

## ARTISTS' BOOKS: Where to put the apostrophe?

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What is an artists' book? The medium of artists' books is a fairly recent addition to the hierarchy of the art world, and when delving into its scholarly history, one finds prodigious confusion. Controversy not only surrounded the medium for decades as it sought to establish itself as a fine art form, but an internal debate erupted among scholars, art historians, critics, librarians and artists over whether or not one truly *is* or *isn't* an artists' book (and not a *livre d'artiste* or an art book or a bookwork), and also over what the true definition of an artists' book *is*, or *isn't*. A simple, concise definition achieved early on by the illustrious Lucy Lippard, still holds true today: "Neither an art book...nor a book on art...the artists' book is a work of art on its own."<sup>1</sup>

The term "artists books" originated in 1973, in the content of the accompanying catalogue to the Moore College of Art's exhibition, *Artists Books*, written by Diane Perry Vanderlip, director of the gallery.<sup>2</sup> Two exhibitions had preceded Moore College's, one in Los Angeles at the Gallery of the Otis Art Institute, titled *Possibilities*, and the other in London at Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd., titled *Book as Artwork 1960/1972*. The curator of the latter, Germano Celant, observed in his catalogue that the 1960s had marked a shift in the rules used to identify "art," which thereafter required more participation and contemplation on the part of the viewer.<sup>3</sup> Celant wrote: "In the 1960s the medium of the book contributed to.... [an] interior significance of an art work... which demand[s] an analytical mode of discussion."<sup>4</sup>

The newly minted medium of artists' books not only presented this "challenge to a new kind of reading," but it also provided a vehicle through which to contest the art establishment.<sup>5</sup> This was an idea that had been germinated earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by art movements such as Futurism, Constructivism and DADA which made use of cheaply produced and easily distributed art texts and publications. The book as a democratizing art form was further proliferated in the 1960s by Fluxus artists John Cage and Yoko Ono, as well as the Conceptualists.<sup>6</sup> Artists like Dieter Roth, Sol LeWitt, Edward Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner sought to circulate the idea that "the concept itself becomes a work of art" and discovered that with artists' books they could circumvent the galleries, which had at first rejected them, while creating more egalitarian avenues for art to reach the masses.<sup>7</sup> Ruscha's first artists' book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, now one of the most well-known and highly collected tomes, was cheaply self-published in 1963 and originally sold for three dollars.<sup>8</sup>

Once the medium of artists' books was officially recognized in the early 1970s, a flurry of activity was spent attempting to create concrete, definitive boundaries for this elusive art form, with little agreement achieved among scholars after the first decade of debate.<sup>9</sup> Some of the disagreement centered around the use of an apostrophe in the

phrase “artists’ books,” with writers using every possible permutation, sometimes more than one, confusingly, within a single piece of writing.<sup>10</sup> Debate was further fueled by the vast variety of materials and processes used by book artists. Formats could include traditional codex, accordion, scroll, box book, pop-up or tunnel book forms, and a myriad of combinations or variations thereof.<sup>11</sup> By the close of the second decade, in the 1990s, a more cautious approach was taken to assigning a definition to the medium, perhaps due to a greater understanding of the versatility of artists’ books: “There are as many definitions of an artist’s book as there are innovative extensions of its flexible form.... This mercurial condition... defines the nature of the artist’s book.”<sup>12</sup>

The variability and elasticity of the artists’ book also invited deliberation over what works could truly be categorized as such.<sup>13</sup> One book from Union College’s own collection provides an example of the confusion and debate that the medium can incite: Lawrence Weiner’s iconic yet unimposing *Statements*, published in 1968, does contain “statements,” to be sure, yet the surface readability of his work stops there. Weiner uses language as a sculptural material to construct ideas, which when perceived by the reader, fabricate his intended work of art.<sup>14</sup> It’s no surprise that the cataloguer tasked with locating this book within the traditional library classification system chose “American Literature” and released it into Schaffer Library’s circulating collection.

By the late 1970s, the visibility of artists’ books had increased with the establishment of institutions like the Center for Book Arts and Printed Matter in New York City, the latter founded in 1976 by a group of artists and writers including Sol LeWitt and Lucy Lippard.<sup>15</sup> In 1980, the Library of Congress introduced the term “artists books” as a subject, before adopting the current manifestation, “artists’ books,” in 1985.<sup>16</sup> In 2005, the New York Art Book Fair was founded by Printed Matter and “print on demand” services such as Blurb books and Lulu introduced a new generation to self-publishing.<sup>17</sup>

That Weiner’s book, now long out of print and coveted by collectors, ended up in Union College’s *circulating* collection, written on and in, stamped, covered in stickers and categorized as “American Literature,” wonderfully fulfilled the artist’s original intent for art to bypass the elitist model of the gallery, upend society’s pre-conceived notions of what constitutes art, and be both available and accessible to the masses.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Lyons, ed., *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology Sourcebook* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Klima, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960/1972* (New York: 6 Decades Book, 2010), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Klima, *Artists Books*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Celant, *Book as Artwork*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 120.

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<sup>9</sup> Klima, *Artists Books*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Yvonne Korshak and Robert J. Ruben, *Beyond the Text: Artists' Books from the Collection of Robert J. Ruben* (New York: Grolier Club, 2010), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Klima, *Artists Books*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo, *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2007), 65.

<sup>15</sup> "History," Printed Matter, accessed September, 2014, [https://printedmatter.org/what\\_we\\_do/history](https://printedmatter.org/what_we_do/history).

<sup>16</sup> Klima, *Artists Books*, 10; and "Library of Congress Subject Headings: Artists' Books," accessed September, 2014, <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh85008302.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "History," Printed Matter.