Material Cultures and Artists' Codices: Museum Education With Artists' Books

By Courtney Lee Weida, *Adelphi University*[1]

"What are books? The history of the book, or an imagination of a book: this would be an interesting theme for a school project." - M.C. Richards in *The Crossing Point*

"Worried about your book?" - Lynda Barry in *What it is.*

"Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now." - Toni Morrison's last sentence in *Jazz*

Introduction: Books as Artifact/Art(e)fact

Historically, museums have often been linked with books. Museum education theorist Hilde Hein (2000) reminds us that the prototypical museum was (in the oldest sense) a "temple of the muses, a 'sylvan grove' to which scholars repaired. . . amid books" (p. 5). As a poet, artist, and arts educator, I myself harbor a passion for books – a love for both their conceptual content and their physical and aesthetic presence. They are also objects directly or indirectly representing unique perspectives on historical and cultural moments. Meanwhile, I negotiate a certain ambivalence and anxiety towards the authority and hierarchies associated with traditional publishing and systems of cultural capital surrounding the text and its various histories. This paper will explore artists' books as hand-crafted and hand-held artifacts of material culture within museums and will examine potentialities and problems of bookarts as it overlaps digital culture.

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[1] Contact: cweida@adelphi.edu

I conceptualize artists' books as metaphorical threshold between text/narrative and image/object with rich poetic, visual, and (sometimes) even tactile content. Morrison's closing to her novel *Jazz* points out that the act of reading books is also touching and interacting, calling attention to how we as readers are holding and in some manner remaking her work. Books are not only visual, but also uniquely material in their use. While the concept of visual culture has been applied to examples of advertising, news media, and the internet, (Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2003), I understand material culture studies as both explorations of histories and cultures surrounding visual culture objects, and also artifacts made by humans, including even fine art (Ulbricht, 2007). Artists books are perhaps particularly interesting archival sources, for they are poised between art and artifact - as material of historical record, commentary, and personal object. Further, there is a parallel creative process of inquiry and innovation in the book as a somewhat antiquated art object among emerging forms of digital documentation. I have come to believe that just as book arts engage in reconceptualizations of text and image; digital media such as wikis, blogs, and online social networks dovetail, extend and/or reflect/are reflected by questionings of the book format as well.

Books of Histories/Histories of Books

Art historians may locate artists' books within varied spaces: from museums to private collections, from libraries to art classrooms and museum studios. The unique historical contexts of book arts engage particular art historical analysis.

Historically, artist books could be traced back to illuminated medieval manuscripts as well as works of William Blake as a sort of legacy or artistic continuum. Contemporary artists like Lynda Barry, whose work intersect bookarts, graphica, and diary genres, have a profound knowledge of their media's history, including references to the lineage of bookworks within William Blake's work. Bookmakers/book artists such as Johanna Drucker (2004) have also recognized the artistically inscribed early notebooks of Emily Dickinson as prototypes of today's book arts. Robert Warner has even created a book commemorating Emily Dickinson's words and images. These contemporary book artists challenge traditional notions of the book, structurally and conceptually, even as they pay homage to earlier book objects.

Other investigations and challenges include Barbara Hashimoto's ceramic codex piece, *Tabula Rasa* (Latin: "scraped tablet"), which metaphorically explores experience, identity, and pre-cognition within the blank slate. Meanwhile, Denise Hawrysio's unconventional fur-lined book object *The Killing*, is a work without text that functions as protest against violence towards animals. Conceptually, I have been influenced by Fred Wilson's interrogative archaeology as an overarching museum education approach that invites us to question and reconfigure museum objects and curatorial choices in text and meaning. Artists' books and the theoretical frameworks of material culture in which they exist uniquely illuminate such issues of object, image, and text. Specifically, the book as a kind of art and archival media is particularly conscious of its function as a dialogue with the viewer (reader), and so

viewers can layer their own questions of the object with encounters of those self-reflexive inquiries the book has posed for us.

The Smith College Museum of Art recently featured a multifaceted bookworks exhibition called "Poetic Science: Bookworks by Daniel E Kelm" in 2007. Kelm, a bookbinder, teacher, chemist, and storyteller views his process as part chemistry, alchemy, and collecting. His innovations in bookbinding meet interesting conceptualizations of the book as an object, including such pieces as *Frankenstein*, a codex containing a monster hand; and *Mars,* which is a folding book that includes an actual meteorite. This format demonstrates the process of narrative, collection, and artifact that can literally reconfigure the book as a canvas or vessel for an actual object.

Narratives About/In/Of Books

Typically, although books are catalogues and collections of ideas, we might not expect a book to contain physical objects. Kathleen McLean (1999) asserts that usually "books are relatively uniform media that delivers an experience to physically passive individuals" (p. 86). Hilde Hein adds that "physical objects . . . signify within narrative systems" (p. 31). Recent bookworks exhibitions and associated programs pose counterpoints to our perceptions of uniformity and systems of narrative structure. All museum objects can be approached as containing narrative features, and yet bookarts may consciously resist and revise particular

narratives. It is the range of narrative features of text and image in bookarts that invites a unique framework of looking, reading, and thinking.

Children encountering bookworks can combine conventional text reading with thoughtful explorations of different literary and artistic modes (origami formats, sculptural books, altered books, sketchbooks, weblogs, etc). Addressing literacy in education, Ansbacher (1998) writes of instruction in which "learners [could be] introduced to books as aesthetic and cultural artifacts" (p. 29). In this spirit, students in the museum might encounter a variety of book formats, then become engaged with activities that help them to look closely at and ask in-depth questions about examples of these formats. Finally, museums with studio resources enable them to also engage with interactive activities to create their own bookworks.

Tim Rollins, an artist and educator, engaged his students in such an activity through "Kids of Survival" afterschool program and related museum and gallery exhibitions. In one exploration, high school students created altered books, using canonical texts as canvases for contemporary paintings of parallel themes in their own lives. Learning experiences like these not only serves goals of print literacy, but also important issues of aesthetic education. Further, this sort of project does not assume passivity of the learner, but rather encourages analysis and interaction with the text. The narrative becomes literary, visual, and historical through the book, the story, the image, and books themselves.

(Hyper)text(s)

The thinking we can do through and about books is related to the special look and feel of books. Johanna Drucker (2004) has conceptualized art books and bookworks as "auratic objects," for they have a unique presence. This is particularly notable in our digital age, in which many students have interacted with computer text and electronic media more frequently and/or prior to printed texts. Altered books are perhaps the prototypical blog, as they allow us to "enter" and alter a text again and again. This can especially be seen in Tom Phillip's *Humument*, a text he has altered within several editions. However, altered books maintain physical presence as objects/artifacts.

On a wide enough continuum, the consideration of artists' books or bookworks might also include formats of contemporary scrapbooks and journals within DIY culture as well. Lynda Barry's work *What it is* questions the word and the image continuously in a graphic novel-like format, and refers to her book as the space (mentally, imaginatively, and philosophically) where her entire life history is "still alive." Meanwhile, the collaboratively authored and illustrated *To Die No More* is a compilation of various quotes, primers, and practices pertaining to death throughout the course of history. This sort of catalog is both discursive and archival, and perhaps evokes the life of the book form itself as well as human life.

Pablo Helguera (2007) created the *Manual of Contemporary Art Style* which both mimics and mocks the parallel processes of formatting in writing an academic paper with those of being an artist. This often satirical book questions the idea of a

singular model or style of contemporary art, even as it adopts the format of a manual. We might consider this kind of editorializing and ironic writing alongside digital sources like Wikipedia to invite our students to consider all sorts of authorial presences with healthy criticality and/or skepticism. In other words, the format of a manual or online encyclopedia should not, in and of itself, lend seriousness and/or credibility to the author(s). At the same time, much can be learned from artists and those outside traditional positions of authorial authority. Artists/authors like the Guerilla Girls provide alternative art histories that are told with satire, cartooning, collage, and other forms of commentary with a feminist twist. These texts also question the authority of authors and canons.

Other texts engage the possibility of multiple narratives and perspectives. Clarissa Sligh's *Wrongly Bodied Two*, produced at the Women's Studio Workshop, weaves together the stories of two people. One narrative transgresses gender boundaries through the character Jake's modern day transformation from female to male. His experience is juxtaposed with that of Ellen Craft, a 19th century black woman who escapes slavery by passing as a white male. The idea of "passing" and the concept of gender are explored in both narratives, although each tale belongs to its own time period and socio-cultural identity.

Concluding Remarks: (Re)Making Books

The overlapping theme of embodiment through time and space is one that perhaps speaks to both archival processes and the discursive nature of the internet as well. The archival quality of bookarts is enhanced by their fluidity in record-keeping and collecting processes. While traditional books may be akin to time capsules with closed-endedness, bookarts often contain revisions and commentaries on themselves and can speak across time in a manner parallel to hypertext. Bookarts symbolically influence new digital formats, and underscore how book artifacts will persist as precious, tactile, auratic personal and museum objects for us to read, to see, and to know – even though we may not always actually *need* them as primary archival formats.

Caroline Jones (2006) has characterized art that uses early technology in a fetishized manner as "residual." In many ways, bookworks fall into this category of residual, nostalgic technologies. However, our nostalgia for books is meaningful as their "bookness" is even more compelling when artist books are most unique or rare. These rare works are paradoxically new and old in their contexts, for we know them through traditional museum collections and library archives *and/or* through digital records online such as art historical databases and gallery websites. As quoted in *To Die No More:* "I would wish that they might find with every new orbit that life affords us successors on whom the whole sum of love and belief dedicated to them might be carried on" (np).

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Resources:

http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument/0/001010/index.html

This website provides links to pdf files of the altered book pages done by Tom Phillips.

http://iowabookworks.bookways.com/history

This website explores ways in which books themselves have a history. Appropriate for people of all ages, this site explains that history.

http://www.colophon.com/gallery/futurism/

This website addresses book arts and the arts movement of Futurism.

http://www.treehuggerbooks.com/dogearedmagazine/

This website includes information about a periodical on altered books. Submissions are welcomed and resources are presented. This website may be suitable for some adolescents.

http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/middle/Linda-books.htm

This website features a lessonplan on altered books