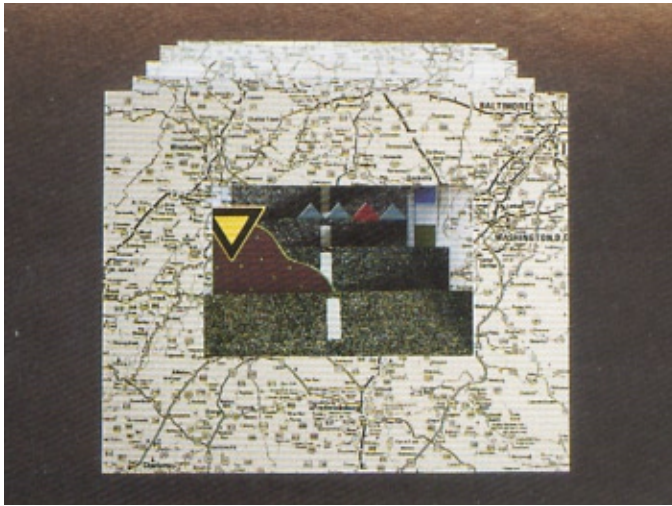
who work in artists books do not even agree on what to call their medium – much less agree on how to define it. Artists books, book arts, book works, book structures, book-shaped objects, manuscript books, bookness, books as art and book objects are all terms used by various artists to define their work. However, common to all of these is the word “book” and at present this can serve as a link or meeting place for critics, historians and researchers who are writing about the genre of the artists book. It does seem that regardless how the artists label their work, in the last decade the critical writing being done about the medium uses the term “artists books” (with the apostrophe before or after the s or not at all). The Library of Congress also adopted this term (without and apostrophe) in 1980 in its list of establish subjects.¹ It is for this reason I have also chosen this term to represent the wide range of book related art.

The term artists book first appeared in 1973 when Moore College of Art in Philadelphia hosted an exhibition of more than 250 different types of books created by artists during the years of 1960 to 1973. Diane Perry Vanderlip, the gallery director and show organizer is credited with originating this term. The books in this exhibit, “Artists Books” were created by artists practicing in a broad range of mediums – musicians, choreographers, painters and conceptual art.²

The exhibit traveled from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Brooklyn, New York and on to Berkeley, California. The cross-country travel and ensuing reviews in *Art in America* and *Print Collectors Newsletter* exposed the term artists books to a large audience.³

In the review in *Print Collectors Newsletter*, author Nancy Tousley begins the definition of artists books by explaining that the primary function of the artists book is “ideas, not objects ...communication ... whether it is through words, words plus image, word-images as objects, sequential images as text, ‘art as idea’ or book as object.”⁴

In the following decade many artists and critics engaged in dogmatic debates attempting to develop a definition or a better term for artists



Carol Barton, Bethesda, MD. *Everyday Road Signs*, 1988, silk screen, offset, 7x 9", 20" deep fully extended

books. Clive Phillpot (past director of the Library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York) and Lucy Lippard (well known author and art critic) as well as Ulises Carrión (poet, essayist and founder of a store and exhibition space for artists books in Amsterdam) were three dominant voices in this debate.

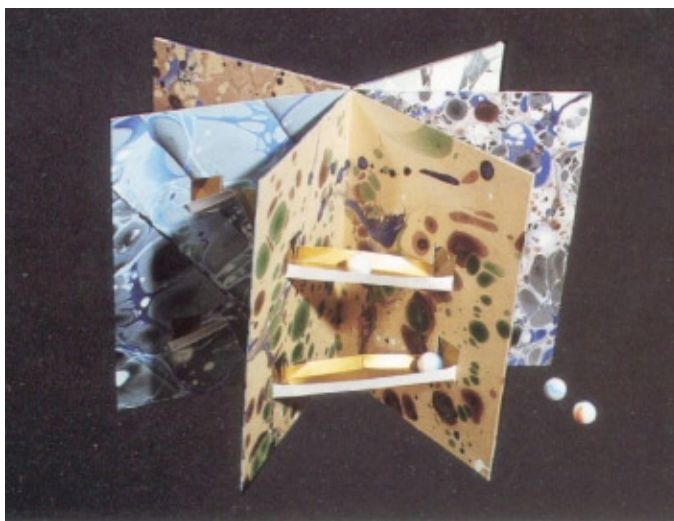
Clive Phillpot, also a frequent lecturer and writer, has had various definitions for artists books since he became involved in the debate. In 1976 while addressing librarians about the difficulties of cataloguing artists books he defined the term as “books or booklets produced by the artists using mass-production methods, and in (theoretically) unlimited numbers in which the artist documents or realizes art ideas or art works.”⁵ By 1980 in a review in *Art Journal*, his definition had changed to suggest that artists books “were not inextricably dependent on the book form.”

His definition becomes broader still by 1998, in his essay in “Books by Artists and Books as Art.” By this time, he also frequently uses the term artists books instead of his previously preferred, bookworks:

Artists’ books are distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation, and literature all come together. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the field is its mongrel nature. ... What really characterizes artists’ books is that they reflect and emerge from the preoccupations and sensibilities of artists, as makers and as citizens.⁶

Both Phillpot and Lippard started their discussions on the definitions of artist books in the 1970s when artists books were being created to “democratize” art, meaning the artist’s intent was to make art available to the masses. The definition in Lippard’s 1977 essay “The Artists’ Book Goes Public,” published in *Art in America*, is written in this context.

Neither an art book ... or a book on art ... the artists’ book is a work of art on its own, conceived specifically for the book form and often published by the artist him/herself. It can be visual, verbal, or visual/verbal. With few exceptions, it is all of a piece, consisting of one serial work or a series of closely related ideas and/or images – a portable exhibition. ... Usually inexpensive in price, modest in format and



Richard McClintock, Hampden Sydney, VA. *In & Out: A Marble Book*, 1988, marbled paper, board, marbles, 8 x 6", 12" wide fully opened

ambitious in scope, the artists' book is a fragile vehicle for a weighty load of hopes and ideals: it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience.⁷

In her early enthusiasm for artists books, Lippard co-founded Printed Matter, a book store for artists books in New York City which is still in existence. By 1985 in an essay published in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, her support is more reserved. This reserve may in part be because the genre of the "democratic" artists books has more or less gone out of existence. Her definitions changes to "like performance art, artists' books are best defined as whatever isn't anything else," but she also states she would miss them if they ever went away.⁸

Shortly before the disillusionment of Lippard and Phillpot was expressed an essay intended for a literary crowd "The New Art of Making Books" by Ulises Carrión,⁹ caught the attention of visual artists and Carrión soon became a spokesperson for book artists. His definition looks beyond the 1970s format and purpose of artists books. In the words of Renée Riese and Judd D. Hubert, authors of *The Cutting Edge of Artist Reading: Artists' Books*, he provides a useful definition for the protean artist book: "Bookworks are books that are conceived as an expressive unity, that is to say, where the message is the sum of all materials and formal elements."¹⁰ This definition is much more aligned with the direction artists books were headed as they moved away from the goals of creating affordable art for the masses and moved into an art form that incorporated a much larger scope of processes and materials. Lippard's prediction that artists books might be disappearing did not materialize and as the medium flourishes, so does the search for a definition.

In 1998 members of the Book_Arts_L listserv were invited to respond to the list with a concise definition of artists books for the purpose of providing a definition for an art history class. One hundred and forty-nine definitions and responses to definitions arrived in the next six days.

These responses ranged from asking the basics questions of "What is a



Hedi Kyle, Philadelphia, PA. *ABC*, 1989, offset,
12 x 6.25", 28" long fully extended

book?" and "What is an artist?" to philosophical ramblings, and to those who thought that since none of the words seem to fit the medium, a new word should be created. Book artists still feel strongly enough about this topic to write essays and give speeches on why their particular choice of words is the one that should take the medium into the next century. Perhaps one reason why this discussion is so passionate is that for many book artists the words they use are as important as the visual concept and words are laboriously and carefully chosen. The book created as a work of art is a relatively new concept in the modern world. New territory is being charted and with this inception comes the struggle for definition. There is an exuberance and passion for defining the art form.

I find the Book_Arts_L listserv exchange of ideas useful in understanding the spirit of artists who create in the book medium and the essence of the work they create at this period in history. Book artists today bring many diverse areas of book arts expertise as well as interests and experience from various vocations: teachers, historians, chemists, librarians, conservationists, to name a few, all brought together out of the love for redefining the "book."

An artists' book is a book made by an artist. In the making of the object, expression by the artist predominates over conventions of bookmaking.

When Marcel Duchamp installs a urinal in a museum, it is art. Intent is everything. An artists' book is different from other books simply because it is conceived and executed from the beginning as a work of art by its creator. Nothing anyone thinks changes the original intent of the artist. — *Michael Morin, Artist/Librarian*

An "artist book" is an assemblage of folios, bound or otherwise, meant to be observed in a sequential fashion, either arbitrary or predetermined, and comprised of elements both textual, or pictorial. Construction is often of an importance equal to that of content. Modes of reproduction are variable, as are methods of construction. — *Michael Babcock, Interrobang Letterpress*

Like the examples above, other definitions for artists books



Maryline Pool Adams, Berkeley, CA. *A Peep-Show Alice*, 1989, letterpress, drawings, 3 x2.25", 8" deep

contributed to the Book_Arts_L listserv debate fall into two categories. Interestingly, I think these two categories can be characterized by separating and using the two words they seek to define. The first group aligns with the word “artists” and draws their definition of artists books from this perspective. The second group derives its definition from the vantage of the more concrete work “book,” bringing concrete considerations of structure and conformity rather than the philosophy of intent.

Definitions from “artists” perspective

The definitions derived from the “artists” perspective have a very broad all-encompassing description. Within this approach there are three basic variations to how artists books are defined.

- those interested primarily in the artists’ concept, idea or purpose – intent – when defining an artists book. If the creator says it is an artists book then it is.
- those concerned that any definition will only exclude a brilliant idea or confine the artists’ approach to the medium.
- and those who believe that rather than create a written definition, a variety of works need to be shown so the viewer can draw his or her own conclusions.

Intent is everything

“Artists book” is a (controversial term given to) book or book-like object in which the primary interest, or emphasis, is visual rather than textual. The controversy arises because some feel strongly that a book, to be considered a book, must behave in all respects like a book. Otherwise it's not a book but something else, such as sculpture.
— Richard Miller, editor, *Canadian Bookbinder and Book Artist Guild*

A book which is itself the thing to be communicated, not a support for conveying something other than itself. In an artist-book the book is the art, not just a possible enabling factor for time delayed (mass) communication. —Angela Moll, *Cornell University library*



William Harroff, Roxana, IL. *Flat Beer*, 1987,
tin cans, wire pigment, 7 x 4", 8.25" wide fully opened

Perhaps the Fluxist movement would define an artists book as some thing that involves linking together. Thought – execute imaginary – tangible to be – it is. — *Colette Vosberg, artist*

Artists are trying to redefine the notion of a book. ... There also seems to be a couple of lines of arguments. One seems to have to do with structure while the other has to do with function. These are two completely different ideas. Structure has to do with the physical object. People who seem to be stuck on structure are discounting the purpose of the book. What does the book do? In simplest terms it relays information. — *Berwyn Hung, Five Feather Press*

What I have liked so much about the book arts, using that term to encompass the whole range, is how welcoming it is. I feel I have found a place where my work can fit and I feel comfortable. The fact that it is so hard to agree on a definition may make life difficult for art historians and critics, but I think it is wonderful for artists.

— *Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord, artist, teacher*

If “Artists” Book” is a statement of result, in that it’s a book by an artist, I’d rather stake my claim as a “Book Artist,” which is a statement of intent: that the Book is my medium of Art. I don’t make “artist”s books.” I make “Book Art,” in the sense that others make painting or sculpture. It’s important that the sophisticated viewer of my work bring with them the history of the book, from the use of caves to preserve human marks to the use of electronic media. Of course you’ll find a lot of artists entering any field who don’t know the history, and only bring their personal experience to the table. Sometimes that produces something that we all can learn from. If I see one new thing in a work I’m happy. — *Richard Minsky, founder, New York Center for the Book*

Definition may limit creativity

Though I hate the notion of a definition, since by defining what an artists book is, may lead to excluding SOMETHING which, upon reading the definition, would work to eliminate SOMEONE who would have perhaps made an artists book (or books) which would have been an enriching and tremendous addition to the realm of art itself, not just artists books. — *Lucy Alexander, artist*



Larry B. Thomas, Atlanta, GA. *Flagellation Book #10-4-D/10-4-D-yea*, 1987, mixed media, tax forms, 23 x 5.25"

Some of us choose to work within Artists/Books precisely because of the utterly refreshing elusiveness of a set of defining LIMITATIONS.
— Melissa Jay Craig, director, Chicago Center for the Book

An artists' book is a book whose whole entity is intended to be a work of art, where the design and structure are subordinate to the communication, even though they may enhance it. I suppose there would always be some works on the borderline between books and artist's books and sculptures. But art is not something that can be neatly divided into categories, which doesn't mean that categories can't be useful if you aren't rigid about them.

The problem (for the purists), however, is when a work is created which ignores – or defies – one or more aspects of the traditional book, such as the pages being glued, nailed, or otherwise fastened together so that the book will not open.

I have no doubt that, in time, the controversy will abate when people realize that objects (or sculpture) which have been inspired by, or heavily influenced by “the fetish-object known as book” (to quote Stan Bevington), can be considered “artists books” even though they don't conform in all respects to some ten-point checklist of what makes a traditional book. — Richard Miller, editor, *Canadian Bookbinder and Book Artist Guild Newsletter*

Give a visual definition

...I think that any definition is problematic. I am only able to answer the question with more difficult questions: What is a book? What is art (and/or what is an artist)? Perhaps for teaching purposes, it is best to show various examples that fulfill the many definitions that you will no doubt receive from this query. — Janice Esther Westley Braun, *Special Collections Librarian, Mills College*

Whether artists use the form conventionally, or tweak it one way or the other, interpretation and inspiration comes from a deep connection to “experience” with books. Artists add depth and breadth to the definition of the form. — Catherine Kanner, *The Melville Press*

The attempt to define the genre limits the possibilities. How much better to show a variety of books to start a conversation about the issue, rather than presenting a definition. Showing what artist's books HAVE been sparks the imagination. — Susan King, *Paradise Press*



Diane Stemper, Richmond, IN. *Road Food*, 1988, mixed media, found placemats, xerox, 10.5" diameter

I see most artists' books as self contained galleries, each page being a wall and the whole book as being the show. — *Edith Abeyta, artist*

Definitions from “book” perspective

The previous definitions based on the word “artist” are more concerned with artistic freedoms and philosophy. The group of definitions that come from the vantage point of the word “book” are more concrete. They derive their meaning from either the physical characteristics of a book or from the structural integrity of the object and that it relates to an accepted idea of what constitutes a book.

Physical characteristics of a book

My definition of not just the artists book, but book in general is an object which contains. The definition of what a book is simple: A book consists of a number of piece of paper sewn together, and bound with a cover. That my friends is a book. A scroll is not a book. It is a scroll. Nor are commas floating down a river. A number of things have been called books, which aren't books. It's like calling a fish a pen - they have no similarities beyond common shape. A chiseled stone is not a book, not until you bind a number of them together in the form of pages. Sorry, that's the facts. — *Yara Ferreira Cluver, artist, instructor*

A book is a three-dimensional, functional object. ... a book is something which I can hold in my hand while turning pages/leaves which have something upon them which can impart additional information to me. — *Jack C. Thompson, Thompson Conservation Laboratory*

I have seen poor workmanship excused with the phrase, “it’s art” or dismissed as irrelevant. If I look at a print, I expect it to be well crafted, if I look at a painting, a collage, a sculpture I expect the same. ... if you want to create “artist’s books please do. ... but please have a solid foundation in the craft of the book. — *Peter Verheyen, conservator, Syracuse University Library, fine design bindings*

Structural integrity

To me equally important in the making of a work of art are the materials one uses, craftsmanship, the content, and the way in which all this is put together. If you ignore the importance of any



Pat Baldwin, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico,
Micromacrocasm, 1989, letterpress collage, 2.25 x
 2.75",

one of these, you end up with something inferior. — *Shireen Holman, printmaker, book artist*

Not everything can be a book. That doesn't make it non-art, just not a book. — *Peter Verheyen, conservator, Syracuse University Library, fine design bindings*

Book as an art, and an artist's book are two completely different things. An artist's book can be made by somebody who does not know the book structure. For him/her a form or an image of a book is used to convey a certain message that is not connected with book as a medium. Book as an art must combine two equally important elements: an intellectual and artistic message. In other words the expression and form must melt together. In an artist's book, the symbol or an image of a book serves only as an excuse for expressing some other idea. In an artist's book the EXPRESSION is a primary concern. In book that is an art both EXPRESSION, and STRUCTURE are equally important. Artist's book? [A] Piece where bookish shapes, objects or book symbols serve as a form of artistic expression. — *Ksenia Kopystynska, Ars Libri Studio*

An artist's book is a form of art that alludes to traditional book characteristics in one or more ways. — *Lilias Ford, Salt Winds Yankee Barn Workshop*

Invent a new word

Another final approach from the "book" side of the controversy is to invent a new word. Phillip Smith, a well know British book binder coined the term "bookness." In the 1970s, after reading in James Joyce's *Ulysses* of the "horseness of horses" – the whatness of horses – he decided the phrase "the whatness of the book" or "bookness" would make a more suitable term than artists books.

Bookness: The qualities which have to do with a book. In its simplest meaning the term covers the packaging of multiple planes held together in fixed or variable sequence by some kind of hinging mechanism, support, or container, associated with a visual/verbal content called a text. The term should not strictly speaking include pre-codex carriers of text such as the scroll or the clay tablet, in



Clifton Meador, Ossining, New York. *Anecdote of the Jar* 1989, offset, 10 x 5.25", 11" wide fully opened

fact nothing on a single leaf or planar surface such as a TV screen, poster or hand-bill.

“Bookness” is however being stretched to include forms which carry a digitalized or electronic text such as a CD, a hard disk or a microchip, or miscellaneous forms such as spirals of paper with continuous text, or pyramids, dodecahedrons and other geometric multiplanar forms (which could also have text inscribed on them). I would not describe all these things as having the quality of bookness or being strictly covered by the definition. A blank book is still a book, but a blank dodecahedron or unmarked spiral of paper is not a book, it is a dodecahedron etc.

A text is a text and not a book, but any other object one likes to imagine may perhaps be its conveyance. A text can be inscribed on anything but this does not make it a book, or have the quality of bookness, even as a scroll retains its scrollness without any text on it. A teddy bear with text on it is not a book! The book is not the text, although it is traditionally associated with it, and these two elements appear often to be mistaken for the same thing. The book is the hinged multi-planar vehicle or substrate on which texts, verbal, or tactile (the latter would include braille and other relief or embossed effects, found objects, pop-ups) maybe written, drawn, reproduced, printed or assembled.

Also included in these various posts were references to the Bible and Oxford English Dictionary. One would not think that either of these could add much openness or new thought to the debate, but I was quite surprised at how the historical reference to the “books” of the Bible and definition in the OED could expand our 21st-century concept of a book.

One cannot assume that the definition of a book, let alone an Artist’s Book, is understood by all, but indubitably the book arts have infinitely expanded that definition. The definition of a book (like the Duchampian definition of art itself) can now mean any object which a book artist defines as a book! All the usual criteria have been breached, infringed and transgressed. The Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.) entry for ‘book’ is surprisingly wide... Part of the long O.E.D. entry (running to over seven pages) reads

[3. gen. A written or printed treatise or series of treatises, occupying several sheets of paper or other substance fastened together so as to compose a material whole. In this wide sense, referring to all ages



Anne Patterson, Jersey City NJ. *Kaleidosights*, 1989, wood, brass, plexiglass, photostats, 11.25" diameters 3.25" deep

and countries, a book comprehends a treatise written on any material (skin, parchment, papyrus, paper, cotton, silk, palm leaves, bark, tablets of wood, ivory, slate, metal, etc) put together in any portable form, e.g. that of a long roll, or of separate leaves, hinged, strung, stitched, or pasted together.]

We can thank those Christian marketers of the early centuries of the Common Era, for repackaging the “books” that contained their religious writings. Our word for book refers to the amount of text that could easily fit on a scroll. A scroll “is” a book. That’s why biblical chapters are called books. There were even earlier forms of the “book;” that’s so long ago that when people make those kinds of books today, they are called artist’s books. — *Nicholas G. Yeager, artist*

Many responses also saw the validity to both the “artists” and the “book” sides of the discussion:

I love books which surprise me, whose imaginative reach thrills me and perhaps makes me see “book” in a way I haven’t seen it before. And if a creatively made book or book-like object does so, I am willing to give it a lot of leeway in terms of its craft. ... When a book can be both well made and imaginatively powerful, yes, that’s the best it gets.

I call much of my work Book Objects and as stretchy as they may get in their “book-ness,” they are well-crafted, often employing very traditional bench techniques. — *Melissa Jay Craig, director, Chicago Center for the Book*

Johanna Drucker, in her recent book, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, is able to blend these two groups of definitions together giving importance to the “bookness” of a work – how the artist integrates the specific features of the book form into their artists book, but with emphasis also placed on “explorations of the book as an artistic concept.” She also states that without the attention to concept, a work cannot be considered an artists book.¹¹

I would like to close this debate using a statement from an essay by Ed Hutchins entitled “Defining the Book in the Electronic Age.”

“When I define books for myself, I chose not to look at what a book is, what it is made out of, or what it looks like. Instead, I chose to consider how a book is used and what purpose it serves. For me a



Teresa Pankratz, Chicago, IL. *The Wardrobe*, 1988, letterpress, etchings, mahogany case, 12 x 10.75", 148" long fully extended

book is a structure for storing and sharing information. ... I told this definition to an audience and someone exclaimed, 'But that describes a refrigerator.' I replied, 'Wow, what a great idea for a book.'"¹²

This quote embodies the the spirit that I would like to use for the exploration of artists books in this thesis. I contains an openness (like the definition from the OED) that can encompass the many explorations of artists who work in this medium. Like the fable of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, it provides room for the many characteristics that make up the whole of artists books. My purpose is not to evaluate, but to explore the medium of artists books, what it is, who it is and why it is.

Endnotes

¹ Stefan Klima, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), p. 10.

² Klima, p. 13.

³ Klima, p. 15.

⁴ Klima, p. 17.

⁵ Klima, p. 23.

⁶ Lauf, Cornelia and Clive Phillpot, *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books* (New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 1998), p. 32.

⁷ Joan Lyons, *Artist Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), p. 45.

⁸ Klima, p. 53.

⁹ Lyons, p. 267.

¹⁰ Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert, *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books* (New York City: Granary Books, 1999), p. 7.

¹¹ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, (New York: Granary Books, 1995), p. 6.

¹² Book_Arts_L list archive, www.philobiblon.com