

May 2023

Body Bound

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BODY BOUND

by

Rachel Allison

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in Art History

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2023

ABSTRACT

Body Bound

by

Rachel Allison

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Dr. Jennifer Johung

Body Bound is an exhibition catalog that corresponds to an exhibition of objects on display in the Emile Mathis Gallery that opened on February 23, 2023. The Exhibition traces the historically grounded and long-standing tradition of using bodily material as the basis for bookmaking. This practice has not subsided entirely in its traditional form but has also branched off and informed contemporary book-making practices. Contemporary books, specifically artist books, are a part of a longer history of using and presenting bodies with books. This exhibition includes historical books and contemporary artist books from the UWM special collections as well as the John Michael Kohler Art Foundation. The exhibition is grounded in the larger theoretical study of Bioart, Vital Matter, bookbinding, and artist book making practices.

By tracing the use of bodies as a material for bookmaking historically and asking the viewers to engage with the books as intrinsically related to multiple forms of the body, the exhibition illustrates the relationship between our own our own human bodies, other human and non-human bodies, and the objects around us. It also reevaluates notions of Bioart as a strictly contemporary practice. The relationship between our own bodies and the bodily material of the book becomes more ambiguous, as especially highlighted by contemporary books that use human bodily material. When does a body cease to be a body and what objects do we consider living and why?

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In loving memory of my dad, whom I miss every day, thank you for making me who I am but never telling me who I should be.

And to my mom who gave me life and made everything in it better, lovelier, and more joyful. There is no one better.

And to my brother Tom, my best friend, who supports me always and brings so much laughter to my life.

Finally, to my advisor Jennifer, who was the best advisor I could imagine and who encouraged and inspired me at every step. As well as my second reader Max Yela who provided invaluable feedback, material, and ideas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
Part One	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Grounding Bioart	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bookbinding Practices and the Body	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Exhibition Objects	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Historical Manuscripts	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Body Bound from the Historical into the Contemporary	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Contemporary Artist Book Interpretations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bibliography/Works Cited/References	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix: Exhibition Checklist.....	21

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Italian Manuscript 17 th century	5
Figure 2	Greek List of Names (A-G Sections)	6
Figure 3	<i>Lining</i>	7
Figure 4	<i>Anti-Lepus Journal: Travels With Howard</i>	7
Figure 5	<i>Im-'ped-e-ment</i>	8
Figure 6	<i>Body of Text</i>	9
Figure 7	<i>Biblio Tech: Reverse Engineering Historical and Modern Binding Structures with a Focus on Board Attachment</i>	9
Figure 8	<i>The Alder: A Poem by William Everson</i>	10
Figure 9	<i>An Alphabet Book</i>	11
Figure 10	<i>Beach Finds</i>	12
Figure 11	<i>Schengen's Kit: Rules and Advices for Survival of Refugees at Sea</i>	13
Figure 12	<i>Surrogate # 2, female and # 5, male</i>	14
Figure 13	Untitled Stella Waitzkins	15
Figure 14	<i>Burn</i>	16
Figure 15	<i>2nd Stage</i>	16
Figure 16	<i>The Index</i>	17
Figure 17	<i>Table of Contents with Appendix</i>	18

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to UWM's Special Collections library, especially Max Yela, for providing so many amazing objects as well as guidance, time, and opportunities for growth.

Also, to the Kohler Foundation, especially Annalise Flynn, for providing me with a wonderful internship opportunity and for lending me the beautiful Stella Waitzkin book.

Thank you to Leigh Mahlik, David Pacifico, and all of the Emile E. Mathis gallery staff, especially Mirel Crumb.

Thank you to the Jeffrey R. Hayes Graduate Research Award for funding this exhibition.

Finally, thank you Jennifer Johung, my advisor who is an immense inspiration to me both personally and academically. Thank you for the unwavering support and bountiful flow of ideas and dialogue.

But I know that I am living. I live, the way numbers live, and the stars; the way tanned hide ripped from the belly of the animal lives, and nylon rope; the way any object lives, in communion with others.

-Olga Ravn, The Employees

Introduction

The exhibition will trace the historically grounded and long-standing tradition of using bodily material as the basis for bookmaking. This practice has not subsided entirely in its traditional form but has also branched off and informed contemporary book-making practices. Contemporary books, specifically artist books, are a part of a longer history of using and presenting bodies with books. Some of the contemporary artist books use bodily material while others allude to it and use the book as a form to express a body of bodies.

To showcase the relationship between historical book-making with bodily materials and contemporary books, I will be utilizing the extensive book and manuscript collection from UWM's Special Collections library. These books start with a collection of historical manuscripts bound in various animal skins and move on to contemporary artist books. The installation will start with the historical books and discuss the traditions of using bodily material. There will be some transitional books that more literally utilize bodily materials before moving into artist books that reimagine them as a tool for expressing the body.

Grounding Bioart

Much of the existing research does not delve into the relationship between the history of bodily material and books. In 2010 Tagny Duff created books made of still-living material called The Cryobook Archivesⁱ. In many ways, this exhibit is in conversation with that project but uses a more historically focused lens to trace the long-standing relationship between books and bodies. This exhibition will also be in communion and conversation with contemporary Bioart practices. Bioart is deeply contemporary and can feel unfamiliar and unsettling but the implications of Bioart touch practices across time and space. Bioart need not be relegated only to the contemporary and laboratory practices it has far-reaching roots in historical practices across disciplines. The term Bioart was coined in 1997 by Eduardo Kac. Kac defines Bioart creation in his introduction to the book *Signs of Life* saying, “Bioart employs one or more of the following approaches “(1) the coaching of biomaterials into specific inert shapes or behaviors; (2) the unusual or subversive use of biotech tools and processes; (3) the invention or transformation of living organisms with or without social or environmental integration”ⁱⁱ Bioartists’ materials include living tissue, embryos, and plant and animal DNA. Bioartists use these materials in combination with various biotechnical interventions to create and manipulate living forms. In contemporary Bioart the living nature of the object or thing produces is sacrosanct.

This exhibition however looks at the ways in which Bioart principles and ways of making have long been a part of the book-making tradition and in the history of objects in ways that may be subtler to us. In her theory of *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett explores the powerful role of non-human materials in our lives. Bennet uses the term “thing-power” to illustrate the roles of objects in everyday life and “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle”ⁱⁱⁱ Objects are on varying levels alive and have the ability to affect the world

around them. In this exhibit the objects are all books and their thing- power lies not only in their roles as books but also in their materiality. All books are made from materials that were once living: plant, animal, and in some case human genetic materials.

Bookbinding Practices and the Body

In the history of books animal skin predated paper and was the predominant surface for bookmaking in the western world up until the late middle ages.^{iv} The use of animal skins as a writing surface can be traced back as early as 2500 B.C.E. Writing surfaces made from animal skin include parchment and vellum. Both parchment and vellum are used today in luxury books, artistic practices, and in the making of religious texts specifically the Torah.^v Leather and hides from various animals have long been a popular book covering. Marion Kite and Roy Thomson describe tanning as man's first manufacturing process.⁸ Vellum is more smooth and harder than leather. According to Oxford Art Online vellum only refers to calf skin but it is often used incorrectly to describe parchment which can be made from any animal skin including lambs.^{vi} Leather is made from the preserved and tanned hides of animals. Through the tanning process leather transforms the skins and hides from three layers to one. Leather types can be determined by the hair follicle patterns these hair follicle holes are in the corium layer.^{vii} The two categories of leather are those that are made from hides and those made from skins. Hides refer to material taken from larger animals like buffaloes whereas skins, which are more common in bookmaking, are taken from smaller animals like goats, pigs, and sheep.^{viii} While the process of tanning the hides to make leather does stagnate the decaying process, leather in many ways still possesses qualities associated with living material. Leather "breathes", adapts to temperature shifts, and adjusts to humidity as it releases and absorbs moisture. It is these qualities coupled with its durability that make it an ideal book covering. Even when removed from

the body leather still functions in the way it does on the body; it incases what is inside, protects it, and binds it together.

The last two sections of objects in this show specifically center artist books. Artists' books are largely undervalued as art objects and are subsequently highly under researched. In her study of artists' books, *The Century of Artists' Book*, Johanna decker posits that not only are artists' books the quintessential artform of the twentieth century they also "...appear in every major movement in art and literature and have provided a unique means of realizing works within all of the many avant-garde, experimental, and independent groups whose contributions have defined the shape of 20th-century artistic activity."^{ix} The artists' books featured reveal how artists are not only able to draw from historical book binding practices while expanding upon them but also how the book can express the body through shared terminologies, material configurations, and shapes.

Exhibition Objects

Historical Manuscripts

The first section of this exhibition will showcase these more historical forms of bookmaking with bodily material to ground the connection between books and bodies.

The first manuscript a 17th-century choir manuscript from Italy (fig. 2), presents bodily material on a grand scale. This book is more than two feet tall and over a foot and a half wide. The book's binding is sheepskin and the pages inside are vellum. The verso side of each page is smooth while the outside shows the follicle pattern of the animal and is rougher. The front and back cover of this book would have used the entire torso of a sheep to make. This manuscript uses bodily material both within and without the book and its immense scale alludes to the body from whence it came.



Figure 1: Italian Choir Manuscript 1600-1699 68 cm Leather-bound, brass fittings, 72 folios of vellum pages On loan from UWM Special Collections

A much smaller, but materially impactful book, features the uterine fetal skin of an animal, likely a sheep. (fig.2) This is the oldest object in the UWM special collections. This manuscript's pages are incredibly smooth and have no visible follicles as the animal was still in utero. This manuscript goes beyond the use of a fully formed living animal's skin as a material and uses the genetic material of a living but still forming animal.



Figure 2: Alphabetical List of Names (A-G Section) c.1225 C.E. Fetal sheep skin pages On loan from UWM Special Collections

This historical section of the exhibition will also feature a selection of other texts that display a range of materials including sheepskin, calfskin, leather, and pigskin.

Body Bound from the Historical into the Contemporary

The books featured in this transitional section of this show are contemporary artist books that utilize the once living material from a body as medium to facilitate their bookmaking practice. While these books are made in ways that are inventive and often beyond the scope of historical bookbinding the construction, material choices, and relationship to the body are grounded in the historical.

The first artist book displayed in this section is *Lining* by Denise Bookwalter and Lee Emma Running. *Lining* is an artist book that focuses on the relationship between skin and fabric. Like its historical predecessors, this book is housed in the bodily material of an animal, in this case, a birch wood cover lined with rabbit fur.(fig.3) Similarly, *Anti-Lepus Journal: Travels with Howard* by Elsi Vassdal Ellis is bound in rabbit fur but tells the tale of a quest for a mythical bunny.(fig.4)

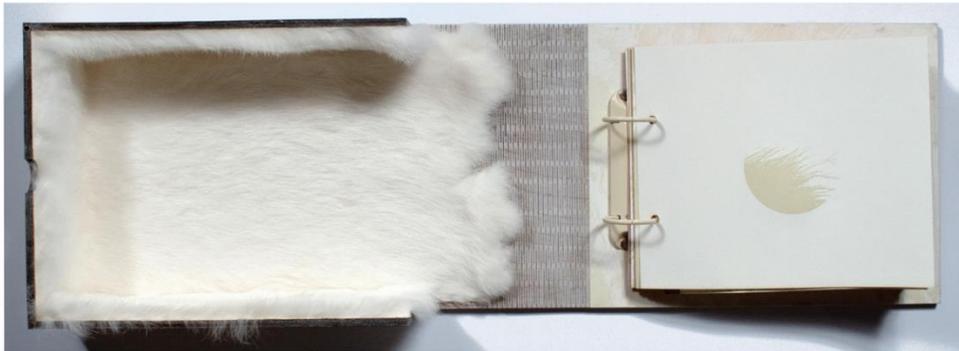


Figure 3: *Lining* Denise Bookwalter and Lee Emma Running 2013 35 cm Birch plywood, rabbit fur, felt, ripstop nylon, satin, silky solid polyester, and knit jersey. On loan from UWM Special Collections



Figure 4: *Anti-Lepus Journal: Travels with Howard* Elsi Vassdal Ellis 2006 22 cm rabbit fur On loan from UWM Special Collections

Im-'ped-e-ment by Cheri Gaulke (fig.5) is another artist book that uses historically grounded book-making traditions but expands them into the artist's own practice. Almost all writing surfaces are made from once-living material, be it the skin of an animal or the organic material of a tree. The paper used in *Im-'ped-e-ment* is handmade by the artist and contains their toenails and hair in addition to plant seeds. The use of this bodily material compliments the content of the book which explores the abuse of women's feet from Chinese foot binding to high heeled shoes.

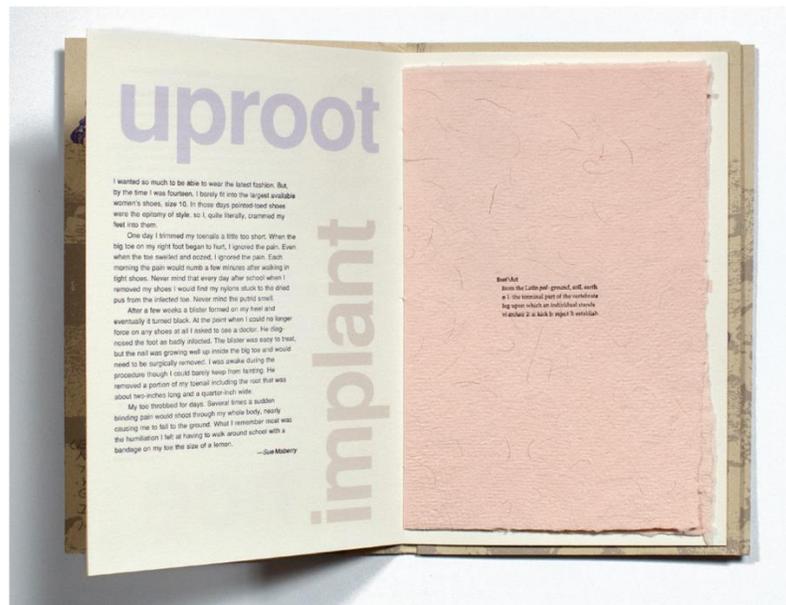


Figure 5: *Im-'ped-e-ment* Cheri Gaulke 1991 25 cm Handmade paper with artist's toenails and hair, seed envelopes On loan from UWM Special Collections

Body of text (fig.6) contains photographs of bodies and the text of the book is written on the bodies. While the bodies and their material remain living and physically separate from the book the body is being used by the artist as a surface in the digital age.

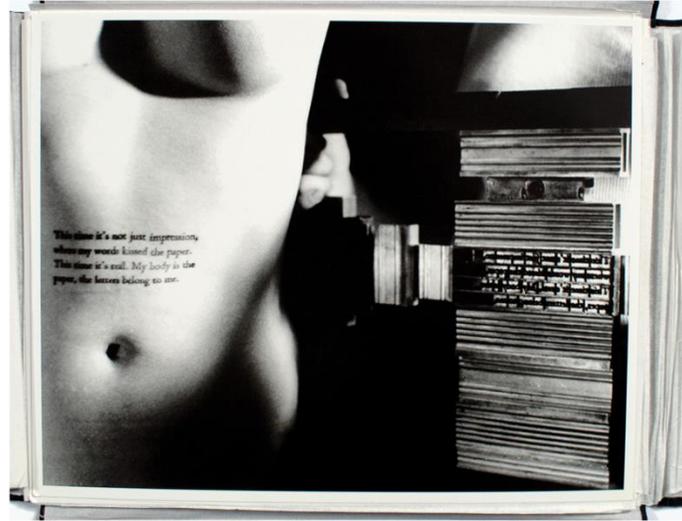


Figure 6: Body of Text text and printing Kelly Wellman and Madeleine Zygarewicz photography by Xochitl Oliva 2000 27 cm Photographs of human bodies with text printed on them, artist paper On loan from UWM Special Collections

Biblio Tech: Reverse Engineering Historical and Modern Binding Structures with a Focus on Board Attachment (fig. 7) by Karen Hanmer by Karen Hanmer is a set that consists of twelve various binding models. The models are made so that different historical bookbinding methods are visible and the construction methods can be seen. There are only two of thirteen on display in this show and those are both models wrapped in leather. Biblio tech allows us to see how the manuscripts from the first section were bound and also allows us to see what a clean leather binding looks like.



Figure 7: Biblio Tech: Reverse Engineering Historical and Modern Binding Structures with a Focus on Board Attachment Karen Hanmer 2013 Leather, various paper, sewing supports, wooden boards, and museum board On loan from UWM Special Collections

The Alder: A Poem by William Everson (fig.8) was made into this artist book by Peter and Donna Thomas. The contents of the poem by Everson is a source of inspiration for many of the material and visual choices made by Thomas in this book. The book is bound in alder wood in reference to the title and subject of the poem. This wood was also sourced from a tree near Everson's home. The Alder bound in alder is housed in a fine lapped pig skin envelope that features quite clearly the triangular follicle pattern unique to pigs. The limp leather lets the skin remain in a state that is more natural and similar to the way it would have been when it was attached to a body. The distinct follicle pattern lets us know the body of the animal that this skin came from. Like the alder used to bind the book recalls the alder featured in the poem the leather of the envelope recalls the body of the animal from where it was sourced.



Figure 8: *The Alder: A Poem by William Everson* Peter and Donna Thomas 2012 33 cm Limp pigskin envelope, cloth covered clamshell box, handmade paper, alder wood On loan from UWM Special Collections

Finally, *An Alphabet Book* (fig. 9) by Susan K. Grant is a collection of 26 original black and white photographic prints each of which corresponds to a letter in the alphabet. For each letter, the photograph contains a portrait of things that start with that letter including people and human body parts. The book itself is bound in un-dehaired black and white cowhide. The large scale and full hair present in this book's binding make it impossible for a viewer to forget where this binding came from. One cannot view *An Alphabet Book* without being called to remember the body it is bound in.



Figure 9: *An Alphabet Book* Susan K. Grant 1979 46 cm Underhaired black and white cowhide On loan from UWM Special Collections

Contemporary Artist Book Interpretations

The artists whose work will be shown in the contemporary section are all expanding the notions of what a book is but they are still engaging with traditional book-making practices and are also using the book as a tool to express a vast scope of bodily forms and different understandings of what life is.

The First of the featured books is *Beach Finds* (fig.10) by Geo Lynn Rutherford. *Beach Finds* is comprised of a homemade box that houses forty vintage test tubes. The box functions as the binding of the book and is even inscribed inside with a colophon.^x The test tubes act as individual pages. The test tubes are filled with both natural and unnatural material the artist gathered on the Lake Michigan beaches. These materials include the bodily materials of insects, birds, and other animals.

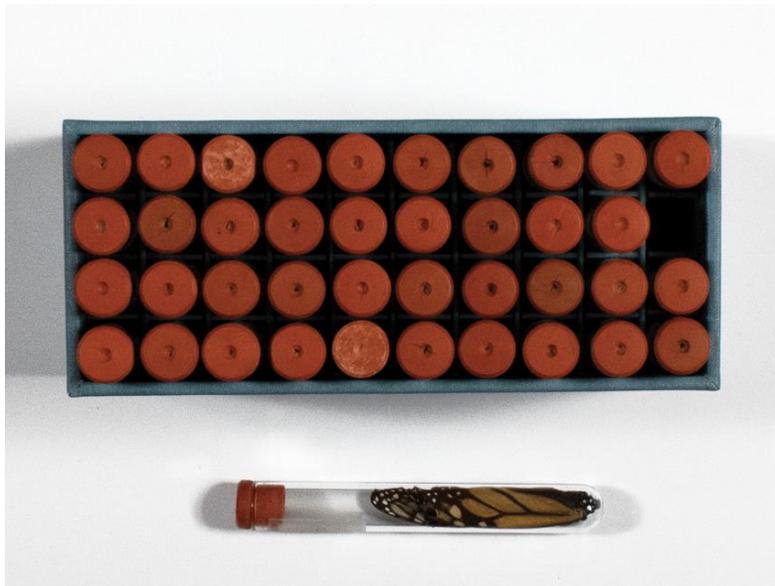


Figure 20: *Beach Finds* Geo Lynn Rutherford 2020 18 cm Vintage test tubes, natural and unnatural material collected from Lake Michigan on Bradford Beach On loan from UWM Special Collections

The next artist book is *Schengen's Kit: Rules and Advices for Survival of Refugees at Sea: Instructions on a Funeral Body Bag in a Plastic Envelope* (fig.11) by Christine Kermaire is a book that as you unfold its pages you realize they are encased in a body bag. As you read through Schengen's Kit the body bag unfolds. The video installation of Schengen's kit would show the individual pages and the unfolding process on a loop so that viewers can see the entire reading process. While Kermaire doesn't overtly utilize bodily material the use of a body bag as the binding for her book engage with the traditions of using bodily material as book bindings. The absence of the body in the bag highlights the times in which a body is present in books.

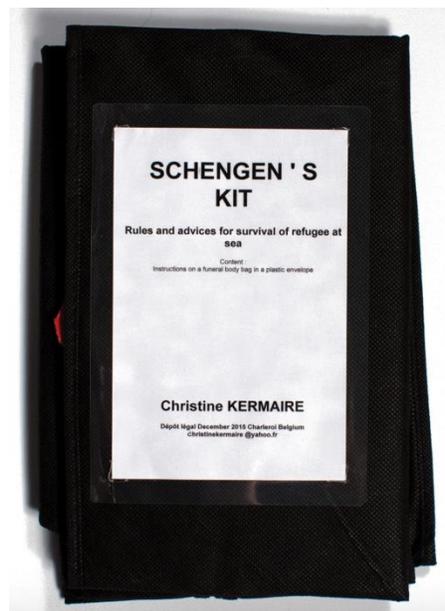


Figure 31: Schengen's Kit: Rules and Advices for Survival of Refugees at Sea Christine Kermaire 2015 153 cm Black cloth body bag, red cloth poppies, laminated text panels On loan from UWM Special Collections

Surrogate #5, male, and *Surrogate #2*, (fig. 12) female, by Jessica Poor are both books that take the form of a body. The book in this case, as the title suggests, is a surrogate for an actual book. The binding of the book is made of a box that acts as a torso for the attached doll's head, arms, and legs. The box or torso of this book opens up for a scroll to unravel. In *Surrogate #5* the book is literally bound inside a body.



Figure 42: Surrogate # 5, (right) male Jessica Poor 2006 31 cm Doll parts, velum, cigar box, found paper and ephemera On loan from UWM Special Collections and Surrogate # 2,(left) female Jessica Poor 2007 31 cm Doll parts, velum, cigar box, found paper and ephemera On loan from UWM Special Collections

This untitled polyester resin book (fig. 13) was created by Stella Waitzkin. Waitzkin was a New York-based artist. In her youth, she studied under Willem de Koonig. In the 1960's Stella began working with what would become her primary object of focus the book. This book is one of many created by Stella and installed on shelves and bookcases many of which were installed in her Chelsea Hotel apartment. Stella created these books by casting old leather-bound volumes and using those molds to create her resin books. She often included other objects in her casting usually depictions of living things such as birds, fruit, and most commonly- human faces. This specific work features two full-size figures that are cast in the resin. While most of these objects are representations of living Stella's son did recount a story of her encasing a dead bird in one of her resin books. Stella's books tell stories not with words but with the lifelike objects that are bound within the resin.^{xi}



Figure 53: Untitled Stella Waitzkins n.d. 31 cm Polyester resin On loan from The Kohler Foundation

Burn (Fig. 14) by Lisa Beth Robinson is a book that explored Robinson's mother's painful fight against breast cancer and her experience with harsh cancer treatments. Robinson explores how growing up with a mother with only one breast post-mastectomy affected her relationship and view of her own body. While the cover of *Burn* is made of paper-covered boards with a jagged top edge the front cover has copper breast attached. While the breast is not made of living material the cover of *Burn* is still binding the book with a body part. A single post-mastectomy breast.



Figure 64: Burn Lisa Beth Robinson 2014 16 cm Paper covered boards, copper breast ornament On loan from UWM Special Collections

2nd Stage (fig. 15) by Linda Wervey Vitamvas is another artist's book that deals with a bodily trauma: birth. *2nd Stage* shows not only the body that gives birth but also the body that is born. *2nd Stage* is made from a cut copy of *Principles and Practices of Obstetrics* (9th ed.) by Joseph De Lee. The book has been cut so that the pages form a yonic opening. To the artist, a former nurse, this harsh cut made in the book was representative forceful nature of birth. Through the opening cut, we can see the anatomical image of a fetus in utero from the original text. The book becomes the body of the person giving birth and it holds another body inside it about to be born.

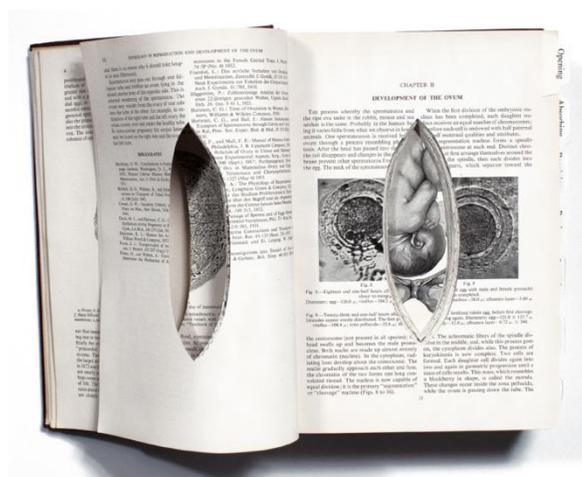


Figure 75: *2nd Stage* Linda Wervey Vitamvas 2006 27 cm Altered textbook On loan from UWM Special Collections

The Index (fig. 16) by Sarah Bryant is a book that folds open both vertically and horizontally. When fully opened *The Index* is five feet six inches in length and is a complete illustration of the human skeleton. Along the skeleton, the text lists the complete anatomical terms for a biologically female body.¹⁶ Bryant uses the human body as not only the subject matter for the text and illustration but makes the book itself on the same scale as an average human female body. The book depicts the human skeleton while occupying the same space an genuine skeleton would.



Figure 86: *The Index* Sarah Bryant 2006 168 cm Paper On loan from UWM Special Collections

Table of Contents with Appendix (fig. 17) by JoAnna Poehlmann is a sculptural artist book. The book takes the form of a table that has been decoupage with the over and over with the word ‘contents.’ The pages of Table of contents with Appendix, which are mounted on an outline of a human abdomen, are anatomical illustrations.^{xiii} These illustrations depict a dissected chest, lungs, intestines, and as the title suggests an appendix. Poehlmann is not only referencing traditional overlays in medical textbooks but is also illustrating the overlap of terminology used to discuss both books and human body parts.

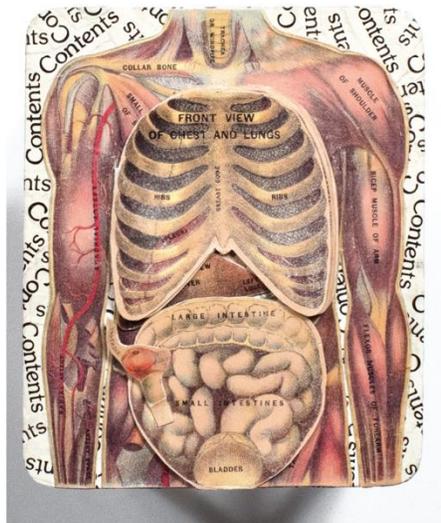


Figure 97: Table of Contents with Appendix JoAnna Poehlmann 1994 18cm Decoupage paper On loan from UWM Special Collections

Conclusion

These books, just like the bodies of the viewer, are housed in a skin. The skin of a once living body keeps the book together much as our own skin houses our living bodies. Through the selection of books on display and through their material natures viewers are asked to consider the communion between their own bodies and the books. By tracing the use of bodies as a material for bookmaking historically and asking the viewers to engage with the books as intrinsically related to multiple forms of the body, the exhibition illustrates the relationship between our own our own human bodies, other human and non-human bodies, and the objects around us. It also reevaluates notions of Bioart as a strictly contemporary practice. The relationship between our own bodies and the bodily material of the book becomes more ambiguous, as especially highlighted by contemporary books that use human bodily material. When does a body cease to be a body and what objects do we consider living and why?

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Appendix: Exhibition Checklist

1. Italian Choir Manuscript

1600-1699

68 cm

Leather-bound, brass fittings, 72 folios of vellum pages

2. Alphabetical List of Names (A-G Section)

c.1225 C.E.

Fetal sheep skin pages

3. Lining

Denise Bookwalter and Lee Emma Running

2013

35 cm

Birch plywood, rabbit fur, felt, ripstop nylon, satin, silky solid polyester, and knit jersey.

4. Im-'ped-e-ment

Cheri Gaulke

1991

25 cm

Handmade paper with toenails and hair, seed envelopes

5. Body of Text

text and printing Kelly Wellman and Madeleine Zygarewicz photography by Xochitl Oliva

2000

27 cm

Photographs of human bodies with text printed on them, artist paper

6. Biblio Tech: Reverse Engineering Historical and Modern Binding Structures with a Focus on Board Attachment

Karen Hanmer

2013

Leather, various paper, sewing supports, wooden boards, and museum board

7. The Alder: A Poem by William Everson

Peter and Donna Thomas

2012

33 cm

Limp pigskin envelope, cloth covered clamshell box, handmade paper, alder wood

8. An Alphabet Book

Susan K. Grant

1979

46 cm

Underhaired black and white cowhide

9. Schengen's Kit: Rules and Advices for Survival of Refugees at Sea

Christine Kermaire

2015

153 cm

Black cloth body bag, red cloth poppies, laminated text panels

10. Surrogate # 2, female

Jessica Poor

2007

31 cm

Doll parts, velum, cigar box, found paper and ephemera

11. Surrogate # 5, male

Jessica Poor

2006

31 cm

Doll parts, velum, cigar box, found paper and ephemera

12. Untitled

Stella Waitzkins

Undated 1960-?

31 cm

Polyester resin

13. Burn

Lisa Beth Robinson

2014

16 cm

Paper covered boards, copper breast ornament

14. 2nd Stage

Linda Wervev Vitamvas

2006

27 cm

Altered textbook

15. Beach Finds

Geo Lynn Rutherford

2020

18 cm

Vintage test tubes, natural and unnatural material collected from Lake Michigan on Bradford Beach

16. The Index

Sarah Bryant
2006
168 cm
Paper

17. Table of Contents with Appendix
JoAnna Poehlmann
1994
18cm
Decoupage paper

Endnotes

ⁱ Tagny Duff, “Project Description Cryobook Archives”, May 7, 2009, <https://cryobookarchives.wordpress.com/project-description/>.

ⁱⁱ Eduardo Kac, “Introduction Art that Looks You in the Eye: Hybrids, Clones, Mutants, Synthetics, and Transgenics,” in *Signs of Life*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 1-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010

^{iv} Leila Avrin, *Scribes, Script and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: American Library Assoc., 1991), 3.

^v Avrin, 112.

^{vi} Marion Kite and Roy Thomson, *Conservation of Leather and Related Materials*. 1st ed. Jordan Hill: Routledge, 2006, 1-3.

^{vii} “Vellum.” Grove Art Online. Accessed May 15, 2022. <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000088541?rskey=Gw277C>.

^{viii} A. (Alfred) Seymour-Jones, Cyril Davenport, F. J Williamson, E. Wyndham Hulme, and J. Gordon (James Gordon) Parker. *Leather for Libraries*. Project Gutenberg, n.d

^{ix} Drunker, Johanna. *The Century of Artists’ Books*. New York City: Granary Books, 1995, 6-10.

^x The colophon is a publisher or printer’s mark or imprint typically found on the spine or end of a book. The first colophon we know of was the Mainz Psalter, created by Johann Fust and Peter Schoeffer in 1457. (see Avrin)

^{xi} Leslie Seymour-Jones and Erika Doss, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*. Leslie Umberge; with Contributions by Erika Doss [and Others]. First edition. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007, 304-317

^{xii} The original source for the illustration and the text were taken from Mosby’s *Atlas of Functional Human Anatomy*.