Detail from The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, *a carousel book by Emily Martin.*

FROM THE EDITOR: BOOK WORK / SOCIAL WORK

by Peter J. Tanner

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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THE FRAMEWORKS WE USE TO MAKE sense of the world determine everything we perceive and how we comprehend these observations, but the structures of these frameworks are simultaneously the strictures that bind us. When we are bound, we might not make the best choices, especially when those choices are determined by artificial and arbitrary alternatives that leave out many other possible choices and opportunities.

However, what happens when we apply these concepts to our life and work in the book arts? What does choice have to do with making or analyzing works of book artistry? Lately I have been reading critical theory about photography, and I cannot help but be struck by the parallels between the mechanical nature of photographic image capture and the mechanical nature of book creation. One important article in the history of photography, "Camera Work/Social Work" by Alan Trachtenberg,[1] is particularly relevant to the current moment. In this article, Trachtenberg contrasts the photographic work of Alfred Stieglitz, who is primarily thought of as an artist, and Lewis Hine, who is commonly considered a documentarian motivated by social activism. There are a number of questions germane to the book arts raised in the context of photography in this article, the most salient of which is whether the book arts should focus upon the technically aesthetic or the socially relevant. The answer should be that they work hand in hand and that this dichotomy is artificial and arbitrary.

Openings: STUDIES IN BOOK ART

The artist book, as a medium and practice, values change, experimentation, and freedom. It serves the public by questioning and breaking old rules and founding new ones, as if in an aesthetic laboratory. The inquisitive and interrogative nature of this art form is one that postulates new paradigms equally relevant for both new aesthetic expressions and changing social patterns.

When we grapple with the definition of the artist book, we are continuing to wrestle with claims that engage and participate in the vagaries of the aesthetic "legislation of what is and is not art."[2] This overriding question seems to isolate the artist book from its potential as an art object with a social function. Thus, the preoccupation with its incorporation within the canon confirms the hegemony of the discourses that surround the historic and contemporary importance of art and, by extension, book art. The push to place the artist book within the canon, thus sanctioning and containing it within the frameworks of cultural institutions and academies, is actually counterintuitive to its history as a conceptual object whose initial intent was to eschew the materialist nature of the art market and official canon-dom. Therefore, "tradition" is an unreliable guide to this medium's history.

One definition—for artist publications rather than artist books—provided by the Centre for Artists' Publications at the Weserburg Museum für moderne Kunst in Weserberg, Germany, states, "Artists' publications are thus also manifestations of information and communication."[3] If this definition is applied consistently, all works of printing by artists can be considered artist publications. Michalis Pichler, in his anthology, *Publishing Manifestos* (2019), chooses instead the more open term, "Publishing or publications as an umbrella term," in order to "include any form of circulating information, including books, zines, loose-leaf collections, flyers, e-books, blog posts, social media, and hybrids, as long as they are (or are meant to be) viewed or read by multiple audiences."[4] It is a brilliant way to open up the genre, making it more inclusive. Nevertheless, both positions will ultimately "fall into the mindless pluralism of anything goes."[5] Further, they overlook the distinction that not all artist publications are books. The ideologies of inclusivity and genre deconstruction fail to account for the needs of metadata to separate, detail, and classify objects. When overly inclusive definitions dissolve what should be obvious distinctions, say that between a print and a book, the need for specificity becomes more apparent.

Regardless of the metadata issues involved with these definitions, it can clearly be seen that both lines of thought lead back to taxonomies of the canon within fine art, connecting to a centuries-long discourse of what is and is not included. At the same time, they attempt to open up the canon through the use of overly inclusive umbrella terms. It appears, at least to me, to be a kind of doublespeak, acknowledging difference, but disavowing the difference of that difference.

While there is no record of such taxonomic debates happening in reference to painting, there is a clear historical precedent in the discipline of photography. The photograph has varyingly been viewed as both artistic and not artistic because it is captured directly from nature, by the "pencil of light"[6] and using a mechanical means that, because of its scientific nature, is theoretically free of any mediation by the artist's mind and hand (though that is also understood to never have been the case, due to the fact that the photographic recording process has always been crafted by the eye of the photographer selecting what does and does not fall within the recording field of their impartial device). This long debate took approximately a century to finalize and is well documented in many of the various

histories of photography. Which brings us back to Stieglitz and Hine and whether or not the mechanized reproduction of art is conducive to technically aesthetic work and social work functioning in unison.

The history of book art is still under construction. Therefore, the desire to receive institutional recognition has dominated the culture and explains the constant need to define and redefine what book art is—and is not—in order to facilitate its inclusion in the canonical histories of art.

Books have always performed a social function as tools of instruction, indoctrination, and education. They have also contributed to cultural labors to justify racism, eugenics, and racial superiority, as well as to maintain class and social status. As such it must be recognized that this labor performed by books, and by association book art, has done damage to countless individuals throughout history. This is the reasoning behind the need for book work to be social work: to correct, repair, and mitigate the damage done by previous books, making the world a better place.

As a means to address this work, the printed page must be considered as the inheritor of a social history, especially in its attempts to connect to and separate from canon and market forces.

In order to pursue these questions, I am including here some interesting points, which I quote from Trachtenberg and which seem particularly relevant to the social work of the book arts:

> The aim [is] to subordinate the machine, symbol of all that [is] wrong and inhuman in industrial society, to individual will.[7]

> The insistence that "treatment" rather than subject or content mattered most . . . [and] would save art . . . from the fate of unskilled factory laborers chained to the machines by ignorance and surrender of will.[8]

> "The . . . apparatus" . . . can be "pliant tools and not mechanical tyrants." Science, in short, in service to art.[9]

> The signs of style, of individuality, are found on the surface of the print, in its rendering of "tonal-values," and in its "correctness of composition."[10]

> The legibility of . . . [books] as meaningful representations depends upon the specific structures of meaning in which we see them.[11]

We perform our artistic and academic labors within institutional frameworks; there are pressures in our world that require that our art take notice of social conflict. Our outlook should be toward change fostered by enlightened and activated public opinion. This means that we should promote an artistic ideal of the world through book works in order to reshape reality in a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive image. As such, the greatest work that book art can perform is that of illuminating the contradictions between rhetoric and reality.

Detail from Desdemona In Her Own Words, *by Emily Martin.*

When did your heart lose faith
so your ears hear but guilt
and your eyes see not
your loving wife

NOTES

1. Alan Trachtenberg, "Camera Work/Social Work," in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 164–230.

2. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 175.

3. "What Are Artists' Publications?" (Weserburg, Germany). Accessed at weserburg.de/en/centre-for-artists-publications/what-are-artists-publications

4. Michalis Pichler, *Publishing Manifestos: An International Anthology from Artists and Writers* (Berlin/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Miss Read: The Berlin Art Book Fair/The MIT Press, 2019). 15.

5. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, ix.

6. Carol Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography," *October* vol. 76 (Spring 1996): 115–41.

7. Trachtenberg, "Camera Work/Social Work," 182.

8. Ibid., 182.

9. Ibid., 181.

10. Ibid., 181–2.

11. Ibid., 180–1. The word, "books," has been substituted for "photographs" here.