
review

A kind of a 'Huh?' Artists' publications, (not) a user's guide

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This short, attractive book briskly outlines the field of artists' publications (in English and Dutch) with 29 examples illustrated, and an extensive bibliography of secondary literature. It is 'intended for persons who (wish to) deal professionally with artists' publications' (p. [6]), whether in 'general libraries and archives' or 'institution[s] concerned with modern and contemporary art'. The Middelheim Museum in Antwerp is an example of the latter: the book is an outcome of a research project based on a survey of its library by two experts – not librarians – at the Antwerp Royal Academy. In either type of context, conceptual or institutional frameworks may be lacking to enable recognition of, and an appropriate collection 'status' for, artists' publications as more than mere documentary items. Policies and attitudes aside, the practical challenge of double-cataloguing, often required to better discover special library items in museums, is one issue not mentioned here.

While asserting the 'contrarian' nature of artists' publications, and that 'no one benefits from rigid characteristics and criteria', the authors nonetheless focus (like almost all others) on definitions and 'typology', treated as if intrinsic rather than applied: 'symptoms' by which one learns to 'diagnose' the condition of artists' bookness. (Likewise my great-uncle Gilbert who, he said, once he'd worn a pair of socks a few times, could always recognize which fit which foot.) But their value and identities are actually functions of perception and assertion: we might be better to ask not 'What 'is' this?' but 'What work can this do in my institution? Is it potentially useful, or stimulating, to *our* readers – or others to whom we are reaching out?'

However, the text is reliable and stimulating, if a little over-peppered with undercutting parentheses (heralded in the subtitle '(not) a users' guide'). The selection of examples is varied and may be usefully unfamiliar to many; colour plates are inserted, in landscape format, good to show spreads. Neophytes and aficionados alike will find this introduction engaging and thought-provoking, and almost certainly get something new from it.

Though the book is well organized and articulated with a good table of contents, and is nicely produced, the typography and layout are unhelpful, with headings inconspicuous, an excessively bold face used for non-structural emphases, and no page numbers. I find it hard to navigate or use easily for reference. Other somewhat comparable titles are more clearly presented.¹

However, the rich bibliography at the heart of the work sets it on another level. Comprising upwards of 350 items, in seven generic sections, the subject content is post-1945, and documentary rather than technical (since not aimed at artist practitioners). Regrettably, its informative potential is somewhat confounded by its arrangement: alphabetical by author, in each of the sections, rather than (say) chronological for the general titles and alphabetical by subject for those sections covering works on individual artists, publishers, or countries.

In scope and range of content however it is really valuable, and it is only a compliment to its scale that additional suggestions are provoked. Under

1. E.g. Sally Dickinson, compiler, *Artists' books in the Watkinson Library: a checklist* (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 2014).

'collections' I would surely include the catalogue of Jack Ginsberg's major South African collection.² Photobook people probably should be aware that the ground for Parr & Badger's canonical surveys was actually broken earlier by Andrew Roth's *The Book of 101 Books*.³

An emphasis on conceptual art rather than illustrative, fine-press and print-making 'livres d'artistes' may rationalize omissions like Paul van Capelleveen's works on the Koopman collection in the Dutch national library,⁴ as well as the publications from the Codex Foundation (although some other inclusions go against this hypothesis). The essay collection on artists' books in Australia, published in the *La Trobe journal*, would be a useful addition to the 'by country' section, but all periodicals (as well as, more understandably, individual articles) are deemed out of scope.⁵

The record of 'exhibitions' could be supplemented from East Asia, with Marshall Weber and Xu Bing's remarkable achievement in China, *Diamond leaves: artist books from around the world*.⁶ I would also recommend catalogues of exhibitions that were noteworthy for bringing artists' books into wider perspectives of book history, or dialogue with other material of recognized significance, because these are really good strategies for promoting the 'status', or situational relevance, of artists' publications, e.g. *Infinite tasks* at the Gulbenkian;⁷ and *Of green leaf, bird, and flower* at the Yale Center for British Art.⁸

The copious European coverage is particularly useful for those of us tending to over-dependence on Anglophone sources. (Oddly, Marc Goethals' and Filiep Tacq's 2004 catalogue of an exhibition in Antwerp is listed under an English title which I cannot verify: it was certainly published in Flemish, and is cited as such in footnote 3.)⁹

Be it noted that cataloguing manuals are not included, albeit one can learn a lot about the field at large from Anne Thurmann-Jajes's comprehensive, code-agnostic *Manual for artists' publications*;¹⁰ and the ARLIS UK & Ireland's *Artists' books: a cataloguers' manual* remains a decent, straightforward introduction.¹¹

In all, despite editorial caveats, the readable text, good illustrations and exceptional bibliography do recommend this book, whether as the latest addition to a comprehensive reference library or even as the first thing you might read on the subject, especially at the modest price.

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2. David Paton, curator, *Booknesses: artists' books from the Jack Ginsberg collection* (Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg, 2017).

3. Andrew Roth, editor, *The book of 101 books: seminal photographic books of the twentieth century* (New York: PPP Editions ..., 2001).

4. e.g. Paul van Capelleveen, *Artists & others: the imaginative French book in the 21st century. Koopman Collection, National Library of the Netherlands* (Nijmegen: Vantilt Publishers, 2016).

5. Des Cowley, editor, 'Creating and Collecting Artists' Books in Australia', *La Trobe University journal* no. 95 (whole issue), (Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 2015). Librarians concerned with artists' books should know about the few specialist periodicals, at least Judith Hoffberg's pioneering *Umbrella*, Brad Freeman's *JAB: Journal of artists' books*, which was especially intended as 'a forum for critical inquiry' (like the new *Book art review* from the Centre for Book Arts, New York, 2022-), and the several titles produced by Sarah Bodman out of the University of the West of England.

6. Xu Bing, Marshall Weber, editors, *Diamond leaves: artist books from around the world* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).

7. João Carvalho Dias, curator, *Infinite tasks: when art and book unbind each other* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2012).

8. Elisabeth Fairman, editor, *Of green leaf, bird, and flower: artists' books and the natural world* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2014).

9. Marc Goethals and Filiep Tacq, *De loense strategieën van het (kunst)boek: een selectie uit de Antwerpse kunst- en bewaarbibliotheken* (Antwerp: Overleg Kunstbibliotheken Vlaanderen, 2004).

10. Anne Thurmann-Jajes, *Manual for artists' publications (MAP): cataloging rules, definitions, and descriptions* (Bremen: Research Centre for Artists' Publications at the Weserburg / Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

11. Maria White et al, *Artists' books: a cataloguers' manual* (ARLIS UK & Ireland, 2006).