

Technology and the Evolution of the Artist's Book - Artists from Central Booking, New York City
Curated by Maddy Rosenberg (Central Booking)

Exhibition Design by Curious Space (Anna Jones & Patrick Burnier)

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Probably the best exhibition of artist's books I have been to, Technology and the Evolution of the Artist's Book is ambitious and wide-ranging. Einstein is here, and Existentialism, and higher maths, and medicine, and also film: there are animations, stories which complement the books and say something about the history, the content and the way of making of the artist's book, a thing crafted, one way or another, a thing at once forward- and backward-looking, always aware of its physical immediacy in the hand, ready to the eye to have its pages turned, so as interactive as books have always been.

These are generalisations of course, but this is a show that tries to take a broad sweep, that shows off the experience of the curator. I'm sure there are other curators of wide-ranging vision and full address books, but a lot of people do seem to have turned up to her party. It's the philosophical reach of the artists' book she has touched on, even without necessarily mentioning the conceptualism connection, or the Ed Ruschas and their ilk, in the telling.

What she's done is make a case for bringing together the craft-angle of the history - often difficult because often tempted toward cuteness - and the more cerebral: both those who want to analyse what Deleuze meant when he wrote about maps, and those who see that the geometry of higher maths might better be caught by a book than a diagram, to those who want to meditate on Tolstoy.

Book-like forms, tables, diagrams, records, time-based documents, are here. Alice is here, somehow wedded to the beginnings of the artists' book, with her thought-into-thing-and-back-again way of thinking. Which makes us think that perhaps the birth of photography, with its own new tricks and ways of thinking, ways of doing and thinking often condemned as tricks, might not just co-incidentally align with the birth of the artist's book genre.

This show reminded me about the autograph book my great-grandmother had: really a series of paintings in watercolour by her friends - drawing and painting in those days were expected skills, before everyone owned a camera, perhaps. It was an extraordinary document, and common of its type. What did these books do? They were personal, social, intimate, show-offy. They were about identity I suppose.

Ms Rosenberg says that she is an art curator, and what she does is not limited to artists' books, but it is clear (I've been to her gallery and shop, Central Booking, in New York) that the kind

of art she likes connects very easily with the 'world', if such a thing exists, of the artists' book. (In fact I think that the interest of the 'artists' book' is that it is a genre that has no edges, no borders, it's a zone awkwardly defined in the middle of 'fine art', 'print', 'conceptual art', and a few other -isms and -osms.)

Malevich is here - with a whole gang of artists from the Book Art Museum in Lodz, Poland, doing homage to him. He seems incredibly appropriate somehow, and in this context connects Mallarmé and Sol LeWitt.

I've been to Lodz too, though not to the museum. But I remember there an artists' residency foundation, and to go back to photos - a photography and film foundation of very long standing and renown. We took a canister of Russian Super-8 there, to see if the experts knew of cameras and projectors that might fit its peculiar notch-pattern. I remember when he - the expert we found - opened the canister, and the entire group's intake of breath could be heard, because we all thought - wrongly - he was about to expose the film. In fact he could tell from just the black paper wrapping what kind of a film it was. I think of the whole event as a real artists' book moment - looking backwards and forwards at once.

Boccaccio is here. And Heinrich Hoffman, Nabakov, Ukiye-O, Cyrano de Bergerac and Icelandic sagas - they're all here. So too are U.S. attacks on caves in Afghanistan. They were looking for something, I guess. We are not told they did good.

Architecture is important here, and anatomy. They are not so far apart, in the world of this show. This fact has to do with 17th to 18th century anatomical models - the bits that come out, the organs that reveal more organs and the body's structure.

What it most makes me think about is an international network of contacts - which existed before the internet - read the biography of Kurt Schwitters, for example. And letters, letters with plans for books. Postal art - American, South American, European. Lodz, New York, Iceland.

It reminds you that Boccaccio's Decameron has a structure that appeals to the visual imagination. Each of its 100 stories has an introductory speaker who also comments on the last story, in a coda-cum-preface that also allows in the voice of the book's architect ('they all laughed, and then...') It is a set of ten sheaves of ten stories. The narrators are all in a strange place, shut away in a country villa to escape the plague, and their stories roam. Affinities with collage are obvious. Brandon Taylor, in what is probably the best general book on collage, is at pains to point out, and analyse, the relationship between word and image in Russian Formalism - so amongst Mayakovsky, Malevich Tatlin and others.

On skill - Maddy's piece, I see (in fact I didn't see till I read it) is a linocut. It is very skilfully made. She is not just a curator then. Her work also deals with history.

Mary Ting's piece about her mother's hands, and the lines in them, even while she was in her coffin, along with the lines on the hands of the living artist and daughter, connect past and

future - I suppose we could say anatomically, but that would be strange - emotionally, more like.

Sarah Stengle's piece is about remorse. It (like other pieces) uses no paper. But it does use Morse code, which is an alphabet, and reminds us of the artists' books way of connecting the written word and the spoken word and all worlds of visual communication.

On the installation: one visitor complained that they couldn't get close to the piece they wanted to see - a beautiful paint-chart style piece that turned out to be about cancer - I was drawn to this too. They couldn't get close because the ramp-style internal walls made it too far away. She had a point, this visitor. But in general, the cardboard-walls installation was good, made you feel as if you were inside a model, and heightened the feeling of the books' relationship with models, with scale, with craft, which for many of them was appropriate.

David Lillington is a curator and writer. In September he will present a paper for the 'Death and Culture' conference, University of York, on the work of Elizabeth Price. On Friday 30th September he will, with the Georgian artist Ketik Kapanadze, introduce the book launch of Kapanadze's monograph, *What is Love?* at the Georgian Embassy, Kensington. Exhibitions he has curated include 'Unwheeled' (three artists from Georgia) at Danielle Arnaud, 2015, and 'Tod und Sterben/Death and Dying' at MAG3 Project Space, Vienna, 2014. A feature article about death as a subject in contemporary art will appear in the September issue of Art Monthly.