

BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE

Book Arts Today II

This is a transcription of a conversation about artist books. It is part of *Dewey Decimal Days*. To learn more about it and listen to the talk, visit bureauforopenculture.org.

James Voorhies: Deirdre, I want to introduce you to Bob Tauber. He is the director of Logan Elm Press here at Ohio State University.

Deirdre Lawrence: Hello Bob.

Bob Tauber: Hi Deirdre.

James: And Suzanne Silver; she is an assistant professor of art here at The Ohio State University.

Deirdre: Hello Suzanne.

Suzanne: Hi Deirdre.

James: Deirdre is the chief librarian at the Brooklyn Museum and a curator of artist books. Deirdre, we thought this would be a good opportunity to have this conversation because the three of you represent three really important components of making, exhibiting, and preserving artist books. What might be the best thing to do is start with your giving a perspective on "What is an artist book?".

Deirdre: We started the Brooklyn Museum artist book collection in 1970. Its heart and soul are multiples, also known as open editions. Over the years we have built a collection that includes books that could fall under the genre term "artist books". We are not endeavoring to define what an artist book is, but it's fair to include all examples of what could be called an artist book. That ranges from playing cards to the standard codex form to scrolls, you name it. Basically, when an artist creates an artist book and calls it an artist book, that's what we're basing our interests on, as well as our collecting scope. It's sort of a dangerous world when you get out there, in terms of trying to define artist books. They are so varied and so wonderful. I think we probably don't want to focus so much on definitions but look at the wide range of materials and formats used in creating artist books—historically, now, and in the future.

James: Suzanne and Bob are currently collaborating on producing a book. I think

Suzanne would like to talk a bit about how making a book fits into her larger artistic practice.

Suzanne: Yes, actually I don't make work exclusively in the form of a book. It's more art about the books—work that evokes actually reading, writing, and sometimes speaking. I'm interested in making and turning language into a physical object. Sometimes it takes the form of something more sculptural or site specific, such as mixed media installation in which the spacing on a page, between the lines, and the spacing in a physical environment combine or are examined or investigated. I try to figure out how that conveys meaning. It may be paying homage to the vernacular signs. It could be something in words, letters, or forms in neon—or it could be letter-forms in ephemeral materials: powders on the floor, dispersed. They are not contained in book form or in codex form, but they do relate to language. I guess that's my prime interest. When it does exist in book form I refer to Johanna Drucker's definition of an artist book or what artists strive for. They look at the book as a form to interrogate. I'm interested in this form of interrogation, whether it's conceptual or formal.

James: This is something, though, Deirdre, that is interesting for you to discuss, and with you also, Suzanne: in terms of people who touch and hold the book. As an artist, do you care or want people to interact with the book?

Suzanne: It's a tricky situation when it is in book form. I have, for example, a piece called *Ledger Léger de Main*, the pun using sleight of hand and of course using the ledger book as my book format. In the work there are images punctured—it is sort of a blank book. There is only embossing or piercing. It consists of signs and symbols and the person reads it recto-verso. You have to see the front and the back and you have to keep turning the pages because these images disappear. The images are W.M.D.s and other forms and it is kind of about their disappearance. You have physically to move the book in order for it to convey its full or fuller meaning. But when it was displayed, by necessity it was placed—or I don't know if it was by necessity—but in this one place it was situated under glass and lit so that the barrage of blanks, those embossments, could be seen. It was fine in viewing that piece, but it never conveyed the entirety of the conceptual content.

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Deirdre: We experimented, back in 2000 when I curated a show of artist books, with placing tables in the gallery. We put about 30 multiples out for people to sit in front of, hold, read, handle, enjoy. It was a very positive experiment. We didn't lose anything. And it gave people either the great pleasure of the one-to-one relationship that you have with a book. It's an experiment that I would like to continue because what has happened over the years is that multiples have evolved into more expensive items for purchase along with limited editions and unique book-works. Sometimes when you spend a few hundred dollars on an artist book you're less apt to put it out on the table for it to be easily handled. However, that is the mission of the artist for most of these books. They do want them to be handled. None of us has come up with a suitable solution other than scanning each page of the book. There's something called "turn-a-leaf" software, but you still lose the tactile quality of the paper, and also the ability to see the images in person. I think this is still a problem that everybody faces. You know simply putting the book in the case where it silently sits doesn't do anything in terms of communicating the message that the artist had intended. I think that through technology we can find a solution to that. I don't know.

Bob: But of course, throughout history all kinds of books by artists and scholars have survived remarkably well. The book is a pretty remarkable object when you think about it.

Deirdre: Absolutely.

Bob: We have a conservation lab. Harry Campbell, our paper and book conservator here at Ohio State, spends quite a bit of time repairing old books. But, a lot of the books I've produced—and increasingly with the influence of Heidi Kyle and experiences with artists and bookmakers—we have learned great ways of binding that make it very easy to keep books from deteriorating through use.

James: This discussion brings up the kind of collaborative nature that is an artist book. The production is not only between the artist and the viewer. Because, on one hand, an artist book is tangibly engaging with the viewer—with the person who holds it and so forth. But, on the other, it might be interesting also to talk about the

making of it—the collaboration that exists between printer and facilitator and artist. Maybe Suzanne and Bob can talk a little bit about this because they are currently in the process of making a book.

Bob: I'd like to tell you that, professionally and personally, for me it is really exciting: the prospect of doing this book with Suzanne. Because to a large degree it is my first artist book. It's not my book. It's Suzanne's book. It's a do-si-do working with vinyl, which is generally fugitive, so we're having to take some steps to make it work for us by coating it. And we're working with materials like glassine—most of the book is printing on glassine. I'm using some different inks than I'm not used to using. But the thing that's exciting for me is working with an artist like Suzanne who is open to the possibilities of using the book as a format for her work, which is one reason why I think I gravitated to Suzanne. I'm not sure why she gravitated towards me. But she was very responsive to collaborating in a process of sort of playful experiments that we went through before we started working on this book. In any event, she really challenges a lot of my ability as a printer and bookmaker, and that's what I was looking to do: to challenge myself in ways that historically fine printing and traditional combination of text and image don't challenge anymore.

James: Suzanne, could you please tell us a little bit about the book and how you look at it in terms of a collaborative process?

Suzanne: It is tremendously exciting for me as well—to have this opportunity to experiment. That's why I'm glad Bob is open to this type of orientation. I wouldn't have been interested in doing a book at this time otherwise. This allows me to try to invent new forms to convey imagery. Now, it's not imagery per se, there's nothing representational. This book, *Blacklists/Whitelists*, stems from an earlier more sculptural piece using embossing labels more commonly found on the inside of a camper's goods or something like that—not used in the so-called fine arts context—and certainly not used in books. I made almost alphabet block shapes with embossing labels of different colors. The actual names of the colors embossed on the embossing labels do not necessarily conform to the color of the label itself. After different things about naming and associations and representations, there are allusions to red and the McCarthy era and

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black lists. It stems from those investigations.

James: Deirdre, all of the ideas Suzanne discusses relate to this collaborative process. Could you talk about how the printing presses you've engaged with and the artists who worked with those presses. For instance, there is Ugly Duckling Press in Brooklyn. How important is that facility in terms of helping an artist with their vision?

Deirdre: Well, actually, Brooklyn seems to be a hotbed of people who are putting together books—a combination of artists and writers. It is extremely interesting to see how art and literature are coming together right now. I wonder why and what is driving it. But a better example here in Brooklyn is something called Booklyn, which is a cooperative. They bring together artists all the time to create artist books and to meet to talk about what the message of the book will be, what format the book will be, and what kind of paper they're going to use, as well as printing. And what they've been producing is rather phenomenal. It's happening all over Brooklyn, if not nationally. I think that if anything is pointing to the future of the book, and certainly artist books, it is certainly this very dynamic sensibility right now. And a lot of it has to spell out political messages. It has somehow come along a lot—it went through a lull for a while and now things are very collaborative in terms of looking at what has been done before and what can be done today, whether it's the message or the format.

James: Part of that energy is driven by the contemporary art market and the fact it has been so strong for so long. That may be changing. In terms of funding—these artists who are working with Booklyn, for example—who absorbs the costs? Do you have any insight into that?

Deirdre: It's actually a very good question with Wall Street doing so poorly these days affecting a lot of funding for the arts coming from federal and state and foundation sources, and then some private collectors. I'm very worried about small presses like Ugly Duckling and Booklyn—where they are going to get their funding for special projects. It's not good right now for anybody, but particularly for the smaller places. In terms of the art market, it's very interesting. There are two things that have been going on: one is a lot of artists who are working in

different media or non-traditional book artists who are choosing the book format as their palette. And I think that a lot of this has to do with their desire to communicate a one-to-one message. Another part of it, though, is that the art market has driven up the prices for limited edition and unique book-works. And it's not unusual for an artist to bring me something that has a price tag associated to it with several thousand dollars. And a) we don't have the several thousand dollars to spend on artist's books here, and b) it kind of rails against the democratic principles that underlie the beginning of multiples and open editions. They were supposed to be like zines, very accessible, very, you know, photocopied; run off a thousand copies, charge a dollar. Because of the economy, and inflation, and collecting—prices have gone up significantly. And it's interesting to watch and I applaud the small presses who try to keep the price tag down so that you can go out and buy an artist book, for say, twenty-five dollars.

Bob: I don't know that we're going to be able to price our book that Suzanne and I are doing, at twenty-five dollars. Certainly one of our goals, one of my goals as a printer and a publisher, is to keep the prices as low as possible. One of our purposes in publishing Suzanne's book *Blacklists/Whitelists*, from Logan Elm Press's point of view, is to keep the price as low as we can in order to be able to provide a gallery without walls for her work.

James: Deidre, I want to thank you very much for speaking with us and for participating in Dewey Decimal Days. Good-bye. (*technical difficulty interpreted Deidre's connection.*)

The issue, though, I believe, of funding, I want Suzanne to speak about that a little bit more because she is working with a larger university press. How does that figure into what you're doing and the quality of the work you're doing and so forth? Suzanne?

Suzanne: Part of the appeal of the opportunity through Logan Elm Press is that they're overseeing all of this and I'm just free to make the work. This is the advantage I find as a fairly new faculty member of being in the university community—both for grants to support research and then these types of

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collaborations. Bob, you should talk about the actual funding of it.

James: I think since your book is being produced at a large university—people may think there is a larger funding source. Bob—you’re saying that is definitely not the case.

Bob: Well, we do have development effort in trying to build a funding foundation for the Center for Book Arts at Ohio State and the Logan Elm Press. But still, by and large, even with that in place, Ohio State is tuition driven. And Logan Elm Press still need to sell the books, which means that we still intend to sell them to people like Deirdre and her institution, the Brooklyn Museum. Part of our market is the 120-odd research library collections because they are the main source of sales for us. I hope these institutions will be able to continue to get the kind of funding that allows them to buy the kind of books that a press like Logan Elm Press produces. And artist books, which are something new for Logan Elm Press, we’ll do more of it. Library collections, for instance, or museum collections, will continue to grow and we intend to try to keep the price low enough for them to be able to do it.

James: Practically speaking, when Suzanne’s book is finished, who is responsible for contacting those institutions and museums.

Bob: Me! I’m the printer/publisher and also the marketer. I’m the one who is trying to provide opportunities for people to put their work in book format and then sell the book.

James: All right. Well, thank you both for participating in this conversation and for participating in Dewey Decimal Days.