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... a kind of a Huh? – Artists' publications after 1960

In 1963, the artist Edward Ruscha published a book which was to become the prototype of the so-called artist's book. In an interview, he explained his unusual and astounding interest in publications: "To begin with – when I'm planning a book, I have a blind faith in what I'm doing. I am not inferring I don't have doubts, or that I haven't made mistakes. Nor am I really interested in books as such, but I am interested in unusual kinds of publications." His artist's book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which stands at the beginning of a series of publications, distinguishes itself by the inexpensive techniques of printing, the simple glued binding and the small pocket-book format. But above all, it was a provocation to publish a book with nothing other than twenty-six photographic reproductions of twenty-six gasoline stations on Route 66 from California to Oklahoma. When Ruscha submitted his book to Washington's Library of Congress, America's leading copyright library, it was rejected. Ruscha capitalised on this response, taking out an ad in the March 1964 edition of the magazine *Artforum*, advertising his book as REJECTED and offering it for sale, at \$3 a copy. He was well aware of the fact that his book, no matter how perfectly it was designed, caused perplexity. He reckoned with the amazement; in his artistic work, he wanted precisely this kind of a "Huh?"

A kind of a "Huh?" is a suitable description for publications by artists. Despite all the differences in their works, publications by artists were also a protest against a restrictive and exclusive practice of exhibition on the part of galleries and museums. Artists' publications were produced in the vain hope of finding another site of presentation and sale. Nevertheless, this idea was able to give the artistic procedures another twist. Artists' books are hybrids between art and publication for which there was no ready classification available. Therefore, the New York periodical, *Art-Rite*, devoted an issue to the artist's book in 1976 that opens with statements from fifty artists. The hopes and intentions connected with the book depend upon each artist's practice, although it was not a question for anybody that the perception of a book is determined by the sequence of pages and habits of reading. Sol LeWitt spoke for many when he declared the book to be the best medium for art: "Art shows come and go but books stay around for years. They are works themselves, not reproductions of works. Books are the best medium for many artists working today ... Unlike most other media they are available to all at a low cost. They do not need a special place to be seen." In the following presentation I will explain why artist books indeed need a special place starting with the history of the collection *Buch- und Medienkunst* at the *Kunstbibliothek*.

The Collection

The Book and Media Art Collection at the Art Library includes books from the beginning of the 15th century up to the present. Today, there are more than 20,000 books and magazines. The collection is

a curatorial department of the Art Library, founded already in 1868 as the library of the *Deutsche Gewerbe-Museum* (German Design Museum).

The Art Library's essential purpose was to convey scientific and practical knowledge of the decorative arts "in word and image". In 1906, the library purchased the private collection belonging to the architect Hans Grisebach with illustrated books from the 15th to late 18th century. This acquisition marks the beginning of the Book and Media Art Collection. The collection was in the following years decisively shaped by the international press movement, which aimed to improve the formal, technical, and artistic quality of book design. This collection area stands in contrast to the later-acquired books by avant-garde artists such, who used the medium of book to try out new forms of typography. Starting in the 1980s, there was then an effort to build up a collection of modern artist's books, according to Ed Ruscha's "prototype", conceived and designed by contemporary artists as works of art. The collection expanded with the collection of concrete poetry by Jasia Reichardt, the Fluxus collection of Hanns Sohm, book objects from the collection of Rolf Dittmar, as well as many artists' books assembled by the Franklin Furnace Institute in New York. The archive of the Marzona Collection, which was acquired in 2002 as a donation, with books, magazines, invitation cards, posters, vinyl records, films, letters and photographs, had an important impact on the collection. As a side effect the collection paradigm tend to move from "library" to "archive". The collection contained then much more than books but all sorts of printed matter. Signifying a further step in this direction was the 2007 acquisition of *KIOSK Modes of Multiplication*, an archive of independent publishing of contemporary art.

Acquisition

This new orientation toward the artistic book since the 80's is also reflected by changed procedures of acquisition, cataloguing and conservation. There are different ways artists' books arrive at the Art Library. In great part, they are delivered by vendors like *Buchhandlung Walther König* at library acquisitions. There are firm orders that are determined by name and standing orders, open orders for all titles that fit the particular category "artist's book". Notwithstanding always possible misunderstandings regarding the limits of the category, the benefit to this style of ordering is that it is automatic. The decision whether to include a title into the collection depends again on the paradigm of an artist's book (conceived by an artist as a work of art) and on the relevance of the book for the collection (for example, important formal or conceptual innovations of the artist's book represented by a single title or, in contrast, the collected works by an artist). In contrary to the exchange of new materials between libraries, none of the artists' books are acquired in exchange. Beside these daily routines of acquisition, direct and personal contacts with artists, publishers, and collectors are even more important, also in view of the fact, that there are only a few book fairs like Codex in California, art book berlin and Berlin Art Book Fair (formerly Miss Read). Many of the published artists' books - due to the harsh conditions of the book trade - are not distributed by companies; there is no marketing or advertisement at all.

Therefore, it is almost impossible not to miss books which would fit into the collection. Gifts and donations as well as acquisitions of vast and individually formed collections may be sometimes complicated, but they are essential and necessary. For example, as part of the Rolf Dittmar Collection,

first shown at the documenta 6 in 1977 and acquired by the Art Library in 1990, there are about 20 books by Dieter Roth, his famous *Children book*, the deluxe editions of the *Collected Works* or the *Halbjahresschrift für Poesie* (bi-annual for poetry), all of them too expensive to be acquired today.

Cataloguing

After being inventoried and stamped, the artists' books are catalogued in the database according to cataloguing rules, the rules for alphabetical cataloguing. There are always titles which seem to escape the standards, the codes of cataloguing. For example: Sara MacKillop's book *Remains* is conceived as an appropriation of another text which itself is a photocopy of a text: "I found a book in the proof section of a second hand bookshop. However, with a closer look I could see that it wasn't a proof at all. The previous owner or author had photocopied an entire book, including cover, and bound it with a plastic comb binder. 'Remains' is my attempt to take this book one step further towards being a book by printing the pages back to back and perfect binding it. At the same time, it takes one a step further away as the pages have been reformatted to fade as the reader progresses." Who is the author of the text (reminding the discussion started with the seminal essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in 60's)? The author of the book is Sara MacKillop, quite sure, but, in order to grasp the aspect of "copy art", it is important to note a "Nebentitel" (variant title).

Christopher Williams' *Printed in German* was conceived to exist as a stand-alone visual object and extend the artist's conceptual concerns into book form. A perfect companion to a first publication, *Printed in Germany* reproduces a carefully curated selection of Williams's constructed photographs and features striking graphic design in the complete absence of language, with no essay, captions, or even a title page or imprint. It has been produced in three colors – yellow, red, and green – each of which features subtle differences. There is an additional booklet, where is to be found the only text: "Printed in Germany", correct information about the publication and, according to the website of the publisher, at the same time title of the book.

The next example refers not only to the importance of the artistic concept which is not always expressed in print, but also to the preservation and conservation of the books. Jonathan Monk's *Cover Version* features a selection of publications from Monk's extensive collection of artists' books. A section of *Cover Version* is a transcribed telephone conversation between Jonathan Monk and Seth Siegelau, which unfolds and discusses their mutual obsession with book making and collecting. Preparing her own artist's book *Page Count*, the artist Amanda Andersen visited the Art Library and wished to photocopy the last pages of Monk's *Cover Version*, the conversation between Monk and Siegelau. Being a part of Book and Media Art Collection, there are restrictions regarding making photocopies and therefore it was not allowed, to make photocopies of Monk's book. Andersen complained about this restriction to Monk, who decided to publish a *PhoTocopied CovEr VersiOn*. Andersen's book is also a reflection on book collection, ownership and reproduction, a documentation of all the books Andersen owns, arranged in order of page counts. Both books were donated to the Art Library with the obligation that these books will be no part of the collection, that is, free for being photocopied – an artistic concept which has to be noted in the catalogue, otherwise the information will be lost.

Preservation

Storing, preservation and restoration of artists' books start with protecting the books in simple folder type boxes, sometimes also in tightly closing clamshell boxes with an extra stable roundabout construction for extremely heavy objects. As these books are quite often produced in a very simple way, they need further protection. To give only one example, Jean Dubuffet's famous *LeR DLan caNpaNe* from 1948 is printed on pulp paper and bound with staples. To stop the degradation and decomposition of the paper, the staples can be removed and the acidic paper can be neutralized, deacidified (which involves washing paper in a bath, complicated by the stamp on the cover of the book) and finally stabilized. The missing parts of the pages can be completed with Japan paper similar to the original paper. The next example refers to a book with organic materials. Between 1966 and 1969 Dieter Roth published *Poeterei*, a bi-annual review for poetry. The special edition of number 4, called *Poemetrie*, consists of nine transparent plastic bags, text printed on both sides, filled with meat, mounted on a plastic board. The decay and impermanence of the material, even the rotten stench of the object, is part of the artistic concept – how can that be preserved in a library? Respecting the artistic concept of decay, the object will be cleaned, in particular cleaning of the adhesive and therefore dust-soiled surfaces. Afterwards, the object will be enclosed in a transparent and hermetically sealed box, protecting the object against microorganisms and insects. Only then it will be possible to present the object in exhibitions or in the library's reading room.

Presentation

Let us turn to the question of public presentation: It's not easy to exhibit books. The solo retrospective *Erik Steinbrecher UBER ALLES* (above, about and on everything), shown at the Art Library in 2012, can be referred to as an example for the special dynamic of an artistic work. Erik Steinbrecher, an artist who has produced over 100 works in printed matter: books along with posters, invites and inserts, mostly with images, often with collaborators and always with witty titles like SCHLUSS MIT ÖKO (Enough with eco), developed a special exhibition idea. The invitation was designed as a poster in different colours. They allude to Daniel Buren who, between 1969 and 1974, sent posters on which only the colours of the printed stripes were changed, as well as the inscription on the back. At any one time, the invitation marks the neuralgic point of crossing between outside and inside. The exhibition installation (50 printed works were on display in 31 showcases) plays with this relation of presenting art and being art. Each showcase contained a mixture of paper and other works; the fun was figuring out what came first and if they even belonged to each other. As a result of the show, there are ten new artist's books produced specially for the exhibition and assembled in a simple bag and a certain *BLUES*. The program of the exhibition included a book presentation, guided tours by the artist, an evening with book-signing and events at other locations like the bookshop MOTTO at Berlin. Looking back, I've tried to outline some of the particularities of artist's books in a library. They are often self-referential, transporting information regarding the book via other media, are being made with unconventional materials. But, on the other, they reflect the order and dissemination of knowledge incorporated in a library.