

The Book's Bounds

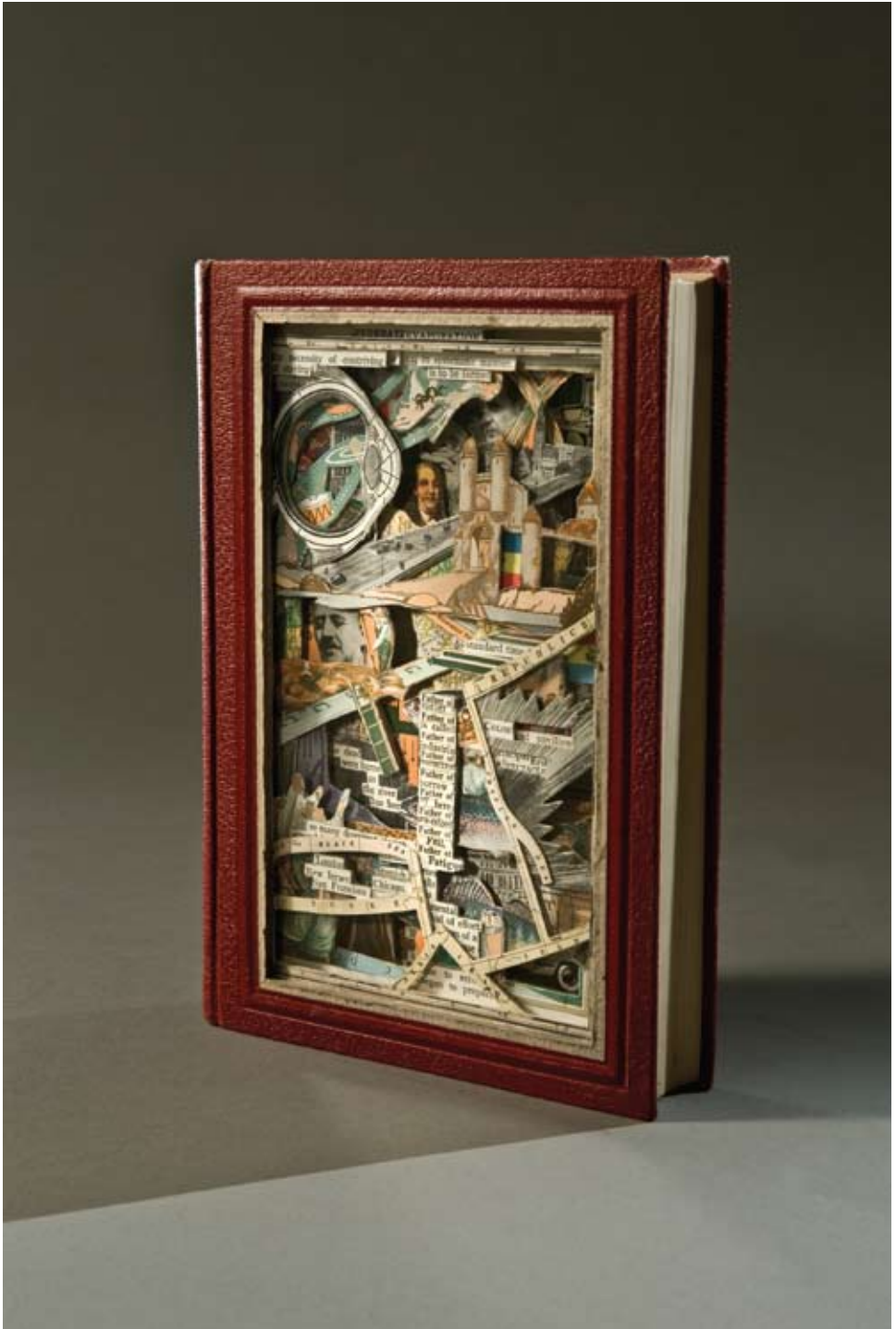
Craig Saper, Ph.D
UCF English Department

What is a Book?

Artists' books challenge us to rethink our reading of the book as a form and as a conceptual tool. Johanna Drucker has called the twentieth-century the century of artists' book, and she notes, in the conclusion to the book by that title, that the emergence of electronic forms have steadily increased artists' book production, and created new possibilities, rather than spelled the Book's last hurrah. The artists' books that emerged in the twentieth century, as opposed to the collectible deluxe editions and illustrated books, called *livre d'artiste*, stress the integration of the material structure and form with thematic and aesthetic issues. This exhibit looks at one variant of artists' books: the sculptural book. The exhibit includes a wide range of works along the spectrum from sculptures that reference books to books that reference movement and shape beyond the bound page and codex form. Including works that



ANIK VINAY (French) and **ERIC MACLOSE** (French)
Pour l'infant, 1999
Wood, bronze and paper, 24 x 3½ x 3½ inches



BRIAN DETTMER (American)
Encyclopedia Series, Engraving to Harlow, 2008
Altered book, 3¼ x 2½ x ½ inches

might ultimately not fall within our definition of sculptural artists' book allows the works to have a dialogue among themselves and the reader-as-art-gallery-visitor. The works challenge our notions of what constitutes a book, reading, and the future of literacy.

If one of the thematics of a book involves unfolding narrative in a dimensional object with print, then can one suggest narrative without a codex? A few of the works in this exhibit push on that boundary of the book structure or form. If reading can include visual and semantic aspects, then precisely what ratio determines when a sculpture becomes a book or when it functions as a sculpture alluding to books?

The codex form of books now seems unnecessary because one can read on a computer or on some electronic reader. Artists books may suggest ways that the book will change in the future, not just the type of content or internal forms, but also, and eventually more importantly, the object itself. We assume, with the introduction of a couple of dedicated electronic readers, that the form will become a hand-held tablet. This exhibit asks us to think about other possibilities perhaps outside the easily marketable familiar reader and the complacent habits of readers.

Books have more to offer than 25 lines to a page of words.



CLARK COOLRIDGE (American)
On the Slates, 1992
Leather shoe with paper, 3½ x 11½ x 4 inches



EUGENIO MICCINI (Italian)
Ex Libris, 1981
Wood, paper, and Plexiglas, 6 x 11¼ x 4¾ inches

x-libris or ex libris?

The play among words, or the lexical in general, and design can create new possibilities for reading. These works are not easier to read, not more accessible, but rather change the very rules and constraints of what constitutes reading. The works include what F.W. Marinetti called "the sonorous but abstract expression of an emotion or a pure thought" (185) and allows for, what a book arts scholar describes as, "the extralexical" that creates "undeniable and absorbing meanings" (501).

The sculptural book enters the virtual digital realm with works like holopoetry sculptures, virtual books online, or other virtual reality textual spaces. The texts appear in a virtual (and physically impossible) space contained or displayed in the holographic sculptures or virtual realities that one must walk around to see the unfolding poetry.

One can appreciate the sculptural book as a precursor to future reading machines -- perhaps not hand-held, but spatial, sculptural, and dependent on the place of the reader's body. One can appreciate the sculptural book as a precursor to the virtual or holographic texts. Finally, and most importantly one can appreciate these works as part of the tradition of two overlapping arts: book and sculpture -- some might be on the side of sculpture (where the semantic content is not integrated or in dialogue with the structural form) or on the side of the book (in which the text does not refer to its three-dimensionality, material form, or to the position of the reader).



TOM PHILLIPS (British)
Miami Beach More Than a Million Poems, 1986
Wood, ink and felt, 10½ x 6 x 6 inches

Which works in this exhibit function as sculptural books? Which ones work as *livre d'artiste*? Which ones are sculptures that allude to books? In which ones can you read a narrative? In which ones can you read an idea or concept about books, social issues, or everyday life? The book and collecting of books still has many openings. The exhibit *opens the book* and *leaves the answers* to you, the reader.

Marinetti, F. T. "Destruction of Syntax," (1913) trans. R.W. Flint, and Cayley, John, "Writing (Under-)Sky: On Xu Bing's *Tianshu*," both in Rothenberg, Jerome and Clay, Steven. 2000. *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing*. New York City: Granary Books.



SARAH FIRMIN (British)
Computer Buch from a *Library of Strange Books*. London, 1988
Altered book, 7 x 9 x ½ inches



Photo by Craig Saper