

## Craft & Conceptual Art: Reshaping the Legacy of Artists' Books

Edited by Megan N. Liberty  
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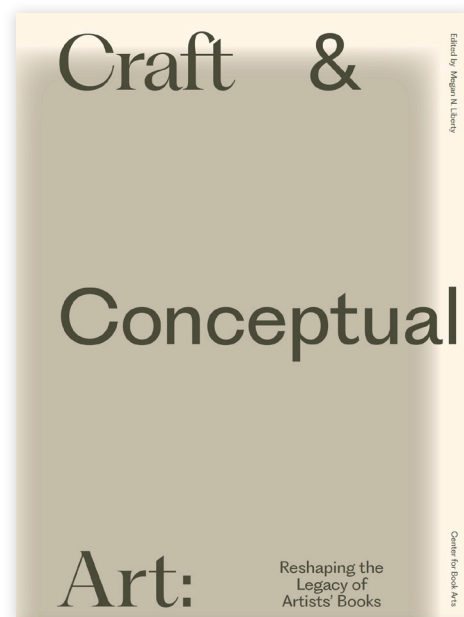
Reviewed by Christopher M. Reeves

**CRAFT & CONCEPTUAL ART:** *Reshaping the Legacy of Artists' Books* is the accompanying catalog for a traveling exhibition of the same name, and explores in greater detail the show's larger thematic concern: artist books that exist in the seemingly incompatible networks of craft and conceptual art. Like its parent exhibition, the catalog aims to reconcile this divide by positing the artist book (as well as its makers and dedicated institutions) as a form that can pay equal attention to the potency of conceptual art benchmarks—for example, dematerialization, ephemerality, and process—and the formal preciousness of craft. While vanguard notions of idea art translated into meticulously fabricated, artist-produced books or journals have existed since at least the early twentieth century (see Dada and Surrealism), *Craft & Conceptual Art* covers artist books from around the early 1960s to the mid-1990s. On account of this, much of the material discussed and shown in this catalog was made during Conceptualism's halcyon days of the 1970s and '80s, a time that coincided with the founding of now legendary book art institutions such as Printed Matter, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and Franklin Furnace.

The catalog explores major themes and developments around the relationship of artist books to conceptual art and crafts through three broad sections: commissioned essays, archival interviews and materials, and photoreproductions of artist books from the exhibition. Of the collected essays, Kayleigh Perkov's "Slipping off the Pink-Collar: The Feminist Subversion of Photocopier Technology circa 1965–1980" and Tara Aisha Willis's "Performance and the Page: The Instructional Score and Conceptual Bookmaking" are particularly generative in moving the thesis of craft and conceptual reconciliation through artist books into more expansive terrain. Perkov locates the Xerox machine, ubiquitous in postwar offices across the United States, as a symbol of gendered labor. The copy machine was largely handled by, but also displaced, the enormous influx of female clerical workers in the postwar workplace. Perkov notes that the creative repurposing of the copy machine's function by artists was a way to counter or comment on automation's alienating effects, and uses Barbara T. Smith's "Coffin" series (1965–67) and Sas Colby's *Lifebook: 1939–1976* (1976–77) as exemplars.

Willis's text is notable for its focus on the work of Benjamin Patterson and Alison Knowles, foundational figures in the Fluxus group who have only very recently gotten overdue art historical attention. Both Patterson and Knowles crafted performances from verbal text instructions that could be collected in book format. Discussed here are the former's *Methods and Processes* (1962), which was self-published, and the latter's by Alison Knowles (1965), published by Dick Higgins's Great Bear/Something Else Press. Willis discusses the possibilities of scores in these collections, as well as in Knowles's more formally ambitious Bean Rolls series, and their potential to serve as objects for activation in their hermeneutic propositions—re-performance by readers—and draw the reader in with their formal properties as book objects.

While it is refreshing to read a text that largely focuses on the work of Patterson and Knowles (there are also a few paragraphs dedicated to *Mariana Valencia's Album* (2019)



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as a contemporary heir), the author misses an opportunity to discuss these works in their historical context. At the time of their inceptions, Patterson's and Knowles's scores were published and re-performed less from Methods or by than from Fluxus editions. Patterson's decision to self-publish and Knowles's appearance in Higgins's "cheap offset" pamphlet branch of his larger, more exorbitant Something Else Press editions means something for the why of their given book forms. These self-publishing endeavors were a means for Fluxus adjacent artists to assert some independence over Maciunas' generous but occasionally imposing design and authorial overreach with Fluxus editions.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the importance of these particular score collections relative to the (admittedly far more thematically appropriate to this exhibition on conceptual book forms and craft) Fluxus book editions published and designed by George Maciunas could alert the reader to ways Patterson and Knowles so often exceed the Fluxus category in their own published book work (particularly Knowles's *Big Book* (1967) and *Book of Bean* (1981)).

The archival interviews and materials complement the commissioned texts in an almost annotative way, bookending each writer's thematic essay with historically salient material. These interviews and materials are one of the most attractive elements of the catalog, providing indispensable reading and resources for those interested in the more granular aspects of artist book-making. Excerpts of interviews and ephemera culled from the Center for Book Arts' publication *Book Art Review* and the Franklin Furnace and Center for Book Arts archives, as well as transcripts from remarks given at book art conferences, provide the reader with a sprawling look at the various ways in which individual artists and thinkers approach the line between concept and craft in their book works through a range of voices, from mainstays like Charles Harrison to the oft-overlooked Reginald Walker.

The photo documentation is as generous as possible. Attempting to provide the reader with an image of an object that exists to be handled, read, experienced, or altered will always make for a difficult translation. Nonetheless, the documentation functions like much of the catalog does, providing an access point through which interested readers might continue their own research, exposing them to lesser-known book artists or compelling them to visit a local special collection to view a copy of one of the books

photographed. In this regard, the catalog is exemplary, an introductory manual that provokes and inspires as much as it exists as a record of an exhibition.

Given the myriad detours, individual expressions, and mostly 1970s–80s archival ephemera, I am not sure the catalog will convince anyone already interested or academically engaged that it is doing anything so holistic as "reshaping the legacy of artists books." By their formal virtues, or at the very least in their nomenclature, artist books exist as formal responses, a subcategory of "book" meant to exceed that category. This quality is what makes the artist book exceptional, but like any form designed to push the boundaries of the possible, it also makes questions of "legacy" difficult to contend with. Legacy questions are most often taken up by the academically interested, which is largely the audience for this catalog (although the casually interested will find something compelling in its pages). However, the catalog's central and admirable provocation is broad enough to be taken up by anyone interested, from academics to the book artist at a copy machine with a stapler: What is it that artist books do?

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#### NOTE

1. For more on the distinction between Fluxus and Something Else Press publications see, Chris Reeves, "Alloturgies in the Annex: Something Else Press and the Fluxus Mode of Production," *Counter Signals* No.2, ed. Jack Henrie Fisher, 2017. [https://www.academia.edu/35109693/Alloturgies\\_in\\_the\\_Annex\\_Something\\_Else\\_Press\\_and\\_the\\_Fluxus\\_Mode\\_of\\_Production](https://www.academia.edu/35109693/Alloturgies_in_the_Annex_Something_Else_Press_and_the_Fluxus_Mode_of_Production).