Experimental writing and artists' books
September 9, 2008 to accompany the special issue of *The Journal of Artists' Books*

Most writers compose a text, not a book, but those who conceive their literary forms within the constraints of graphical and spatial formats, though rare and unique, are notable. At the very outset of the modern era, William Blake embodies the model of book artist poet, one for whom the presentation and composition are inextricably bound in a single complex whole. Page and sequence, part to whole and frame to margin, border and image, writing and interlineal motifs – all figure in Blake's book works. Few independent artists or writers involved in book design have the stature of the Blake, but in the two centuries since the visionary poet exercised his artistic imagination, others have combined the traditions of literary experiment and innovation in the book format.

Among them, many of the modern writers who wrote books rather than texts were well acquainted with the print shop and its techniques—Walt Whitman, William Morris, and William Butler Yeats, or the American humorist Gelett Burgess. Fine press traditions in which book format integrated with literary composition, such as the Vale Press, Chiswick Press, or Cuala Press, might be considered happy syntheses of graphic and illustrational sensibilities with literary ones so that the final product is a whole conception even if the textual composition occurred independently. Oscar Wilde wrote for the stage as much as the page, but the edition of *The Sphinx* designed by Ricketts might be the best performance of that work ever done, just as Aubrey Beardsley's rendering of *Salomé* in the English edition published for the first time in 1894 stamped the work with a definitive character. The charge might be made that this is not an artist's book, conceived from the outset as a work produced in the codex form as an integral whole. But other examples that do meet such criteria can be readily brought into view.

Nineteenth century instances of book work as a whole took inspiration in part from Richard Wagner's concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk*. Even the brilliantly iconoclastic utopian aesthete Stéphane Mallarmé was touched by the composer's vision in his own extensive vision of "the book" as a spiritual "instrument" capable of working dramatic social change while also embodying a radical (in all senses) aesthetic through its material and graphical realization. *A Throw of the Dice*, like the work of Mallarmé's contemporary, William Morris, spun off a host of writer-book-artist imitative or inspired spawn in subsequent decades. The Roycroft industry, brain child of the entrepreneurial self-made evangelist, Elbert Hubbard, put arts and crafts inspired bibles into the hands of American householders. With customary hubris, Hubbard extended his argument for the codex as an aesthetic work into designs for his own writings. In a dramatically different vein, artists and literary figures like the aforementioned Gelett Burgess, conceived of projects like *The Lark* published in San Francisco between 1895 and 1896, or his delightful *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*. Their imaginative engagement with the full design of the book format demonstrated they had absorbed the lessons of Kelmscott, other exemplars of the fine press movement, and even the beginnings of the impulse that would develop into livres d'artistes.

By the early 20th century, avant-gade poets and writers in Russia ,Germany, Italy, France, England and other parts of Europe, theorized the book as an artistic agent of social change. The commitment of Lazar El Lissitzky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Natalia

Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Wassily Kamensky, and Ilia Zdanevich and other members of in the Russian Futurist movement created a host of major literary works in innovative book formats. Filippo Marinetti and his lieutenants, Ardengo Soffici and Fortunato Depero, made fully designed literary works whose page sequences were conceived from the outset as part of the textual field. If Dada and Surrealist artists were less involved with books than film, performance, and painting, the single example of Max Ernst as a major figure of book art (to suggest that these graphic novels are not literary would be absurd) is sufficient to argue for the codex as a medium of aesthetic innovation.

At mid-20th-century, the Situationist Guy DeBord worked with CoBrA artist Asger Jorn on the remarkable 1959 production of *Mémoires*, while the founding Lettrist, Isidore Isou, produced a graphic comic novel about flirtation, as well as a conceptual work in the book format in the form of debris and detritus. In the same early 1950s era, fellow Lettrists, Maurice Lemaître and Gabriel Pommerand, each created remarkable individual works of hypergraphic book work, such as the latter's *St. Ghetto des Prêts*.

Decisions about what counts as literary work in the book format and what falls more properly into either conceptual art, pop, or fluxus muddies easy boundaries among genres. But *0 to 9* and the literary productions of Carl Andre, or typewriter works by Bernard Heidsieck, Henri Chopin, or the intricately designed work of Dick Higgins in his intermedia productions of Something Else Press all contribute to radical textual innovation as well as visual and graphic art. If we cannot imagine the early 20th century without the contributions of Marcel Duchamp (including the Green Box and his conceptual writings), then neither can we imagine the later 20th century without the writings, compositions, graphical/musical/textual performances of John Cage, with their influence on Jackson MacLow whose sensitivity to page, if not book, is obvious in all his works. Genre bending abounds in this era, and the conceptual and procedural turns in experimental writing are intimately linked with visual arts counterparts. Whether Tom Phillips and Walter Hamady find their place in a literary canon, or whether Madeline Gins's brilliant 1969 *Word Rain* is read alongside the essays of Robert Smithson or in a course on experimental women's literature, with Hannah Wiener, Susan Howe, or myself, all graphically inclined writers intent on shaping book space as writing space, matters less than that the traditions of experiment these embody are known for their own unique contributions to the understanding of literary experiment in the book format.

My list could be much longer with specific examples of individual works by Bern Porter, Ken Cambell, Ruth Laxson, b.p. Nichol, Charles Bernstein, John Crombie, Steve McCaffery, and other cross-disciplinary figures whose projects integrate visual and verbal expression in the space of the codex. Closer to the present, such intentionally self-conscious writers as Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Craig Dworkin, and Emily McVarish actively engage the book as a primary feature of composition, structuring their work visually and spatially as well as textually. The legacy of Blake, Morris, Mallarmé, Lissitzky, Cage are all variously present in the conceptual underpinnings of these projects, as are the many vernacular and industrial productions that provide a language of graphic writing up to our times. The possibility certainly exists that having the means of production readily available to more writers will bring about an increase of experimental work in the book format, however defined. Appreciation of the remarkably rich history of imaginative innovations will foster such visionary design. This exhibit, and the issue of *JAB* that accompanies it, are important invitations to future study and creative work.