

### Artists' books – a preliminary definition

Varying, sometimes contradictory, definitions of artists' books renders it unavoidable to begin here. From a theoretical point of view, most influential definitions – Johanna Drucker, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, and Clive Phillpot – are hardly satisfying; still, they can be brought together as inspiration and serve as points of departure.

Clive Phillpot stresses production and the role of the artist who needs to have complete control over the book. To him, an artist needs to be involved in the production of an artists' book.

Johanna Drucker comes from a modernist perspective and claims that artists' books are defined through self-reflexivity. In these books, a self-conscious handling of structure and form always relates to being art as book, the "bookeresque" – to quote the artists Helen Douglas and Telfer Stokes. This definition excludes book sculptures, i.e. works that use books as material but neglect structural aspects.

Anne Moeglin-Delcroix has the French tradition of *livre d'artiste* in mind when she makes the following claims: first, artists' books are published in large editions and not as limited as the *livre d'artiste*; second, artists' books are distributed and spread in broader ways; and third, the artist is involved in all the steps of production – from concept to distribution – which implies that control is exerted on all levels. Similar to Drucker, Moeglin-Delcroix claims that the artists' vision is to present material in a form where the codex is a necessity and not just a vehicle or material.

Inspired by previous research, not limited to these writers, I want briefly to stress the following points whose relevance hopefully will become clear in the ensuing discussion. An artists' book is only conceivable in its form and structure as book. As such, it consists of an inextricable weave of three main aspects: the book as material object and structure, the book as sequence, and the book as page. Material, sequence and page constitute three parts that are inseparable and that together become meaningful – as book. This leads on to a claim that form and content are inseparable. This fact is also one of the main reasons why artists' books call for an approach that inherently combines a study of media and modalities. In other words, it is counterproductive to separate the levels – this may be done, but only after establishing foundational facts about the work at hand.

This point of inseparability is illuminated further through Gérard Genette's term *paratext*. His well-known term pinpoints the importance of what surrounds the novel. Genette argues that cover, foreword, various inserts, and so on influence the experience of the narrative. Jennifer Jae Rossman, librarian at Yale specialising in artists' books, has fruitfully applied Genette's theories to artists' books. Inspired by her work, I would claim, looking at books (and I here limit myself to the material object), that the harder it is to distinguish between text and paratext, the more likely it is that we are dealing with an artists' book. Every aspect participates in the production of meaning. The total experience goes to show the importance of the artists' control over every aspect of the book, which confirms Phillpot's claims.

The fact that book sculptures are excluded – they lack the crucial interplay – underline the importance of interactivity. The point is that any artists' book instigates a relationship with

the user. That is, the book cannot only be read (which, put simply, is the case in a novel where the reader is immersed in narrative and ideally forgets if she/he holds a book or a tablet). It challenges our expectations, denies hierarchies and a coherent experience, and destabilizes the structures the user encounters. This challenge is constant – as would be apparent when one accepts the claim that it is hard to distinguish between text and paratext.