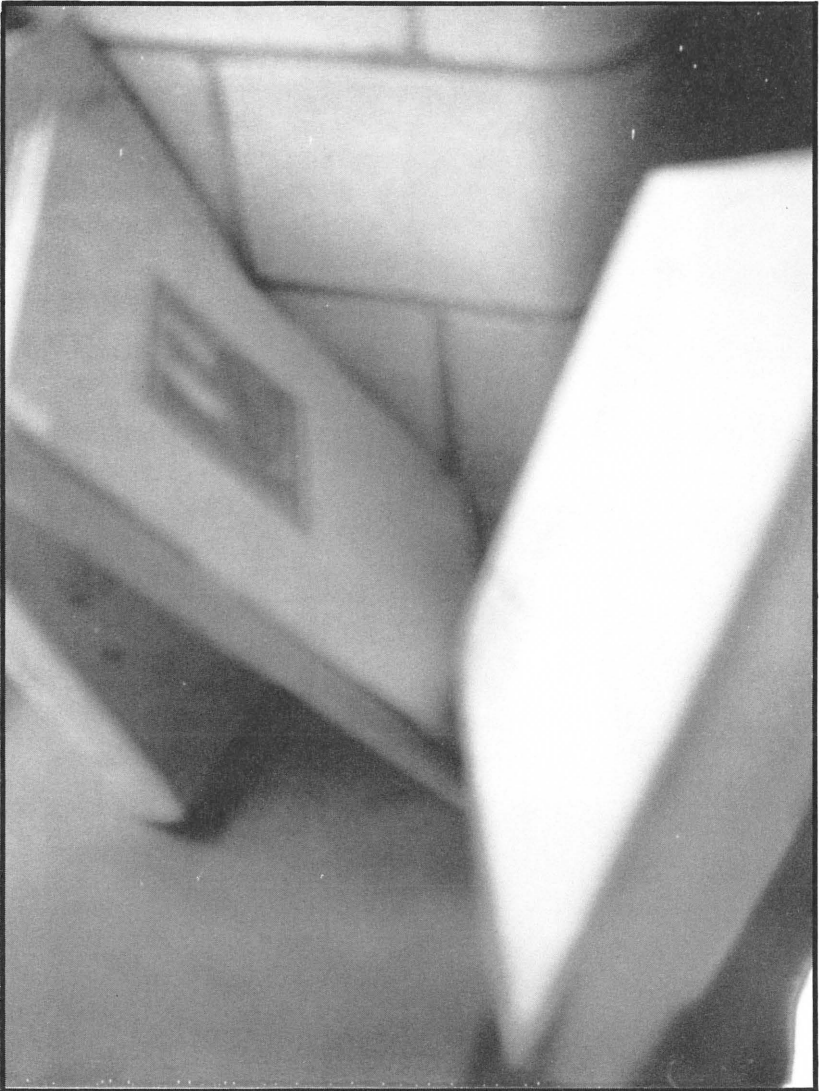


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Definition

FROM BOOK TO ANTI-BOOK

Because they are mixed modes (words and images), "artists' books" have lacked an adequate theory relating them to other forms of cultural production. In order to understand these unique objects, one must divide them into two subgroupings: de luxe editions (usually limited, numbered, signed and sold to dealers and collectors), and "anti-books," those which question the physical and conceptual foundations of the book, seriality, identity and the art marketing system. Mexican examples are presented because they highlight the explicitly political and social substratum from which the avant-garde emerges.

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Visible Language, 25:2/3

Harry Polkinhorn, 139–147

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The notion that man has a body
 distinct from his soul is to be expunged;
 this I shall do,
 by printing in the infernal method,
 by corrosives, which in Hell
 are salutary and medicinal.

William Blake, cited in *Artists' Books*, p. 155.

I.

To arrive at a theoretical understanding of artists' books, it is perhaps best to begin, as Richard Kostelanetz points out in his essay entitled "Book Art," on a formal note:

"Artists' books" are those book-like objects made by visual / literary artists which treat the book form as an artistic genre comprised of dynamic sets of tactile/graphic as well as literary potentials. A (false) contrast is suggested with "writers' books," thus underscoring the futility of trying to classify art objects solely from the point of view of the initial profession (or education)¹

of their makers. Since a formal analysis of these unique objects poses such difficulties for theory, they have generally been relegated to the lower-level rear stacks of the grand library of high culture. The same has happened with pattern poetry, also driven by visual and verbal energies.²

Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook, in which Kostelanetz's essay appears, makes this willful neglect understandable by placing the books in a specific historical context, thereby contributing valuably towards their restitution. With stimulating essays by Dick Higgins, Lucy R. Lippard, Ulises Carrión, Shelley Rice, Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, Clive Phillpot, Susi R. Bloch, Betsy Davids and Jim Petrillo, Felipe Ehrenberg, Magali Lara, Javier Cadena, Alex Sweetman, and Robert C. Morgan, this collection attempts to give the general reader some sense of the richness of artists' books as well as suggesting the first steps towards a theory whereby they can be explained.

Complementing these well-illustrated studies are the "sourcebook" sections: the most important collections of artists' books are detailed, with information on size, a breakdown by subcategories, contact persons, cataloguing and other services provided by individuals, institutions, and archives. Because of the ephemerality of many such

books, the information in this section will prove of inestimable value to scholars of the form. A comprehensive bibliography follows, divided as to articles, books, reviews and exhibition catalogues.

II.

The book as an artistic medium has been with us, in one form or another, since books have been present in our culture. What has become known as “book art, bookworks, or artists’ books”³ since about 1960 allows, even requires, reconsideration of the nature of the book as an aesthetic medium and as a cultural form. Even when considering traditional books made up of text alone, we frequently forget that

the design of books is as much an art as architecture, or painting, or sculpture. . . it exerts an aesthetic influence upon more people than any other art.⁴

Books now are considered primarily as non-image objects, although this has not always been the case. “In antiquity the connection between painting and writing seemed obvious: in ancient Greece the word *egraphen* (“written by”) was affixed to the artist’s signature.”⁵ The separation of word and visual image, which took place over centuries, is directly linked to politics: “Deterioration in the language and in pronunciation is . . . inseparable from political corruption. . . . Writing is the very process of the dispersal of peoples unified as bodies and the beginning of their enslavement.”⁶ Separation of codes and the social specialization necessary for their mastery and transmission provide entry points for an analysis of culture. Consequently, works which consciously rejoin the codes will be perceived as politically subversive, since control of the production and distribution of word and image is necessary to maintain the status quo.

If one can identify two main categories of artists’ books—the editions de luxe that emphasize the craft of the “fine” book and the “anti-books” Kostelanetz mentions, which push the form beyond conventional expectations—then we can begin to understand why the theory which several essays in *Artists’ Books* call for may be lacking. With regard to the first category, we find an earlier group of artists whose works consisted chiefly of visual/plastic elements, yet who turned to the well-made book as a medium of expression. Typically these artists “illustrated” another’s

writings. Such artist-illustrators include Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Birket Foster, John Gilbert, Frederick Leighton, John Millais, D. G. Rossetti, John Tenniel, Aubrey Beardsley, Lucien Pissarro, Walter Crane, Arthur Rackham, George Grosz, Miguel Covarrubias, Picasso, Matisse, Marie Laurencin, Chagall, Braque, Bonnard, Degas, Derain, Dufy, Maillol, Rodin, Roualt, de Chirico, Toulouse-Lautrec, Arp, Dali and Ernst. These artists and others collaborated with authors and dealers to bring out fine books in limited editions not designed for a mass market, who could neither afford nor appreciate them. In our time, there are "Tatanya Grossman's elegant editions of painter-poet collaborations by Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara, Jim Dine and Kenneth Koch, Lee Bontecou and Tony Towle, and Alberti and Motherwell."⁷ Kahnweiler, Vollard, Teriade, and other dealers have done much to further such projects, also known as *livres des peintre*, which can be seen as appealing to the elitism upon which they are based and which informs them throughout. These take the book as what Carrión in "The New Art of Making Books" calls an "accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book" (*Artists' Books*, 32), including the visual imagery, which functions like so much more text.

The other category mentioned above of course has its historical background as well, which is well-documented in the essays in *Artists' Books*. Blake's illuminated books establish him as the spiritual progenitor of this line; his contributions are interestingly analyzed from the technical viewpoint of printing processes by Davids and Petrillo. Books which fall into this category explore the medium and so necessarily develop a politics of resistance and subversion. Simultaneously, the books become limited in terms of audience appeal.

Since the two types of artists' books have such diametrically opposed political implications, this dimension calls for closer examination. Thus, Lippard holds that

the most important aspect of artists' books is their adaptability as instruments for extension to a far broader public than that currently enjoyed by contemporary art (*Artists' Books*, 48).

This, of course, is valid only for the visual imagery (if such a separation can be made at all) since, clearly, the verbal element has always enjoyed such extension by the very nature of printing. It is this bias towards the visual which

mers Kelder's comments as well: "many artists' books reject the de luxe concept, using impersonal duplicating techniques, such as xerox, offset, and mimeo."⁸ What Kelder does not mention is that impersonality was (and is) the very essence of industrialized printing and book-making. The sacrifice of conventional quality and the personal touch is no guarantee of aesthetic interest, originality, or even a product more accessible to the masses. "Good book design has almost no bearing on expense of manufacture,"⁹ which applies as well to artists' books.

Try as it might, the book cannot shake the dirt off its own history: "In its classic phase, the book is a privately owned object,"¹⁰ the reading of which requires light, stillness, withdrawal from work activities; that is, the experience of "reading" (viewing a painting) is very much a part of how the class society structures consciousness. "Printed books were thus [with printers' marks] early identified as articles of commerce."¹¹ Furthermore, since "Western culture unfolds by highly self-conscious modes of imitation, variation, renaissance, parody, or pastiche, from a strikingly small set of canonic, classical texts and form-models. . . most books are about previous books."¹² Industrialized printing techniques can be and are used very effectively in artists' books; what counts here, however, is the control over all aspects of production and distribution which the artists have claimed as their own, as Ehrenberg, et al., make clear. The fact is that when artists begin to produce their own work, most cannot afford a four-color Heidelberg offset press and must work with less sophisticated equipment, which may explain the "impersonal" or raw feel of the product.

Rather than trying to understand the function of these books from the viewpoint of their deviations from standards set by conventional books which inevitably dead-ends in some woefully inadequate form of communications theory, a more useful approach, as Carrión points out, sees the contemporary artists' book or anti-book as categorically rejecting the hierarchic and linear elements upon which traditional culture has been established. "In the old art all books are read in the same way. In the new art every book requires a different reading," or, "In order to be able to read the new art, and to understand it, you don't need to spend five years in a Faculty of English" (*Artists' Books*, 42, 43).

This rejection is mirrored in the most obvious and important innovation in these objects, namely, an attack upon or subversion of sequentiality. According to Alloway, "Nonhierarchic form can be equated with the idea of repeatable structure."¹³ Not only is pagination frequently dropped (this alone would unwittingly align the work with the medieval incunabula, sixteenth-century books which were unpaginated), but there is also no formal sequencing to the subject matter, or if present it is parodied. This lies at the heart of the problem, since

Seriality is . . . a basic social mechanism [in that] 'each is the same as the others to the degree that he is Other from himself,' Sartre says, and in this sense seriality is a vast optical illusion, a kind of collective hallucination projected out of individual solitude onto an imaginary being thought of as 'public opinion' or simply 'they.'¹⁴

Such a philosophical/psychological view can easily be complemented by reference to economic theory, which relates directly to the "decay of plot" in modern literature because "that shared community of abstract values on which no writer can count any longer has been replaced by something even more fundamental, namely the reality of purely physical sensation . . . the reduction to the body itself,"¹⁵ so that seriality in our society can now most clearly be seen in the phenomenon of "advertising and merchandising of mass-produced commodities,"¹⁶ each of which like traditional books is completely substitutable for all others of its kind.

Lack of sequence, absence of plot, "diminished faith in the autograph . . . antipathy to the gallery,"¹⁷ radical exploration of physical properties of book and non-book materials (within the general format of the book) all characterize the contemporary anti-book and constitute one more evidence of "the breakdown of absolute standards in art."¹⁸ Nevertheless, meaning itself is not rejected: a critique is an implicit assertion, and artists' books resort to traditional, even ancient means, such as the rhetorical devices of metonymy and synecdoche, not to mention juxtaposition of imagery and a new use of sequence and repetition.

III.

In "Independent Publishing in Mexico," jointly authored by Felipe Ehrenberg, Magali Lara and Javier Cadena, we have a direct demonstration of a theory of the anti-book; artistic forms are generated out of a social context acutely

conscious of arbitrarily constituted power structures. Facing what Ehrenberg calls “the politics of our moment” (*Artists’ Books*, 183), artists’ books came into being in a situation which lacked infrastructure for their support:

Generally speaking, avant-garde art [in Mexico] can only develop under distressingly difficult circumstances: there exists no supporting criticism, so experimentation develops in a vacuum. And there is no funding whatsoever, no enterprising galleries willing to bet on rising talent, no private foundations, no specific government grants, nothing. (p. 172).

Some universities end up providing alternative spaces for unusual art. To complicate matters, Mexico’s history of colonization, of economic and cultural exploitation by foreigners, and her dangerously strained relations with the United States serve to catalyze a contemporary avant-garde much involved with book art.¹⁹ Ehrenberg, Lara and Cadena detail the birth and spread of visual presses in Mexico, always relating this to a situation of sharply aggravated political and economic tension. Thus, the essentially international or transnational nature of avant-garde experimentalism, so often overlooked in purely formal analyses of artists’ books as a genre or form, becomes central for an understanding of the political dimension of artists’ books.

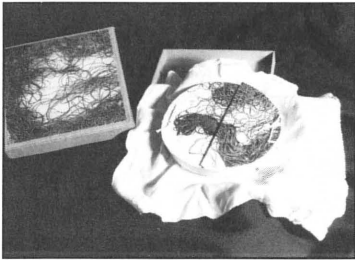


Figure 1

Among those Mexican artists active in the field of artists’ books should be mentioned Felipe Ehrenberg, Angel Cosmos, Jani Pecanins and Gabriel Macotela. Pecanins’ *El Miedo* (1990) works in a fully integrated way with concept and presentation. The theme of fear is reflected in her choice of format, a six-inch-square box containing a small circular embroidery frame stretched with white cotton onto which is tied the round, bisected pages of this book. Intimacy created by the diminutive dimensions magnifies the feeling of fear, presented from a woman’s perspective (*figure 1*). Reproductions of string and thread are accompanied by rubber-stamped text on some pages printed across the vertical art. Cosmos’ *Los 6/80 Primeros Días* (1988) reproduces a unique poetic project which the author undertook in the first six days of 1980, when he published several poems in paid advertising space in the Spanish newspaper *Levante* (Valencia). The book gathers loose reproductions of these newspaper ad/poems in a folder. As Cosmos explains in the introduction, “It was a space for creativity,” which the newspaper’s editors did

not seem to grasp (*figure 2*). The poems are socially critical and directly address the man in the street. Cosmos has produced over a thousand artists' books and related objects and has been very active in the area of innovative musical scores. Gabriel Macotela's *apuntes de ciudad* (1990) gathers loose pages into a small black box. Each sheet contains a semi-figural drawing of some aspect of a city. These sheets or cards can be recombined in any sequence the viewer desires, thereby restructuring the reading/viewing experience (*figure 3*).

A good example of the more demanding work produced by Mexican artists in this genre is Ehrenberg's own *Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis: A Visual Score of Iconotropisms*, recently published by Nexus Press in Atlanta, Georgia, where the artist was in residence. No such press exists in Mexico, so the high-profile, book-art production values evident in *Codex* are a direct reflection of cultural difference. In his accompanying acknowledgments, the artist says,

I might also mention Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, and wish it better times. Had a peer jury not rejected this book project, I would have never produced it at Nexus Press.

Ehrenberg's title makes playful reference to the history of the book, "codex" suggesting a manuscript volume, "especially of a classic work or of the Scriptures."²⁰ Yet the imagery and narrative seem very contemporary, with no obvious references to the Bible. "Aeroscriptus" refers to the spray-can technique with which much of the work was done. Thus the title tells us that this book is ironically important, the technology of its production is somehow central (allusions to the uncontrolled popular proliferation of street art created with spray cans), and the artist's ego will play a controlling role. As Ehrenberg explains in the accompanying pamphlet, stencils have been used extensively in *Codex*, and both detective fiction and the musical score should be considered in an interpretation of the work.

The book itself is presented in almost a square format (c. 17" x 17"). Metal-plate, multi-color lithography is the medium. Printed front and back on sheets, then glued to form one long accordion-folded sheet, *Codex* works with serial imagery appropriate to books. Key images are the television screen, the tropical palm, cameraman, the gunman, the female body, arrows, the skull (Posada), the

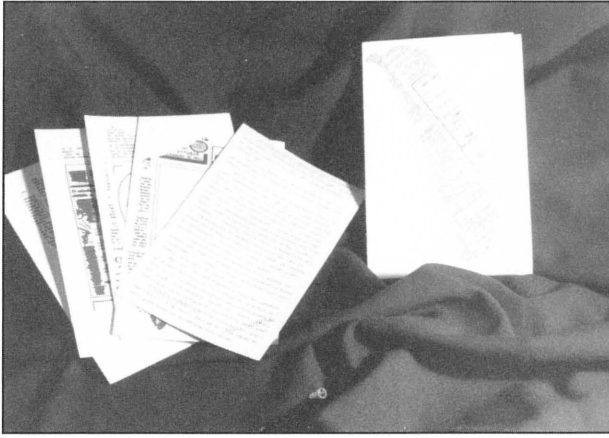


Figure 2



Figure 3

nightclub singer, stamps and helicopters. The main imagery on each spread reverberates with identical but smaller images, often in black on white, running along a horizontal stripe at the top of the sheets, providing a splitting, as if the work were commenting upon itself through internal division. As well, it graphically alludes to Pre-Columbian practices. This stylistically decenters the narrative, playing it back through its own conceptualization. On the inside of the accordian-fold are dark green palms against a blood-red sky. When the book is open with the folded sheet fully pulled out, we have a large, multi-pointed, star-shaped object (*see figures 4 and 5*). This

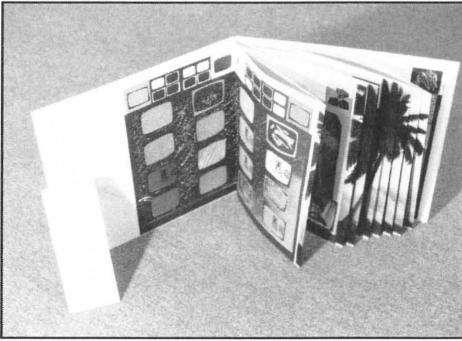


Figure 4

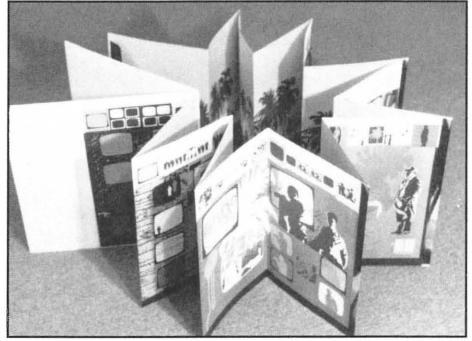


Figure 5

presentation suggests a circularity to the narrative; beginning and end join up to form a non-linear yet open-ended structure.

Perhaps the artist's suggestion of the genre of detective fiction is our best approach to *Codex*. This genre has always appealed to the masses, suggesting a connection with popular culture important to Ehrenberg. However, he complexifies easy interpretation through the panoply of aesthetic strategies he has deployed in *Codex*. The strict linearity which mass culture demands will not be found in this work; yet, the individual images and the bright colors seem easily decipherable. There is an accessible quality that the artist has carefully created in order to involve the reader/spectator. We are in the Latin world of tropical palms and an almost oppressive plant life, threatening gunmen, nightclub torch singers, military violence, sex and death. Something mysterious has happened; someone is fleeing. We have plentiful allusions to consumerism (the bar code) and high technology as well. These are the elements of a Latin version of the detective story. The reader/spectator is put in the position of being the detective trying to decode the hidden messages which structure this riotously colorful and ominous world. Transnational economics emerges as a kind of interpretive backdrop, yet nothing is bluntly stated.

In the end is our beginning; the first spread features an opposition between sixteen mostly dark blue television screens and a single palm tree printed across the folds of

the accordion sheets. All get homogenized through the medium of television, as art divides nature into its own underlying aesthetic structures. The simple chair and fragment of a bed which appear on many of the television screens allude to our principal activities as human beings: sitting in order to work or relax, and reclining in order to sleep, make love, be ill or die. Thus Ehrenberg's seeming simplicity of imagery, style, coloration, and presentation turns out to be a sophisticated guise, revealing an acute sensibility in sharply critical conflict with its social, cultural, economic and natural surroundings.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Joan Lyons, ed. *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*. Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985, p. 29.
- ² See Dick Higgins. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- ³ Kate Linker. "The Artist's Book as an Alternative Space," *Studio International*, (1980), p. 76.
- ⁴ Douglas McMurtie. *The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1943, p. xxv.
- ⁵ Nicolas Calas. *Icons and Images of the Sixties*. New York: Dutton, 1971, p. 131.
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 169–70.
- ⁷ Diane Kelder. "Artists' Books." *Art in America*, (January, 1974), p. 112.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ McMurtie, p. xxviii.
- ¹⁰ George Steiner. "After the Book?" *Visible Language*, 6:3, p. 199.
- ¹¹ McMurtie, p. 289.
- ¹² Steiner, p. 201.
- ¹³ Lawrence Alloway. "Artists As Writers, Part Two: The Realm of Language." *Artforum*, (April, 1974), p. 41.
- ¹⁴ Frederic Jameson. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 248.
- ¹⁵ Frederic Jameson. "Seriality in Modern Literature." *Bucknell Review*, (Spring, 1970), p. 71–2.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Linker, p. 48.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Note, for example, the "Third International Biennial of Visual Poetry," an exhibition made up of works by some 400 artists from 41 countries recently being displayed in Mexico City.
- ²⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969, p. 258.