

Rolling Column... Peter Anderson

What is a book? These days, this question does not seem particularly odd. We now regularly find ourselves considering a future of talking books, hypertext, libraries without walls, and electronic books without either pages or covers. We assume that writing will continue, perhaps increase in importance, but we are less sure of the book. In our discussion of the content of books, our interpretation of texts, it is easy to forget that books are not simply the product of an author's labour. Most books are mass produced manufactured objects and much of the work that goes into making a book is highly mechanised—even computerised.

As Roger Chartier reminds us, the history of the book has not simply been the history of authorship. Rather than tracing the history of books through those who write them, book historians are 'more interested in ascertaining wealth, alliances, and hierarchies in the milieu of those who manufactured and sold books: merchant-booksellers, printers, compositors and pressmen, typefounders, engravers, bookbinders and others'. It is, if you like, quite possible to talk about books without ever engaging with the usual list of literary concerns, to think instead of books as cultural objects or circulating commodities.

This gap between books and writing emerged in interesting ways in the contrast between the author centric activity of the Brisbane Writer's Festival, and the second Artists' Books and Multiples Fair, an officially unrelated event that took place over the same weekend in early September, across the river at Metro Arts. The first Australian Artists' Book Fair, *BEWARE books by artists* was held at the Queensland State Library in 1994, and the Fair organiser, Noreen Grahame, who runs Numero Uno Publications, Grahame Galleries & Editions, and the Centre for the Artists' Book, aims to make this a biennial event.

While the Writers Festival gave priority to authors, readers, and to the textual content of books, the Artists' Book Fair, although it touched on some of these things, was more focused on the visual and physical aspects of books. In some



instances, artist's books set out to interrogate the nature of the book itself. For example, Sebastian Di Mauro's *A Book of Silence* presents us with pages that are empty of text or image, with the whole book constructed of thick sheets of highly textured carpet underlay — not even the rustle of pages here. Others, such as Adele Outteridge's *Threaded Book*, which is held partly shut by a network of threads, defy any attempt to 'read' the book in the usual way. In thinking about the book as an object, artists make works that sit at the very edge of the notion of what a book actually is, or could be.

Perhaps the strongest link between artist's books, and books in general, is in the area of print, paper and binding. In some cases it seems that these elements are almost the sole 'subject' of the book, rather than serving as the support for textual content. Even when books have what looks to be a fairly simple combination of text and image, it is often particular techniques and traditions that are being explored. Tate Adams' *Diary of a Vintage*, which simply explores the year's cycle at a vineyard and winery, is illustrated with wood engravings, so that in addition to being a beautiful object in its own right, it also serves as a contemporary examination of a traditional printmaking technique. It is through books such as this, that contemporary artists and printmakers can keep alive the craft of book making.

Lyre Bird Press, which Tate

Adams established in 1977 with the aim of publishing books of the same quality and stature as the French *livre d'artiste*, was just one of some half dozen or so participating book producers at the Fair, all looking both backwards and forwards at the book and print technology from engraving to the colour copier. Now a part of the Art and Design Department at Townsville's James Cook University, Lyre Bird Press not only publishes more traditional books, but also opens its workshop to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as local artists in a hands-on exploration of the possibilities of the book and printmaking. The press publishes a selection of more 'off the wall' artist's books and multiples, such as Ron McBurnie's three playful explorations of the press; *Classifieds*, *Headlines*, and *Wanted* (a collection of 'wanted' ads from all sorts of places ... wanting all sorts of things), or Larissa Lewis' *The Trip*, 'a brief story of my trip in France in the form of an etched concertina book with handcolouring'.

Obviously, these are not books that would ever make the best-seller list, with many in very limited editions, and some as one-off productions. Many are self-published, like McBurnie's *Tonguey*, a very humorous flickbook of inkjet colour prints in an edition of 30, that follows the journey of a tongue around a face... and beyond. The flickbook, of course, has a strong link to animation, and only works properly when you skim through the pages. Other books hover at the edge of the conceptual and the abstract, where the pleasure in the reading is an encounter with the turning of textured pages, or the surprise at the difficulty of actually getting the thing open.

While one aim of the Fair was to take artist's books out of the gallery, where they tend to end up in glass display cases, the need to wear little white cotton gloves when handling the works was a constant reminder of their singular preciousness. Perhaps at some time in the future this will be the fate of all books — to be works of art, rather than receptacles of information or stories.

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