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THE “NON-BOOK”: NEW DIMENSIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST’S BOOK

Some contemporary books blur the distinction between book and sculpture, presenting three-dimensional objects that toy both with the shape of the book and its definition. Three exemplary “non-books” are examined in this study in order to show how the dimensions of the book have been expanded. As it blurs disciplinary boundaries, the contemporary “non-book” questions its own status as a “book,” thereby enriching and enlarging our definition of what a book might be.

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Figure 1

When the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers exhibited *Pense-Bête* in 1963, it signaled his turn from poetry to art. Fifty copies of his last book of poems were embedded in spheres of plaster. As a book that cannot be read, *Pense Bête* is an extreme case of the book transformed into object.¹ This same tendency can be seen in less radical form as contemporary books assume new and unusual shapes. Barbara Harman's *Some Mountains* (1988) is a sculptural book that folds into a pyramid. In Laurie Szujewska's *Milk Carton* (1983–4), printed paper is formed into a three-dimensional carton, with typographical configurations of the word “milk” appearing on it. Peter Beaman and Elizabeth Whately's *Deck of Cards* (1989) consists of 52 cards measuring 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches by 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches housed in a transparent box.² Pyramids, milk cartons, cards—however various in form, these objects are all created, marketed and sold as books. At its worst, the contemporary “non-book” is pure gimmick, or in the case of most pop-up versions, bad taste. But even the finest bookmakers today are experimenting both with the shape of the book and with its definition.

The edition of Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round* by the Arion Press (1986) is an example of such innovation. Perfectly round, the book is nine inches in diameter. It has a bright pink cover with the title printed in circular formation around a blue globe. Accompanying the book is *The World is Not Flat*, a square companion volume describing the publishing history of *The World is Round*, by Edith Thatcher Hurd. If you order the book from Arion Press, you will also receive a pink balloon reading “The World is Round.” To some extent, the balloon is in keeping with the spirit of Stein's first book for children.³ “Pure delight, simple pleasure, is what little children will get as they listen to ‘The World Is Round,’” wrote one early reviewer.⁴ But what this reviewer didn't recognize is that Stein's text also has a darker dimension.

“Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around.” So begins the story of Rose, a character based in part on Stein's nine-year-old neighbor at Bilignin. The narrative has no coherent progression, but it is filled with events: Rose is bitten by the neighbor's dog because she shut him up in a room; Willie, Rose's cousin, almost drowns in a lake filled with water lilies;

Willie gives Rose a lion, which she returns; Rose climbs to the top of a mountain, conquering her fears and superstitions. At the end, "Willie and Rose turned out not to be cousins, just how nobody knows, and so they married and had children and sang with them and sometimes singing made Rose cry and sometimes it made Willie get more and more excited." While the humor of this passage is directed towards adults, the happy ending and the unusually accessible plot are designed for youthful readers.

If *The World is Round* is less indeterminate than Stein's earlier works (*Melantha*, *Tender Buttons*, "Preciosilla," for example), it exhibits the same interest in presenting what Marjorie Perloff calls "the changing present of human consciousness, the instability of emotion and thought."⁵ As Rose and Willie ponder the physical dimensions of the world, they struggle to discern the dimensions of reality: "If the world is round can wild animals come out of the ground" (31). Although the story begins with the world as a kind of merry-go-round ("you could go on it around and around"), the dimension of the earth becomes a source of dread for Rose:

The teachers taught her
 That the world was round
 That the sun was round
 That the moon was round
 That the stars were round
 And that they were going around and around
 ...It was so sad it almost made her cry
 But then she did not believe it...
 And then a dreadful thing was happening...
 she remembered that her mouth was round when she sang
 (22)

By association with the earth, all images of circularity and rotundity become frightening: "...all of a sudden Rose knew that in Rose there was an o and an o is round, oh dear not a sound" (86). "There were lots of stars and somebody had told her that stars were round, they were not stars, and so the stars were not any comfort to her" (112). Rose thinks about the number "142" because "numbers are round" (63), and she contemplates "how many minutes go around to make a second how many hours go round to make a minute how many days go around to make an hour..." (74). But at the very end of the story, Rose sits on the mountain in her chair, having

conquered her various fears (of dwarfs, of signs that read “Devil, Devil, Devil”); and Willie’s searchlight, which goes “around and around” offers Rose comfort in the night.

The World is Round is the most interesting of Stein’s children’s books since it is overtly about fear and offers a vision of containment. Rose carves (or writes) “Rose is a Rose is a Rose” around a tree trunk, countering its fearful rotundity (see figure 1) and mastering her fear of circularity with her own circuitous writing. The suggestion that Stein’s motto, “rose is a rose is a rose,” might be a punning assertion of “love, love, love,”⁶ fits neatly with the conclusion of *The World is Round*, where it is Rose’s love of Willie that concludes the action and closes off the character’s fear.

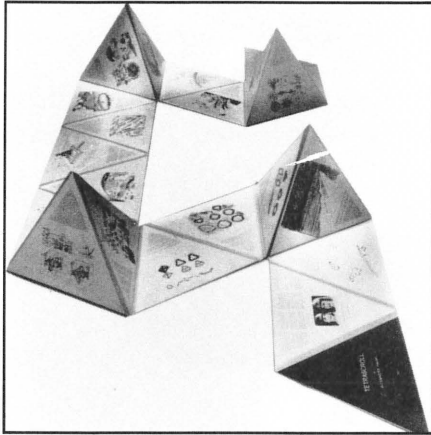


Figure 2

That Arion Press has chosen to shape this book into a circle is clearly in keeping with its subject matter and spirit. Another book shaped in this way by its content is *Tetrascroll* by Buckminster Fuller. Published by Universal Limited Art Editions (1975–7), *Tetrascroll* is a spectacular “book” comprised of 36 inch triangular pages. Fuller’s text is illustrated with 21 lithographs, which he produced at Tatyana Grosman’s studio. Bound in sailcloth, the pages can be arranged and rearranged in various two- and three- dimensional configurations, forming lines and tetrahedra and combinations of the two (see figure 2). The sheer proportions of the “book” are stunning: manipulating its pages can be an athletic event, and when fully extended, it can occupy a room.

The text of *Tetrascroll* developed from Fuller's family history. In the 1930s, Fuller began to respond to his daughter's request for a story by telling her "Goldilocks and The Three Bears"—with a twist. He used the opportunity to work through ideas about relativity theory, quantum physics, mathematics, history, chemistry and architecture. As Fuller explains in the "Introduction," "Goldilocks and the three Bears always had the most interesting discussions which led to the most challenging topics philosophically, but they never called it science or mathematics."

On the very first page, for example, Fuller makes the (quantum) leap from Goldilocks to relativity (*see figure 3*):

Here is Goldy having a sky party with her three friends, the Polar Bear family. Goldy says the sky party is a "system" because Goldy plus the Three Bears equals four entities (or star events), and it takes four events to produce a system (the macrocosm), all the universe inside the system (the microcosm), and the four star events A,B,C,D, which do the dividing. (St. Martin's, 2)

The star system is a tetrahedron subject to relativity: "The star in the nose of the Big Bear is a live show taking place 210 light-years away-and-ago. . .and the pole star at Mommy Bear's nose is a live show taking place 680 light-years away-and-ago...and the star at Wee Bear's front toes is a live show taking place forty-three light-years away-and-ago...." (p. 2) So the system is "a scenario of nonsimultaneous but omni-interrelated events." Goldy "now understands Einstein's concept that Universe is a scenario and not a single simultaneous structure."

Relativity theory shapes the title of Fuller's book as well. "Tetra" refers to the tetrahedron, and to a large extent, the book is concerned with its mathematical properties and transformability, the way it interconnects with relativity and quantum physics, its correspondence, in various permutations, to the periodic table of elements. Part of the fun of *Tetrascroll* is watching the tetrahedron in transformation. Tetrahedra become tetrahelix, the mathematical model employed by the DNA-RNA helix. Naga—the sea serpent—is a live tetrahelix; and Naga is also the "name of the ancient seafarer N(O)(A)(C)H—Noah." Fuller's imaginative leaps occur rapidly, like lightning—which is itself a tetrahelix "stripped." The word "scroll" was chosen by Fuller for its temporal

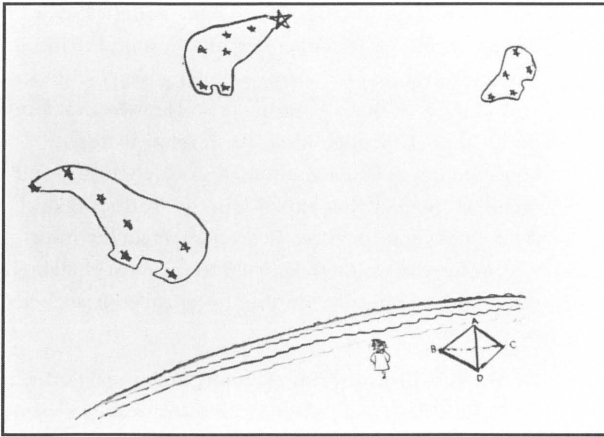


Figure 3

connotations, the way an Oriental scroll in particular stresses narrativity in time.⁷ The title of Fuller's book thus combines both spatial and temporal dimensions.

The illustrations for *Tetrascroll* in general are both charming and instructive. They are simple line drawings, in Fuller's own hand, which are both childlike and diagrammatic. The illustration for the first "story" in *Tetrascroll* portrays three Bear constellations in the sky (with a star at Momma Bear's nose) (see figure 3). Fuller's drawings are delightful in themselves, yet offer valuable information about the concepts being explained. Page seven, for example, combines a number of illustrations portraying the principle of precession and its operation in rubber cylinders, in the interaction of the sun and earth, in a stone dropped into water, in electric currents, in swimming fish and more. Retaining the spontaneity characteristic of drawings for children's books, the illustrations nevertheless also operate as visual aids, as in a science textbook.

But *Tetrascroll* is not just about science and mathematics. Goldy's lectures (and Fuller's) are more wide ranging, encompassing history lessons of great variety, from Viking boat building to "cosmic ecology." Surprising connections are drawn between disparate subjects. Thus, the creation of Eve is linked to shipbuilding: "'Eve' the ship, built from Adam's rib cage design, was temptingly 'led on' by Naga the serpent, god of the sea..." (15). When "Goldy

...elucidates some post-Eden history for the bears" (17), she retells the story of the Trojan war (*see figure 4*):

Now the more-with-lessing Mycenaean sea masters starved the Trojan city-state insiders because the Trojans were the progeny of the overland horsemen, the Mycenaean sailormen produced the famous Trojan Horse within which symbol of seeming acknowledgement of Trojan superiority they hid some fighting men while deceptively withdrawing their maritime fleet.

As told by Goldy, the story has a moral: the Trojan War signals a change in human history from "absolute dominance by massiveness" to a "doing-more-with-less" form of mastery (the Trojan Horse). This change in history culminates, she says:

At the end of the twentieth century A.D. in doing so much with so little as finally to be able to support all humans at an economically sustainable higher standard of living than any have ever experienced, thus to eliminate altogether the fundamental scarcity syndrome and all lethal interstruggling of humanity, allowing humanity to become preoccupied with greater problems of the Universe, with which ultimately to cope, humans had been given their minds. (p. 112)

This "history" is indeed a fairy tale. In keeping with all the other transformations and permutations within *Tetrascroll*, history here mutates into a utopian science fiction.

Genres, subjects, shapes, numbers all constantly undergo change in *Tetrascroll*. Triangles become a tetrahedron, which rolled across the beach, forms a pattern of triangles again. "A bear's foot is itself a triangle," and the pattern of those footprints parallels the pattern of triangles formed by the tetrahedron in motion (2). Fuller shifts dimensions as rapidly as he shifts topics. *Tetrascroll* as a "book" captures this variation in dimensions, as its triangles form tetrahedra and collapse back into two-dimensional space. With its heavy pages a yard long, Fuller presents a "book" larger than the dimensions we usually assign it. His "book" is itself a variable object with multiple dimensions. The pages are designed not to be read consecutively, but rather in non-linear fashion as the various display configurations demand. As Fuller's imagination spins utopian theories of the universe, it also presents new, creative possibilities for the contemporary "book."

Another work that calls into question its own status as a book is the Arion Press edition of John Ashbery's *Self-*

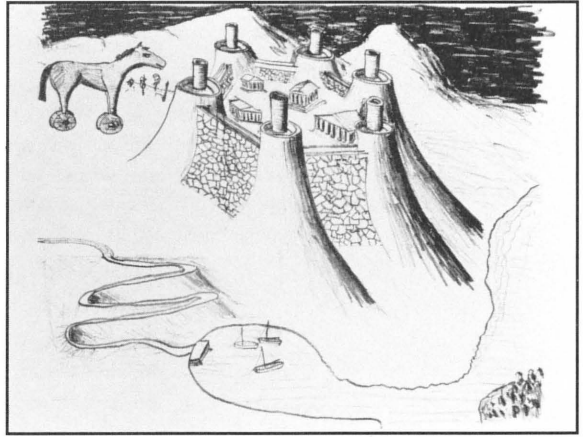


Figure 4

Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1984). The “book” is housed in a round stainless steel container with a convex mirror on the lid. The pages are unbound circular disks, eighteen inches in diameter. The pages are printed with the lines of poetry radiating out from the center, so that the pages must be turned as they are read (see figure 5). The “book” includes eight original prints by Jim Dine, R.B. Kitaj, Willem de Kooning, Richard Avedon, Elaine de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher and Alex Katz. It also includes a recording of John Ashbery reading his poem, with a reproduction of Parmigianino’s painting—the “self-portrait” on the cover.

Ashbery once jokingly referred to his poem as “Self-Portrait in a Complex Mirror,”⁸ and it is indeed complex. It begins as a straightforward poem about a painting, an ekphrastic poem that takes a work of visual art as its subject.

Vasari says, “Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers...
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,”
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed.... (p. 68)

The poem begins with imagery of vacillation and oscillation. Everything seems to move back and forth, including the face, “which swims/Toward and away.” The

Parmigianino is “Lively and intact in a recurring wave/Of arrival.” And the soul swims “out through the eyes/And still return[s] safely to its nest.” (p. 68) These motions all describe the relation of the poem and the painting, as Ashbery moves into and out of the painting as his subject. The ekphrasis set up at the outset of the poem is continually undercut as Ashbery’s digressive reflections set up a continuous engagement and disengagement from the painting. The imagery of vacillation established early in the poem also represents the oscillations and tensions within the poem between the self and the other, between dream and reality, and between time present and time past.

One of the first subjects of the poem is the relation of the soul and the self-portrait. At first we are told that “the soul is a captive” in the painting, “Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay/Posing in this place.” And then:

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits
 Its hollow perfectly; its room, our moments of
 attention. (p. 69)

Ashbery is, I think, drawing a distinction between the soul of the painting and the soul of Parmigianino the man. He seems to be implying that all art is limited in its capacity to express and sustain the soul of the artist. For artists like Parmigianino and Ashbery both, who are creating essentially self-reflexive art, this is a disheartening fact: “The pity of it smarts,/Makes hot tears spurt.” The convex mirror itself comes to represent such limitations:

One would like to stick one’s hand
 Out of the globe, but its dimension
 What carries it, will not allow it.... (p. 69)

Suddenly, one is inside the globe attempting to go beyond its limited and limiting dimensions. This shift in perspective (from outside to inside the painting) and the purposely ambiguous pronoun “one” suggest that viewers and artists alike are confined to the dimensions of the globe, the limits of life, art and the soul.

Ashbery’s poem is self-reflexive not only because it presents his speculations (“From the latin *speculum*. mirror”), but also because it comments on its own mode of proceeding.

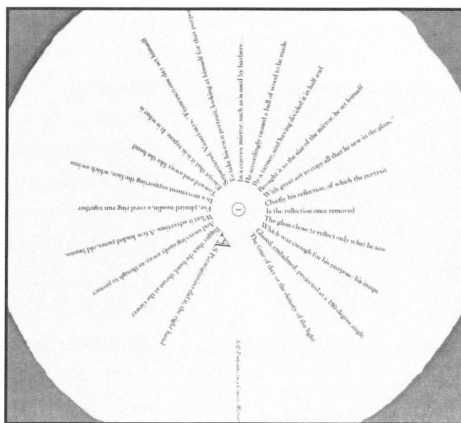


Figure 5

But your eyes proclaim
 That everything is surface. The surface is what's there
 And nothing can exist except what's there...
 And the window doesn't matter much, or that
 Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even
 As a gauge of the weather, which in French is
Le temps, the word for time, and which
 Follows a course wherein changes are merely
 Features of the whole.... (p. 70)

Ashbery is both addressing the Parmigianino painting and describing the style of his own poem. He first asserts the importance of the surface (“not superficial but a visible core”) and then exemplifies that assertion in his writing. Immediately, we get a sense of Ashbery’s surface style, an ever-shifting sequence of associations, which moves from the sliver of window, to the weather, to *Le temps*, the French word for weather, to time. The poetry has enacted what it describes: surface changes in time, following “a course wherein changes are merely features of the whole.” This continuous changing of surfaces (and words) is essentially paradoxical, like the stability within instability of the earth, like the globe which is the painting, and like a ball on a jet of water. “The whole is stable within/Instability, a globe like ours, resting/On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball/Secure on its jet of water.” (p. 70)

But *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* includes other paradoxes as well. It is as much about the nature and meaning of the “self” as it is about Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait.” The self presented here is not a unified and stable consciousness with static ego boundaries, but a fluid process of change and interchange:

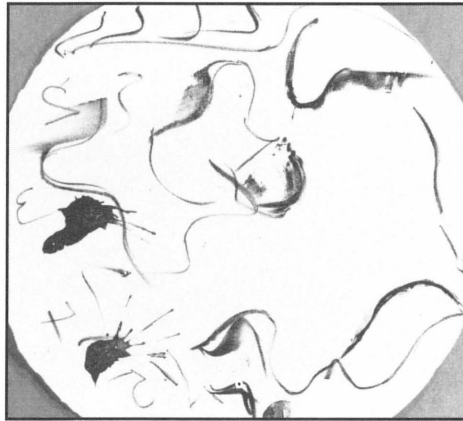


Figure 6

I think of the friends
 That came to see me, of what yesterday
 Was like. A peculiar slant
 Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
 In the silence of the studio as he considers
 Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
 How many people came and stayed a certain time,
 Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
 Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
 Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
 Remains that is surely you. (p. 71)

As is common in Ashbery's writing, the pronouns continually shift, in this case from "me," to "he," to "you." The "you" might simultaneously refer to Parmigianino, to the poet, whose friends became a part of him, and to us, the readers, as the poem becomes a part of us as we read.

Of his use of pronouns, Ashbery has said:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we"....my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward a greater naturalism.⁹

Identity, according to Ashbery, is fluid, fragmented,¹⁰ and constructed in its social relations: "How many people

came and stayed a certain time,/Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you.” Ashbery is exploring the way the self is constituted by its relations with others.

Indeed, “otherness” is a central theme in the poem. On one level, it refers to the otherness that helps to define (or de-define) the self. On another level, it refers to the artistic process, and the otherness that wrests the poem from the poet’s intention to produce something entirely different. Language itself produces this distorting effect, so that the way of telling somehow intrudes, “twisting the end result/Into a caricature of itself.” The work of art ends up as something completely different from what the artist intended, and “Often he finds/He has omitted the thing he started out to say....”

Is there anything
 To be serious about beyond this otherness
 That gets included in the most ordinary
 Forms of daily activity, changing everything
 Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
 Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
 Out of our hands....This otherness, this
 “not-being-us” is all there is to look at
 In the mirror, though no one can say
 How it came to be this way. (p. 80–81)

Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait” is just such an “other” for the poet and his poem. The painting is a mirror that reflects the poet’s acts of self-reflection, but it is also a constituting “other” that shapes Ashbery’s poem: “You could be fooled for a moment/Before you realize the reflection/Isn’t yours.” (p. 74) The “other” changes everything “slightly and profoundly,” including not only the artistic product, but the artist himself. Finally, since it signifies something different from what had originally been intended, the poem itself represents the idea of “otherness” that it describes.¹¹

Ashbery’s poem is a reflection of a reflection since “the portrait/Is the reflection once removed,” and the Arion Press edition of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* increases the manifold mirror relations already set up by Ashbery. The illustrations are works of art about a poem that is about art. The circularity is built into the book visually, with its circling pages of print and round format. The poem itself piles up images of circles: the curves of the painting, the painter’s curved hand, the convex mirror, the balloon



Figure 7

(which pops), the bubble chamber, globes, a “circle of...intentions,” and a carousel of chaos all boiling down to a “magma of interiors.” The format of the book thus fits in neatly with the imagery of Ashbery’s poem.

But what is perhaps most striking about the book is the variety of the illustrations. They are portraits and self-portraits in varied media—etchings, lithographs, photographs—in highly representational and also highly abstract styles. Ashbery has himself voiced a predilection for this kind of variety: “What is better than anything is the renewed realization that all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment, and that that is what life and creating are all about.”¹² In *Reported Sightings* he expresses his “fondness for a polyphony of clashing styles, from highbred to demotic, in a given poem, musical composition...or picture” (243). This polyphony also appears in the poem itself, as Ashbery’s writing moves through various styles and tones, from admiration to reminiscence, “irony, apprehension, hostility, nostalgia and reflection.”¹³

One of the most controversial aspects of Ashbery’s poem concerns the Parmigianino painting and what it represents. For Richard Stamelman, the portrait represents a static mimetic art, an “idealized and totalized representation” that Ashbery undercuts and deconstructs (619). According to Helen Vendler, however, the Parmigianino painting already effects that deconstruction: it represents an anti-mimetic art. Vendler writes, “Parmigianino’s painting forces the spectator to confront his own easy self-



Figure 8

deception about the mimetic truthfulness of art, and to question his own demands that art represent life 'as it is,' in a point-for-point exactness.¹⁴

Perhaps one way out of this impasse is to see the Parmigianino painting as one of those curious works of art that is paradoxically representational and nonrepresenta-



Figure 9

tional at the same time, like Jasper Johns's *Flag* paintings. Even more appropriate is the comparison to the abstract expressionist paintings of Willem de Kooning. In an extended discussion of Ashbery and painting, Leslie Wolf describes de Kooning's work: "His gestures carry hints of representation even as they embody these hints in a fluid and 'paradoxical' matrix; they evoke objects and suggest perspective even as they deny them" (239). The de Kooning lithograph included in the Arion Press book sustains just such tensions between a mimetic and an anti-mimetic art (see figure 6). Amid random configurations on the circular page, are numbers printed in reverse. The numbers suggest that de Kooning's work is a mimetic representation of a convex mirror. Yet the abstract expressionist splotches and lines suggest not a mimetic art, but an abstract, nonrepresentational style. De Kooning's art, like Ashbery's poetry, maintains the tension between these two poles.

The other illustrations in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* are more representational in nature. Jim Dine's woodcut is a self-portrait that suggests a convex mirror through the play of black and white (see figure 7). Here, small white lines radiate out from the rich blackness to circle the round page and suggest convexity. R.B. Kitaj's etching is a self-portrait which prominently displays his hand in an allusion, perhaps, to Parmigianino's painting .

Also included in the Arion Press book are three portraits of John Ashbery. Elaine de Kooning's lithograph is a steel gray portrait composed of strong, crosshatched lines. In

Larry Rivers' etching, Ashbery is seated at his typewriter composing "Pyrography." This poem is about a journey across the American continent and a journey back into cities at the turn of the century, but it is also about the "eternally present 'journey' one lives through each day of one's life."¹⁵ Rivers, who has painted patriotic themes since the 1950s (*The Last Civil War Veteran*, 1959; *The Next to Last Confederate*, 1959; *Study for Last Civil War Veteran*, 1970; *Last Civil War Veteran: Indigo Blue*, 1987) would naturally respond to a poem that begins:

This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.¹⁶

More importantly, Rivers captures Ashbery in the act of composition, and certainly "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is about the vagaries and vicissitudes of artistic creation.

While Rivers' etching directs us outward to other poems by Ashbery,¹⁷ Richard Avedon's photograph takes us directly into the poem (*see figure 8*). Here, Ashbery is caught off guard, not quite ready for the picture to be taken. The photograph might be linked to the surprise Ashbery describes in his own relation to Parmigianino:

...the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works. The picture is almost finished,
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,
Startled by a snowfall which even now is
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow. (p. 74)

The relationship of two artists (Ashbery/Parmigianino; Ashbery/Avedon) is presented as an experience of mutual surprise.

There is, to be sure, much to be surprised at in the Arion Press edition of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. One illustration seems at first to be a visual non sequitur: it is neither a portrait of Ashbery nor a self-portrait. Alex Katz's portrait of his wife is an extremely stylized, bold, black and white lithograph (*see figure 9*). The arm, held strangely at shoulder height, foregrounds the hand in

what may be an allusion to the Parmigianino painting. More interesting is the fact that Katz has been painting portraits of his wife since the 1960s.¹⁸ He has, in fact, painted her so consistently that the portraits have become a signature for his style. The identification of this figure with Katz himself complicates the relation of portrait and self-portraiture, suggesting the fluid relation of self and other described in Ashbery's poem.

Jane Freilicher's lithograph of flowers seems equally surprising as an illustration of Ashbery's poem (*see figure 10*). Certainly, on one level, Freilicher offers her bouquet to the Ashbery poem as a gesture of friendship, a friendship that began in 1949.¹⁹ On another level, the flowers express the artist's openness to the creative process. In his "Foreword" to the Arion Press edition, Ashbery writes:

When the poem appeared as the title-poem in a collection of mine published by Viking Press, I rejected the notion of using a reproduction of the painting on the cover since I wanted the poem to have a life of its own not connected with Parmigianino's masterpiece. On reflection, this seems not a good idea, if only because of the relative unfamiliarity of the the painting and people's desire to know what it looks like. This edition with illustrations by artists whose work I feel close to seems to me a good idea for the opposite reason of taking the poem away from itself and amplifying it in ways I had never anticipated.

Freilicher's illustration does take "the poem away from itself" in the way that Ashbery describes. Even within the poem itself, flowers appear as that which transcends authorial intention:

Often he finds
 He has omitted the thing he started out to say
 In the first place. Seduced by flowers,
 Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though
 Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining
 He had a say in the matter and exercised
 An option of which he was hardly conscious,
 Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions
 So as to create something new.... (p. 80)

One can imagine Ashbery being "secretly satisfied" not only with his own creation but that of his fellow artists.

The Arion Press edition as a whole is startling in the quality of the artworks included in it. With its unbound



Figure 10

pages and circular tin case, the book might fit as easily into a museum collection as a library. Clearly, the contemporary “non-book” effects disciplinary displacements—effects which are part of a much larger trend in the postmodern arts to blur generic and disciplinary boundaries.²⁰

Interestingly enough, some contemporary artists who take the book as subject do so only to suggest its demise.

Anselm Kiefer’s *The High Priestess—The Land of Two Rivers* (1985–9) is a sculpture comprised of 200 lead books in two steel bookcases, 14 feet high and 26 feet long. Inside the books are photographs which show ruined and decayed cities. The work as a whole has an apocalyptic tone; the dark metal books appear desiccated, deadened, part of a larger devastation.²¹ Likewise, Buzz Spector, an American conceptualist, alters books to suggest their decay: books are painted, stacked, boxed, framed, torn and decomposed. In *Toward a Theory of Universal Causality* (1984–90), Spector stacks 6,500 hardcover books against a wall in step formation so that the books become a mute minimalist object. In *Encyclopedia* (1982), he alters a book by tearing its pages; then he displays the unreadable text with a stone embedded in the pages. Spector’s use of natural objects in these transformations calls attention to the mutability of books as objects. At the same time, the disconcerting assault on the printed page suggests that our culture as a whole threatens to destroy the book.

A very different perspective on the book, however, is provided by Siah Armijani, who has been creating “reading rooms” for the past two decades. In *Reading Room #2* (1978–9), the spectator is invited to touch, handle and read the books on display. The viewer can take these books through a wooden construction to a bench specifically designed for reading. Part Japanese tea house, part maze, Armijani’s work confers a subtle sanctity on the act of reading. Like the unusual objects produced by Arion Press and Universal Limited Art Editions, Armijani’s room affirms that there is still a space for reading, and for books, in contemporary culture. Recent “non-books” toy with our very definition of the book in their dimensions, their shapes and their bindings; but rather than attesting to the death of the book, they affirm its present vitality.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Goldwater, Marge, ed. 1989. Marcel Broodthaers. New York: Rizzoli.
- ² On these various examples of the "non-book," see the catalogue: *Center for Book Arts: The First Decade*. 1984. An Exhibition at The New York Public Library. September 7–November 29, 1984. New York: Center for Book Arts, Inc.
- ³ On Stein's writings for children, see Gallup, Donald C. 1957. "Introduction." *Alphabets and Birthdays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, vii–xix.
- ⁴ Becker, May Lamberton. 1939. "Books for Young People." *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 September, 6.
- ⁵ Perloff, Marjorie. 1981. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 98.
- ⁶ Sayre, Henry. 1988. "The Artist's Model: American Art and the Question of Looking Like Gertrude Stein." *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*. Shirley Neuman, and Ira B. Nadel, eds. Boston: Northeastern University Press, (24–27).
- ⁷ Sparks, Esther, ed. 1989. *Universal Limited: A History and Catalogue: The First Twenty-Five Years*. New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Harry N. Abrams, 96.
- ⁸ Conversation with the poet, March 8, 1986.
- ⁹ Bloom, Janet and Robert Losada. "Craft Interview with John Ashbery." *New York Quarterly* 9 (winter 1972): 24–5
- ¹⁰ Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 259.
- ¹¹ Stamelman, Richard. 1984. "Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.'" *New Literary History* 15, 607–30.
- ¹² Ashbery, John. 1991. *Reported Sightings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 244.
- ¹³ Vendler, Helen. 1984. "Reading and Hearing John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*." Record Jacket of Arion Press edition. San Francisco: Arion Press (unpaginated).
- ¹⁴ See Vendler. "Reading and Hearing Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*."
- ¹⁵ Perloff. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 278.
- ¹⁶ Ashbery, John. 1977. *Houseboat Days*. New York: Penguin Books, 8.
- ¹⁷ It also directs us to his earlier painting, *Poem and Portrait: John Ashbery*, 1977.
- ¹⁸ O'Hara, Frank. 1975. *Art Chronicles. 1954–1966*. New York: George Braziller.
- ¹⁹ Ashbery. *Reported Sightings*, 239.
- ²⁰ See Perloff, Marjorie, ed. 1989. *Postmodern Genres*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- ²¹ Jencks, Charles. 1989. *What is Post-Modernism?* Third edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 66–7.

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