



Exhibition View: *Press & Release 2016: Technology and the Evolution of the Artist's Book.*
Photograph: Bernard G Mills, 2016



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Exhibition Review

Press & Release 2016: Technology and the Evolution of The Artist's Book

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Peter Seddon

According to Stefan Klima in his *Artists Books: A critical survey of the literature*, (1985), the term artist's book (note the apostrophe and use of the singular) was first used in the catalogue of a group exhibition of artists' books held at Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, in 1973. The common usage of the term therefore is relatively recent, being a term that comes into focus in the middle part of the 20th century. There are of course plenty of examples before this date of what we may now call the artist's book from earlier periods of the 20th century for example and further back to artists like William Blake or those anonymous medieval monks lavishly illustrating and writing books by hand. As a handy definition for contemporary circumstance, however, we might say the current usage of the term refers to books made by artists rather than written by authors. This emphasis on book works as artworks, as physically made objects begs lots of questions. These include questions about visual images and their relationship to texts, the artist's relationship to industrial culture and technology, about the worlds of publishing, printing, and exhibiting. The term, in spite of its recent origin is slippery, porous rather than fixed. It has a history and one that constantly changes, all issues we will come to.

The recent exhibition, *Press & Release: Technology and the Evolution of the Artist's Book*, was a useful moment to take the temperature of this area in the work of well over twenty artists from all over Europe and the United States. All of them are associated with CENTRAL BOOKING a space specialising in artists' books in New York City. Interestingly, CENTRAL BOOKING has two galleries, one devoted to artists' books, and the other being a space for multi media arts integrating arts and science practices, something partially reflected in a number of the works in this show, curated by CENTRAL BOOKING's director and book artist Maddy Rosenberg. Although this essay refers to a number of works by artists in the show, it should be stated at the outset that these references are to illuminate the points I wish to make and do not indicate individual artistic achievement on the part of some over and above others not mentioned.

The first thing to note is what makes a book (leaving aside whether it is made by an artist, craftsman,

publisher, etc.). It lies, I suggest, in some kind of core identity in page turning, folding, cutting, collating, binding, sequencing. This is ably reflected in the design and layout of the exhibition itself by the Brighton based collective Curious Space.

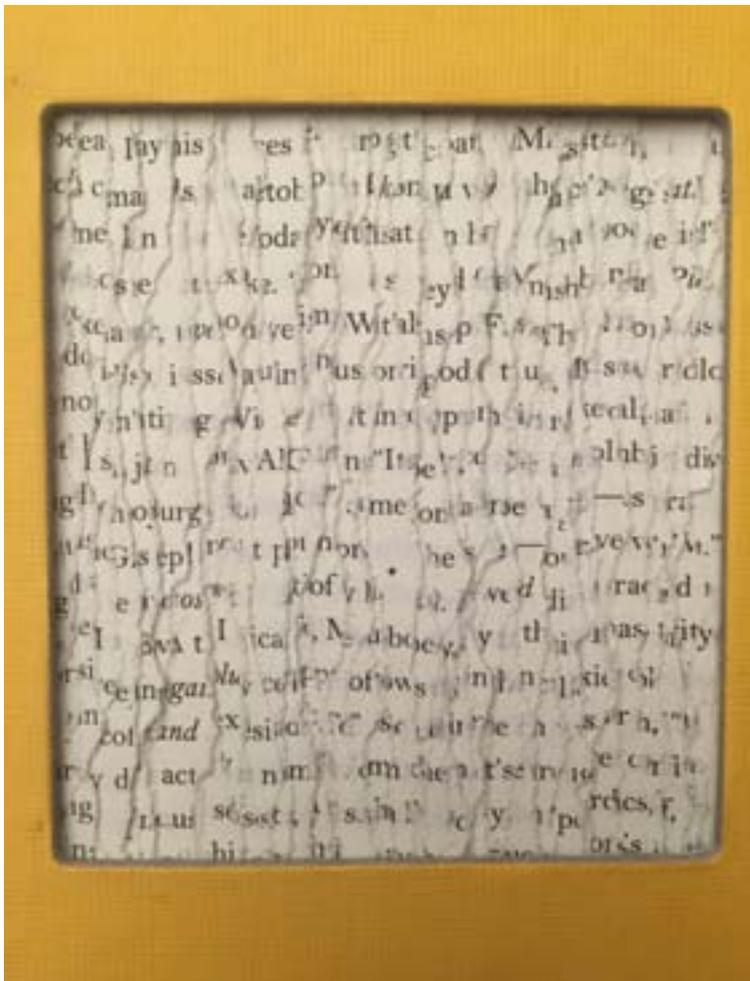
Gallery exhibitions of book arts are so often a matter of elegant vitrines often involving a certain distance between object and viewer. In this case of this show it becomes a physical experience rather as if one was immersed and absorbed by the large wonky panel / pages, the evidently rough honeycombed cardboard edges. It is a display in which one wanders from one enormous page to the next like a hungry bookworm. This makes for a physical experience one not attached so much to gallery walls as one that imitates the architecture of the book itself.

One defining feature of the artist's book from the 20th century onwards lies in its treatment by an artist and the making of the object itself (a book however defined) into an artwork, one not so much intended to be read in the normal sense as handled and apprehended, a concept exposed rather than elucidated and argued. Examples would be Geraldine Ondrizek's *M168, Tracing the Y Chromosome*, or the use of glass in Sarah Stengle's *Remorse Code*. The altered found book (in the tradition of Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade* of 1919) is another example to be seen in Valerie Huhn's use of pins with fingerprint heads stuck over the entry on Leonardo Da Vinci in a copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This work evokes the idea of smeared finger marks spread over the pages of a well-thumbed work of reference. Buzz Spector's altered found book *Slade House* derived from David Mitchell's novel of the same name (2015) is a further example.

However this core idea of emphasising the physical characteristics of a book's construction, something made rather than written, something to be seen rather than read could be seen as a residue of a common mid-20th Century idea of art being defined by the peculiarly appropriate and preferably unique characteristics of a chosen medium. Here perhaps lies the difficulty of definition something philosophers would call ontology. Sometimes book works of this kind pass over into sculpture or expanded practices such as installation. As Johanna Drucker puts it sometimes "they may function as icons of bookishness but not provide an experience associated with books themselves, however intriguing they may be as objects." A good example of this in the exhibition might be Erik and Martin Demaine's *Something from Nothing*, which whatever its source in music manuscripts is surely better defined as sculpture? After all the origin of our modern concept of the book in its basic form



Valerie Huhn *Fingerprint Pin Book*; Encyclopaedia Britannica Leonardo Da Vinci. 2015. Pigment ink, acetate, pins, foam, book. Size w x l x h 279 x 432 x 76 mm. Photograph: Valerie Huhn



Buzz Spector, *Slade House*, 2015, altered copy of David Mitchell's, *Slade House*, New York: Random House, 2015. Photograph: Buzz Spector

lies in the 'Codex' of the ancient world, a method of folding single sheets of vellum or parchment into four then slitting one edge to form the experience of turning pages rather than running a scroll. Groups of these pages would be stitched or bound together to form a book, a tabula rasa to be written or imaged on. By this definition quite a few artists' books are not books at all but something else.



Eric and Martin Demaine, *Something from Nothing from Something*, elephant hide paper, 9"x10"x9", 2014.
Photograph: Eric and Martin Demaine

Does any of this matter? Probably not, that's just artists for you, questioning something to the point of de-definition! Johanna Drucker in her *The Century of Artist's Books* (1995) explores in its first chapter questions of form and definition. She usefully warns against defining the category by placing works against whether they meet or fail to meet, prescribed rigid criteria. Rather she sees it as a field of activity that creates what she calls 'intersecting spaces.' She then lists them from traditional fine printing and craft traditions of book making to experimental procedures in conceptual art, agit-prop, electronic arts, fanzine graphics and so on.¹ Whilst not covering everything this exhibition certainly points towards this kind of variety or set of intersections. There were a fair number of examples of expanded graphics, pop up formats and inventive combinations of image/text and typographic agility. Tina Flau's *Hávamál* (2009) being a good example.

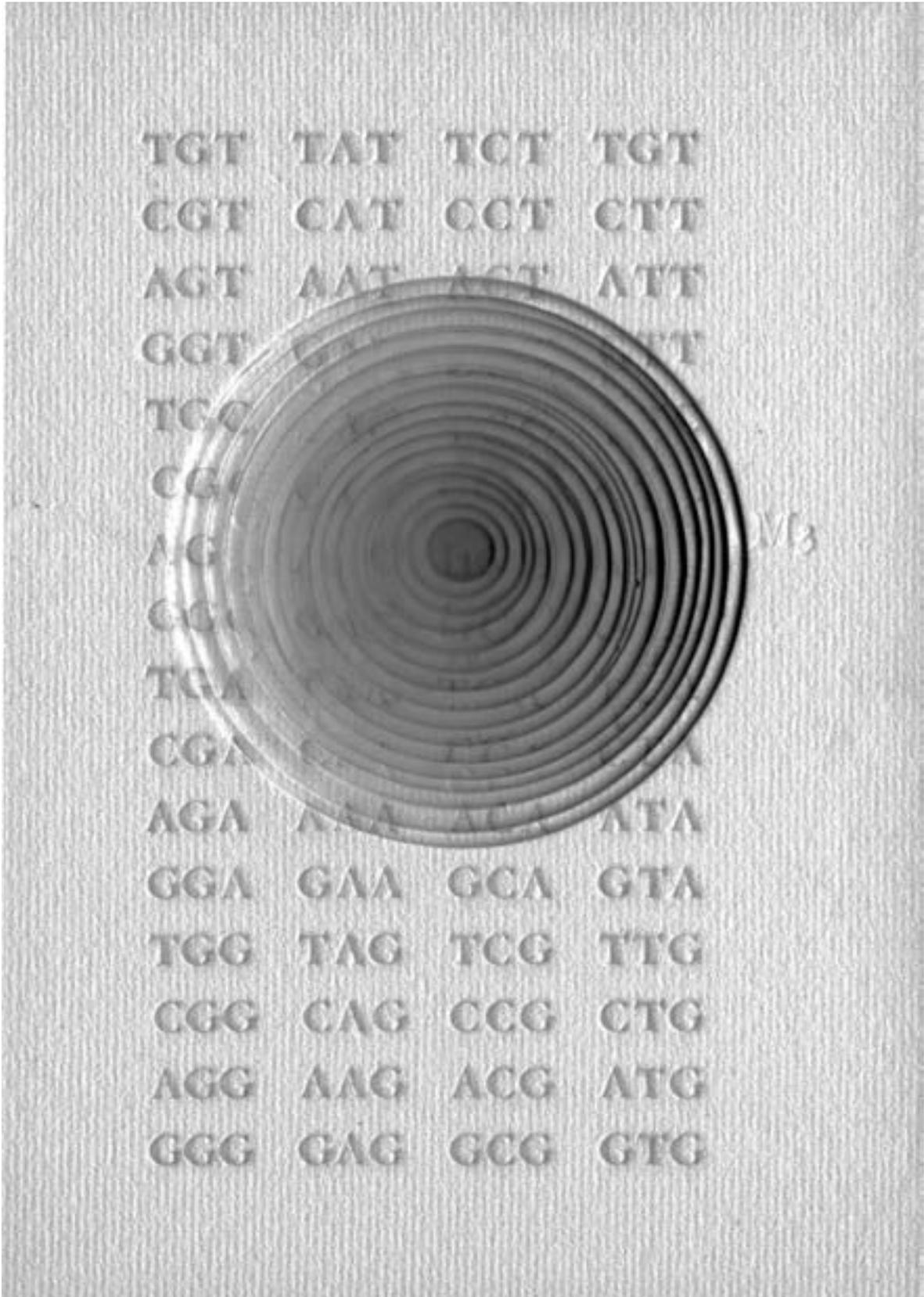
One of the most significant 'intersecting spaces' contributing to the mid century artist's book was the rise of conceptual art in that period. One aspect of this that took book form was the documentation of projects that were time based or temporary or based on an idea whose residue could only be in that form, an often quoted example being Ed Ruscha's book *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* first published in 1962. Dieter Rot in Europe is also often cited as a founding

father. Certainly by the late sixties the demand from conceptual artists such as Art & Language that artists take full control of their practice across images, texts, distribution and publicity was keenly felt and contributed to a new hybridity of roles that was manifested in the artist's book as well as other fields of practice. Conceptual art's questioning of a purely 'visual' language and of formal definitions of art practice encouraged both artists and curators to investigate book forms amongst other documentary practices. It is not without significance that Seth Siegelaub a key curator of early conceptual art in America later became a book dealer. His most famous exhibition was centered on a publication *Zerex Book* (1968) using the work of Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Le Witt, Robert Morris and Lawrence Weiner. Making use of traditional off-set printing because of cost, it was nonetheless based on the idea of Zerex photocopying, a technology that spread rapidly from its invention in 1959, becoming widely available to artists and designers from the late sixties onwards.



Tina Flau, *Hávamál*, 2009, Text from the Edda in old Icelandic language, 4-sided, coloured original drawing, handwritten text, concertina book in velvet cover, Edition of 25, size - h x w x d: 190 x 360 x 15 mm.
Photograph: Tina Flau

This raises the intriguing question of technology (the first word in the exhibition's title) in relation to the artist's book. New technologies arrive, are taken up with enthusiasm and are then super-ceded by the pace of change. For example the arrival of the Zerex form mentioned above sparked the founding of the International Society of Copier Artists (ISCA). They produced from 1982 a quarterly periodical of artists' works in this genre and finally folded in response to inevitable change in June 2003.² The rapid expansion of digitally-based printing technologies, inkjets, laser printing machines and so on both rendered the older form redundant and changed its meaning. New technologies alter and increase the sophistication of what can be achieved



Geraldine Ondrizek, *Tracing the Y Chromosome*, 2006, 16 books, letterpress, die cut with a circle. Papers, Arches cover, vellum, rice paper, Fabriano, hand bound in white linen. Each book: 10.16 x 15.24 x 3.81 cm. Photograph: Dan Kvitka

by simple means making that grubby faded look of the cheaply produced a style choice rather than an accepted necessity. The history of technological innovation is of course complicated. Some procedures decay others persist either as serenely independent or in formats that complement the old with the new.

Various forms of book arts continue. One example is the highly crafted, finely printed, limited edition illustrated book or edited portfolio, often highly expensive and appealing to a luxury market. I am thinking here of a tradition going back to a genre known as the *Livre d'Artiste*, a publishing enterprise adopted by dealers such as Vollard or Kahnweiler, often combining the work of visual artists and literary figures, Apollinaire and Dufy are examples. Something of this approach in the exhibition can be seen in Kahn and Selesnick's *100 views of the Drowning World*. A separate, if related manifestation is the tradition of the magazine/periodical and manifesto by avant-garde groupings during and after WW1, Dada, Futurism and Constructivism. Examples of the persistence of this tradition in the exhibition might be the work of 'Liberature' developed by Katarzyna Bazarnik and Zenon Fajfer.



Art Hazelwood, *Tora Bora: An Opera in Three Acts*, 2011, copper engraving, screenprint, letterpress, DVD, 310 x 335 x 30 mm, closed, 310 x 610 x 254 mm open, edition of 20. Photograph: Art Hazelwood

An example of the complementarity of old and new technologies in the exhibition can be seen in Art Hazelwood's polemical piece *Tora Bora Black Dust: An Opera in three Acts*. This was shown via a DVD animation on a monitor. The DVD in fact accompanies an edition of twenty, fold out, pop-up 3D paper theatre stages, illustrated with scenes and characters based on the conflict in Afghanistan. There are references here to the work of early seventeenth century printmaker Jacques Callot best known for his *Les Grandes Misères de la guerre* series of etchings. The work itself in its overall architecture

is even more reminiscent of Benjamin Pollock's toy theatres. He established his business in the 1880s, his toy theatres being sold in his independent toyshop in Soho even today. In its subject matter and format Hazelwood's work neatly embraces both old and new technologies. The enclosed CD/DVD in the cover sleeves of books, catalogues, travel guides and so on being a common device in contemporary publishing especially for genres that are soaked in information, has made its appearance equally in artists' books such as this one. In our current climate of rapid technological change there is the whole issue of our response to books and reading more generally. It is obvious by now that the often announced demise of print culture in favour of the convenience of its electronic off shoots is vastly exaggerated and that a more complex hybridity and interchange between the two is a far more likely outcome. Over heated techno-enthusiasm is something this exhibition thankfully avoids in favour of more complex fields of activity.

The exhibition also contained a darkened room to one side of the central space showing a somewhat enigmatic work from The Book Art Museum based in Poland. It was called *Czarna Dziura (Black Hole) 2015*, inspired by Malevich, his students and associates in Unovis. This group was concerned with new types of structures for art with practical intent and application including books and graphic projects. It is interesting to note that boundaries between disciplines seem more porous in Eastern Europe than in the West. This raises a final point regarding the taxonomies of art education, training and praxis. Book art manifests and sits at an interface between disciplines like fine art, printmaking, sculpture, critical practices, graphic design, literature, typography, illustration, polemic and politics. In a period of uncertain change this will have implications not just for the organisation of Art Schools and their curricula in the University but also in activities their graduates move on to such as publishing, art organisational work, gallery and museum practice. Book arts including that peculiarity 'the artist's book,' will surely be at the centre of that. *Peter Seddon*, June 2016

Peter Seddon is an artist/curator/writer. He has published a number of articles and books on a variety of topics mostly concerned with history and historiography and has curated a number of exhibition/museum interventions in Britain and France. He has a long standing interest in image/text based work and in his role as a Reader in Visual Art Practices at the University of Brighton, chaired



Sarah Stengle, *Remorse Code*, 2015, glass, rubber, vinyl.
Photograph: Petronella Ytsma, 2015



Kahn & Selesnik, *The Truppe Fledermaus*, 2010 – 2015. Photograph: Kahn & Selesnik

a day symposium on the artist's book held at the University in 2010. A broader view of his work and practice can be found at:
www.peterseddonartistcuratorwriter.weebly.com

References

1. Johanna Drucker's book *The Century of Artists' Books* is now back in print and once again available but readers can source the outline of her ideas provided in the book's first chapter at www.arts.ucsb.edu (accessed 17th June 2016).

2. Information about this society and its publications can be found at the Jaffe Center for Book Arts, Florida Atlantic University Libraries. See www.library.fau.edu (accessed 22nd June 2016)

Press & Release 2016 is the third in a series of innovative, immersive exhibitions at Phoenix Brighton that celebrate artists' books. Conceived and developed by Karin Mori (curator) and Ben Thomson (exhibition design) in 2008, *Press & Release* explores the many facets of artists' books and provides a platform for the artists and collectives who are devoted to this rich and diverse area of contemporary art practice.

Press & Release exhibition archive:
<https://www.phoenixbrighton.org/events/press-release-2016>

Press & Release 2013 archive:
<https://www.phoenixbrighton.org/archive/2013-2/press-release>

Press & Release 2008 archive:
https://www.phoenixbrighton.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/exhibitions_2008.pdf

Located in the heart of the city, Phoenix Brighton is the largest organisation of its kind in the southeast of England. It runs an exhibition programme distinguished by a pioneering approach to working with curators and exploring new models for curatorial practice. Established in 1995 as an arts charity, Phoenix Brighton also runs 120+ artists' studios and a programme of education and public events. www.phoenixbrighton.org