

Pictures to be Read/Poetry to be Seen

Jan van der Marck

Language and pictorial representation are increasingly being fused in contemporary visual arts. This trend toward a visual language—poetic rather than communicative—reflects a breakdown of tradition in all the arts. It is discussed and illustrated in terms of the work of specific artists brought together in an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

The title “Pictures to be Read/Poetry to be Seen” attempts to paraphrase, but by no means defines the subject of this exhibition.¹ The inversion of *Read* and *Seen* is a mere allusion to the breakdown of traditional categories in all the arts. What sets reading apart from seeing is that the former involves time and direction while the latter is instantaneous and wholistic. Words as a temporal element increasingly invade the spatial domain of the image.

If we consider language and pictorial representation as two species of the genus *sign*, they can be wedded with varying degrees of intimacy, either conveniently, by matching illustration to text, or so completely that individual identities are no longer discernible. What characterizes the majority of works in this exhibition is their complex permutation of words and images. The resulting visual language tends towards poetic rather than communicative functions inasmuch as the artist’s attention focuses on the sign itself rather than on what it signifies. The meaning of a work is to be found in its overall perceptual organization and not necessarily in its potential to convey information.

The liaison of visual and descriptive elements has become a distinctive

1. Jan van der Marck’s article originally appeared as the catalog introduction for the exhibition *Pictures to be Read/Poetry to be Seen*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (Fall 1967).

trend in recent art. The tendency toward visualization of music and poetry has a counterpart in the growing emphasis on narration in painting. Critics have variously identified it as "Figuration Narrative" (Gerald Gassiot-Talabot) and "Immagine Fredda e Poetica" (Arturo Schwarz). Although applicable, up to a point, these terms fail to take into account different but related propositions advanced by Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell or Alison Knowles.

More important to the subject of this exhibition than the joint occurrence of words and images is the nature of their relationship and their extension in space and time. Arakawa's diagrams which exist on the borderline between word and image are as pertinent on account of their metaphysical references to space and time, as Kaprow's *Words* and Knowles' *Big Book*, which actually operate in space and time. In analyzing the nature of the varied word-image relationships we discover that the artists in this exhibition have treated them in terms of simultaneity rather than causality, association rather than equivalence, effectiveness rather than sense. The result is pseudo-legible in that it frustrates reading or offers multiple readings; further, it is allogical, discontinuous, non-sequential, and non-explicit. Because of the deliberately complex interrelations between pictorial and literary sign systems, and the absence of reading direction and reference points, the works presented invite speculation but resist interpretation.

A written story this hermetic would remain incomprehensible for the lack of a "code." Works of visual art, on the contrary, still stimulate, aesthetically and intellectually, even though they allow only partial decoding. Their surface coherence overrides content and message and they act like linguistic prisms, refracting and scattering visual information with disregard for immediate comprehension. Assuming a certain amount of shared information, the artist presents us with elaborate stratagems that engage the mind, the eye, and the imagination.

Marcel Duchamp was the first artist to attempt and achieve a visual integration of the work of art with non-art elements from the surrounding world. In his *Large Glass* (1915–23) the pictorial composition and the activity behind the transparent picture plane are fused as we view it. Because the subject is painted on glass, the background is supplied "ready-made" and each situation presents a new context for the painted elements. This open-ended work, capable of absorbing its chance environment, has fascinated artists for half a



Figure 1. *Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even)*, 1915–1923, by Marcel Duchamp.

century and it is particularly pertinent to this exhibition. We find the same attitude of combined attachment and detachment on the part of the artist, the same irreverent attitude toward the idea of art as precious and unique, the same delight in destroying conventional meanings and substituting new or counter meanings for them, and the same attack on our intellectual and perceptual faculties.

The *Large Glass* has inspired Arakawa's diagrammatic divisions of the canvas into imaginary spatio-temporal and sensorial-psychological zones; Baruchello's stratification of meaning by spreading his cryptograms and micro-images over several layers of plexiglass; Bauermeister and Brecht in their exploitation of the "double imagery quotient" (i.e. the fact of one image being contained in another) in either an illusory or literal way; Fahlström and Simonetti in their topographical organization of images on neutral backgrounds and their use of game structures and chance imagery. Duchamp's proposal of the "assisted ready-made" is crucial to the work of Ray Johnson whose fondness for combs is just one of many tributes; Kitaj treats obscure texts and photographs as ready-mades and juxtaposes this found imagery in a non-sequential way; George Brecht poses the logical question whether the "assisted ready-made" concept would not also apply to literature, the theater and perhaps life itself.

John Cage, through his work, his teachings and his friendships, is another major influence on the artists in this exhibition. Paralleling Duchamp's integration of art and environmental phenomena in the *Large Glass*, Cage admits integration of accidental, external sounds in his musical compositions. The shift of emphasis toward non-auditory elements in his concerts reflects painting's increasing incorporation of non-painterly elements. Cage advocates above all the elimination of boundaries between art and life and he favors chance operations and indeterminacy over conscious composition. He agrees with Marshall McLuhan that in the electronic age everything happens at once, that communication has shrunk the world into a global village. Music, therefore, is no longer a "stream falling over rocks," proceeding from start to finish, but a "vibration complex" as James Tenney has put it. Similarly, art, formerly a definable individual expression is now a multi-focus, total-field experience. George Brecht, on whom Cage left an indelible impression (other artists influenced by Cage are Bauermeister, Fahlström, Johnson, Kaprow, Knowles and Simonetti), predicts a

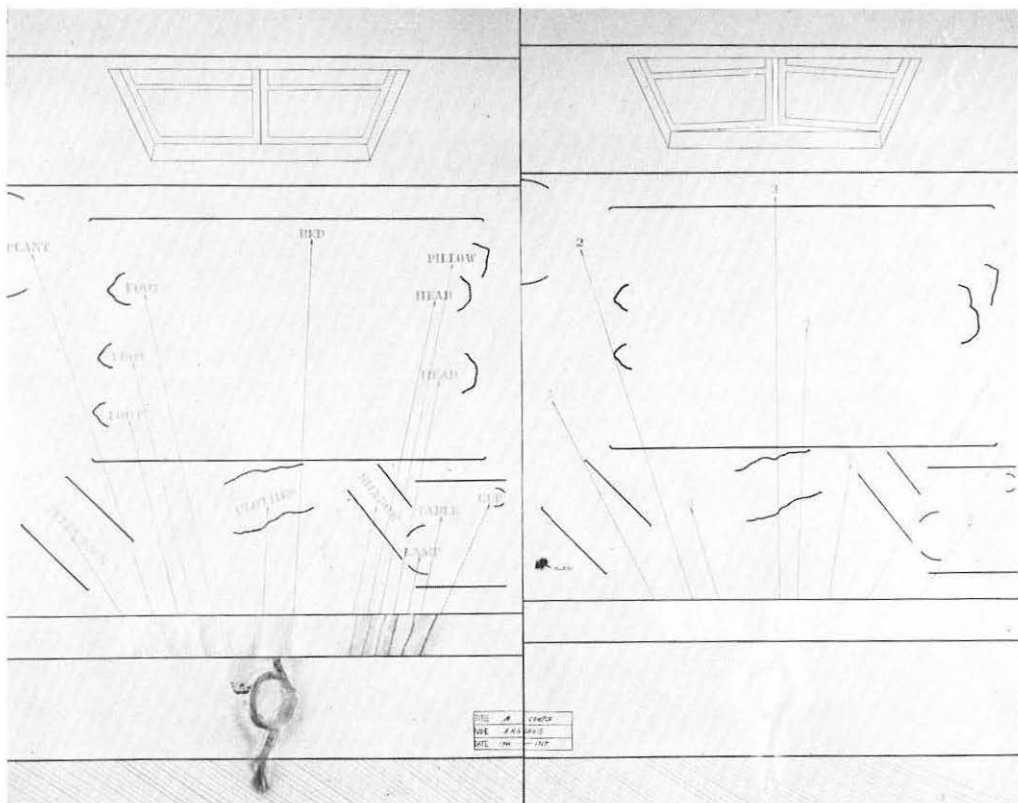


Figure 2. *A Couple*, 1966–1967, by Shusaku Arakawa. Courtesy of the artist and Dwan Gallery, New York. Arakawa says he wants to make “diagrams of the unknown,” discover the essential relationship between imagination and reality, trace the sources of the imagination, and propose a reality that exists only as a name. That he would present the seven-letter word *MISTAKE* as a picture indicates that Arakawa’s investigations extend beyond semantics or linguistic analysis. Rather, he is declaring summarily that the world is a flawed environment and life is an unaccountable passage in the continuum of death. . . . Arakawa believes that his paintings can be explained like poetry. By describing their genesis he facilitates our reading. First he makes a sketch (pre-image) of nature by translating it into language. With words that correspond to facts he draws a diagram of the *visible* world. Then, with words that correspond to feelings or ideas, he draws a diagram of the *invisible* world. The painting’s effectiveness depends on the artist’s ability to establish a connection between the *visible* and the *invisible*, allowing us to “see his feelings . . . touch them and know what they are.” (JvdM)



Figure 3. *Three of Swords*, 1966, by George Brecht. Courtesy of the artist and Fischbach Gallery, New York. George Brecht investigates the relationship between words and objects by making signs and wall hangings that spell SILENCE and NO SMOKING. In *The Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, a continuing work begun in 1964 of which eight chapters and over 200 pages have now been completed, Brecht “researches the continuity of un-like things, of objects, of events in time, of objects and styles, etc.” Brecht does not admit to the conventional distinctions of media and to him they have already ceased to exist. Subscribing to Cage’s ideas about indeterminacy, he writes “event pieces” that may be composed of as little as one word (e.g., EXIT). Like Marcel Duchamp he isolates things that appeal or simply occur to him. Since all these objects relate to his experience, the result capsules the world in terms of autobiography. Thus, his works are personal entries in the book of painting, forever preserved under glass in shallow boxes. . . . At his most effective, Brecht demonstrates the gap between the verbal and the objective level of the things he combines and arranges, and he shows us the fatal inadequacy of word and thing equations. (JvdM).

future state of mind in which divisions within the arts and between art and life no longer exist.

In the field of linguistics this attitude is shared by Ludwig Wittgenstein who commands attention among artists disproportionate to the technical nature of his writings. Unlike the positivists who analyzed what could be said in an ideal language, Wittgenstein concentrated on what is said in actual language. If, in his earlier writings, he contended that language was an exact picture of reality, later, aware of the various language uses, he reevaluated it as a pawn in an indefinite number of language games. His aphoristic arguments have been relieved of their philosophical burdens, as his vivid, rather plastic imagery (chess boards, graphs, pencils, apples, number series) ceased to serve a demonstrative purpose. There is an obvious appeal in such opaque or categorical statements of Wittgenstein's as "What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language," and "What can be shown cannot be said." Wittgenstein has lifted language from its restrictive mold much as Duchamp has freed art and Cage has freed music. His motive was delightfully pragmatic: to someone asking him "What is your aim in philosophy?" he replied, "To show the fly the way out of the fly bottle."

The greatest breakthrough in the use of media and the commingling of art and life came with Allan Kaprow who acknowledges a debt to Duchamp and Cage. In Kaprow's view there are no clear distinctions between drawing and painting (cf. Arakawa, Baruchello, Bauermeister, Simonetti), painting and collage (cf. Johnson), collage and assemblage (cf. Bauermeister, Nutt), assemblage and sculpture (cf. Brecht, Fahlström), sculpture and environmental sculpture; between environmental sculpture, displays and stage-sets (cf. Brecht, Knowles); between these and environments (cf. Kaprow's own *Words*); between art of any kind and life. In a recent article on experimental art Kaprow asserted that "the American melting pot has become a global stew, and the American mind an assemblage."

In the late 1950s Kaprow expanded his art of wall hung assemblages into an art of environment, including light and sound. Attempting to

Text continues on page 270.

AT ONCE!
ONCE!
EVERY
PLEASE
TAKE WORD
STRIPS
EM OVER
OTHERS

WORDS - WORDS
WORDS - WORDS - WORDS
READ LISSEN LISSEN
ON RECORDS READ EM
PLAY - PLAY - PLAY

GRUMBLE
NARROW
CLASSIC
LINUS
CHEAT
CATTLE
SEVEN
BITCH
KINETIC
GATE
WAVES
EDMNEONIC
SHOOT
CARRAMBA
RINSE
MUSIC
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MY EYES
WHIFF OF TIME
ALAS SOON
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SO SAD
MY HAIR
MOTHER DEAR
REMEMBERING
THE END?
SOFTLY SOTLY
WOW!
WHAT FROST?
THE FAR AWAY
A SIMPLE ALL
TOMORROW
WHAT? WAT?
WAY ABOVE
SURELY NOT

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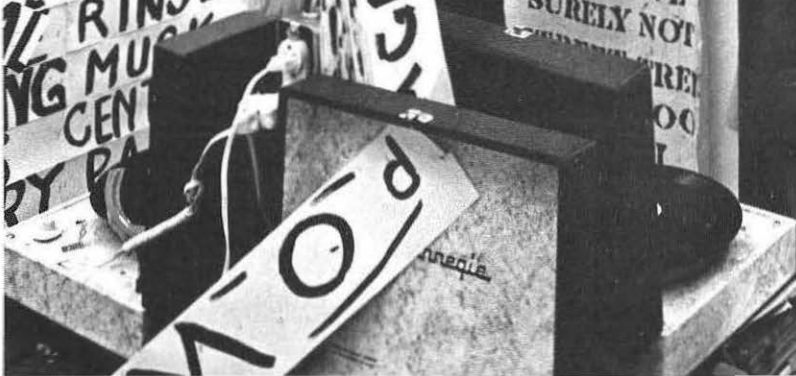


Figure 4. *Words*, a 1962 environment, by Allan Kaprow. Courtesy of the artist and Smolin Gallery, New York.

About *Words*: *Words* is an “environment,” the name given to an art that one enters, submits to, and is—in turn—influenced by. If it is different from most art in its impermanence and changeableness, it is like much contemporary work in being fashioned from the real and everyday world, a world it celebrates, probes, comments on, perhaps, and surely dreams about.

I am involved with the city atmosphere of billboards, newspapers, scrawled pavements, and alley walls, in the drone of a lecture, whispered secrets, pitchmen in Times Square fun-parlors, bits of stories and conversations overheard at the Automat. All this has been compressed and shaped into a situation which, in order to “live” in the fullest sense, must actively engage a visitor.

This may be difficult for those bound by the habits of respectful distance essential for older art. But if we temporarily put aside the question of the sacred in aesthetic matters and see in *Words* activities analogous to some in which we might normally engage—doodling, playing, anagrams, or scrabble, searching for just the right word to express a thought, climbing a ladder to hang a picture on the wall, listening to records, leaving notes for someone—then the accessibility of the work may get across and its art as much as its mystery becomes apparent. I doubt that mere passive observation is very rewarding.

Of course, being active, we can misuse any environment, natural or artistic. We can destroy a landscape through carelessness, and here we can refuse to consider what responses are appropriate to the nature of the idea. For instance, it is inappropriate to staple word-strips askew, onto the floor or anywhere in the smaller room; and it would be just as unfit to write with the colored chalks in the larger room. There are freedoms for the visitor (as there are for the artist), but they are revealed only within the limits dictated by the art work’s immediate as well as underlying themes.

On one level, *Words* is light-hearted, jazzy, flip. Within this mood, there are contrasts. The larger room is public, bright and more formal in both the character and also in the placement of lettered strips, cloth-rolls, and red and white blinking lights. The small room is more subdued, private, organic, and less “arranged.” On another, less obvious, level, the composition of the environment is intended to confer upon this “pop” material a sense of a Special Place. The rooms within a normal room, their centrality and squareness (9’x9’ and 6’x6’), the repeated words and phrases, the passage in gradual degrees from an outer world into an inner one, may suggest to the sensitive participant a sanctuary or tabernacle of sorts, an enshrinement of The Word. In this presence, our acts become ritual and our everyday is transformed.

Allan Kaprow (reprinted from the Smolin Gallery catalog)

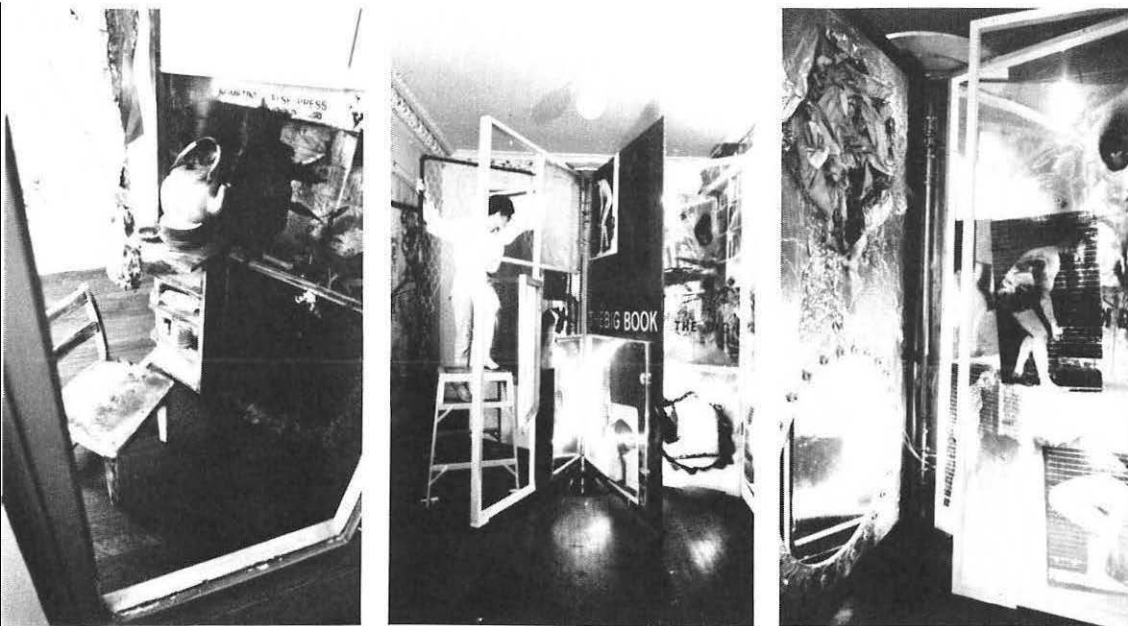
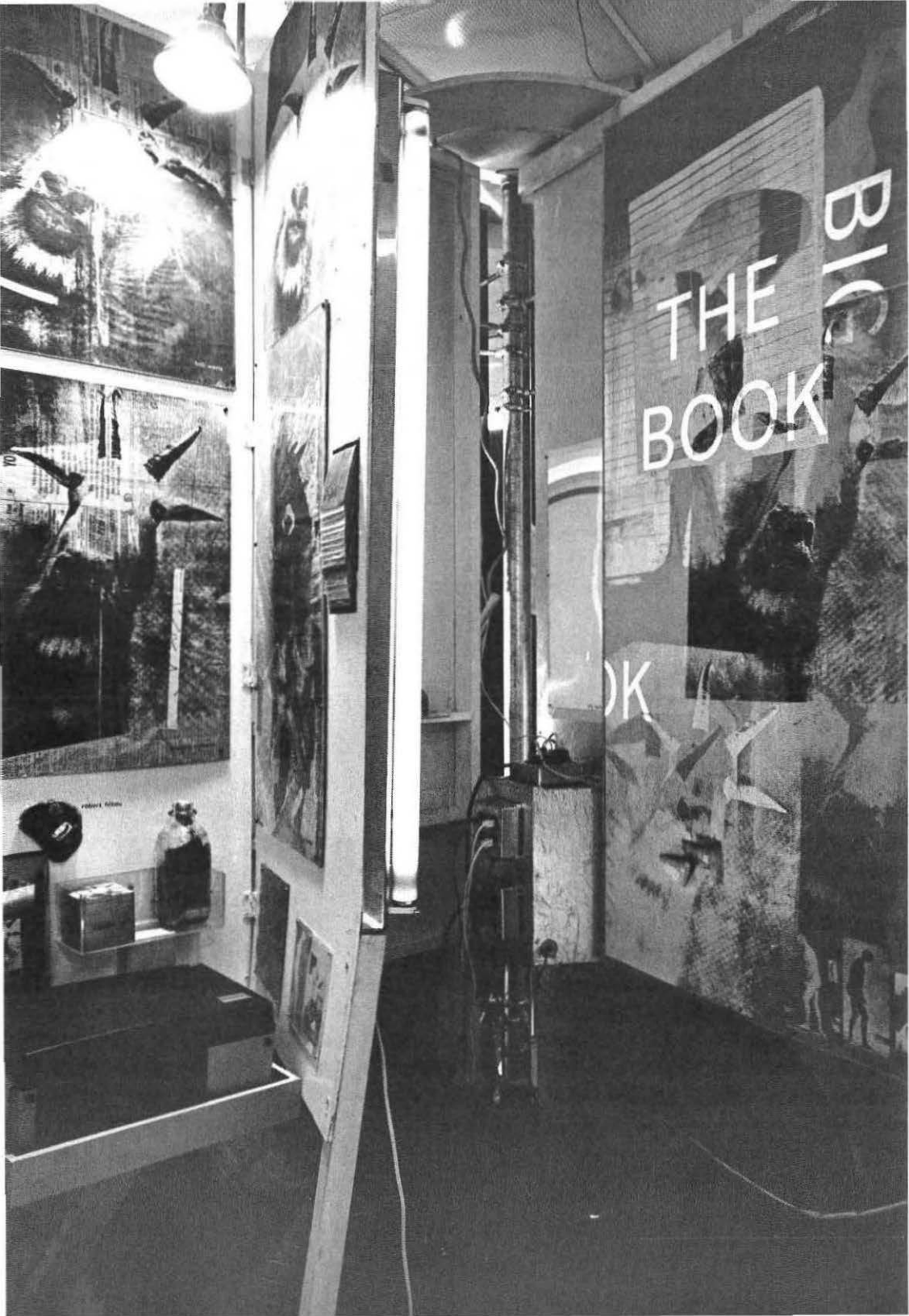


Figure 5. *The Big Book*, 1964-1967, by Alison Knowles. Courtesy of the artist.

The Big Book is not a product, but a process, and the person using the *Book* must accept himself as part of the process, discarding enough reserve to bend over and enter the *Book*—flexing, flowing, discarding stances. *The Big Book* cannot be known without being entered, and it cannot be entered without being modified—so that getting to know it alters it, even as it alters us, and there can be no one interpretation.

So down on hands and knees then, and through the cover, on through a hole burned in page of vinyl artifice, and down onto belly to crawl through a tunnel in a wall of artificial grass and water, imitating a descent, but actually remaining on floor level. After wiggling through the tunnel, one enters the apartment, an image of unpretentious Manhattan loft living in the 1950's and early 1960's. This apparent underworld, such as an epic hero usually enters, presents the processes of life nonchalantly, without varnish. Everything is useful here; there are aspirin, books, cans of soup, and other ordinary household objects. The telephone works, the stove will heat water for tea. The acceptance of this mundane, workaday underworld has the effect of elevating it, and while one enters through a tunnel, one exits through a window, and is free to examine the gallery of goats on page 4, or to climb a short ladder which moves on casters, simulating an experience of attaining precarious heights. Of course *The Big Book* can be read backwards or sideways, and anyone else who takes this journey will read it differently. But from any angle, to be in *The Big Book* is necessarily to be as mobile, kinetic, audial, visual, energetic, and beautiful, as it is.—William S. Wilson, New York.



THE
BIG
BOOK

BOOK

ROBERT FISHMAN

give structure to spectator participation he developed his "action collages," which extend Pollock's gestural approach and total field painting and are governed by Cage's ideas about chance and indeterminacy. The Happening, as it became known, has the makings of a new form of theater. It combines environment and action into compartments of varying size and duration; there is no single focus and no separation between actors and audience.

Alison Knowles, author of the *Big Book*, aligns herself more with Cage than with Kaprow. Four years of creativity, as a writer, silkscreen camera technician, housewife, performer and friend to the inner circle of the Something Else Press, have been crammed into a unique three-dimensional assemblage. Radiating from a central axis, the door-size pages create compartments which function, literally, as rooms of a house, metaphorically as "stills" of an everyday existence, and metaphysically as nooks and crannies of the mind. "Reading" the *Big Book* takes as much time and willingness to become involved as it does engaging in a personal relationship. Crawling through the *Big Book* resembles a physical and spiritual tour of discovery. Unlike Kaprow's *Words*, one can walk in and out of any given page as one would consult a dictionary or sample an anthology. A sequence may be indicated but is never enforced. In a way, the *Big Book* concretizes Alison Knowles' "event pieces." It not only sets the stage for, but, through various additive devices such as light, taped sound, and a live telephone and hot plate, partakes in the action. Offering art within art, life within life, and a world within a world, the *Big Book* comes closer than any work in this exhibition to a radical dissolution of the barriers that separate art from life: it proposes life as art.