

Transforming Artist Books: Is the Term 'Digital Artist Books' a Misnomer?

By Jo Melvin
22 August 2013

The term 'artist book' is grounded in a history of artistic production, emanating from the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting on a series of workshops held in 2012, Jo Melvin discusses the problems in applying this term in the digital age.

There were several reference points that inevitably recurred during the 'Transforming Artist Books' research network meetings. First the desire to retain the term 'artist book' made immediate reference to the history of conceptual art and the actions artists took in the 1960s and 1970s to control their creative output in process, production and publication, outside the commercial sector and aside from the conventional gallery space. A preliminary session led by Steve Woodall focused on the books and working methods of Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930–1998) – in particular, a study of *Daily Mirror Book* 1961 drew attention to how Roth used the form of the book to examine the overlooked detail and the potential for visual juxtaposition which takes on its own dynamic. Clive Phillpot followed with a resounding reading of Roth's statements from exhibition catalogues, notably from the *Options* series of exhibitions of experimental art at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 1984 and the Living Art Museum, Reykjavik in 1982. Roth's writing for these occasions had a strong biographical emphasis through which he wove artistic decisions and circumstances with anecdotal terrors coming to the surface, such as a fear of messing his pants and being stuck down a manhole full of urine and faeces. Roth's inhabited voice rang out into the space.

This evocation of the body through the work raises a question that naturally feeds into the terrain concerning the preservation of an artist's legacy and the potential of the digital analogue to broaden access to it. Posthumous representation is an important issue. It addresses simultaneously how to protect a legacy and render it open to revisiting and reinterpretation. The original context of the artist book may be digitally transposed to enable wider access and also to protect the original from wear, tear and eventual disintegration. There are also the issues of data protection and privacy, and their control, which are circumstances that can affect the decision making process.

In 1964, when British artist Barry Flanagan (1941–2009) was a student on the advanced sculpture course at St Martins School of Art in London, he founded, published and printed the artists' magazine *Silêns* with two friends, Alistair Jackson and Rudy Leenders. Flanagan's aim was to create a free space for exhibition, discussion and exchange. The page could be the site for work made especially for that purpose. He persuaded the course administrator to allow the office cyclostyle to be used for printing fifty copies every fortnight. The magazine ran to sixteen editions, the first dating from October 1964 and the last from June 1965. The cyclostyle machine added technical parameters to the magazine and shaped its character. Self-publishing allowed for exchange, discourse and experimentation, especially with concrete poetry and the relationship between image as mark and as word. The first issue opened with the following statements of intent, 'A Prelude

to a sculpture that has never been seen' and 'A prelude to a sculpture that has never been seen before'. These followed an epigraph from James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*, in which the author describes the sound of the printing press and the squeaking door noting that 'everything speaks in its own way'. The magazine was distributed free at the art school and copies could be picked up at Better Books, a short walk away down Charing Cross Road. Copies circulated between friends and soon acquired something of a cult status. Thirty or so years later Flanagan gave his original copies to St Martins School of Art for their special collections; the school is now Central St Martins and part of the University of the Arts. In 2009 I assessed the possibility of republishing the entire run of the magazine in book form so that it could be read in full without having to visit the special collections. Previously it had only surfaced in short extracts that have been published in catalogue essays about Flanagan and his work. Judy Lindsay, from special collections, was enthusiastic about the plan to print a facsimile that would be faithful to the original ideology of a fast, cheaply produced, experimental art magazine. However, since Flanagan had given his copies for safe-keeping with the intention that they would be available for research purposes, it was necessary to purchase a license from the university to print the book. In September 2011 the facsimile *Silâns (1964–1965)* was launched. A thousand copies were published and I hope its availability will give the opportunity for a fresh look at the collaborations between poetry and the visual arts, and the ferment of ideas between art practices, which embrace concrete poetry as sculptural form, the beat and the underground scene.

The fact that in the 1960s artists chose books and/or magazines as their medium was as much because of the potential for innovation, making art for the page, as the potential to distribute their work independently from art dealers, at low cost and increased circulation. This made access to their work much wider and increased the audience's size, in turn

creating a demand for more availability. The reader-viewer did not need to be wealthy to purchase the books. Now, artist books that were cheap to buy thirty or forty years ago are expensive collector's items and only available through specialist dealers. There are organisations that reprint copies at low cost and also produce new material; for instance, Primary Information in New York produce inexpensive facsimiles and in 2011 released several of the pioneering dealer and publisher Seth Siegelaub's books free online. These include the radical exhibition catalogues *One Month* (1969) and *January 5–31 1969* (1969). According to James Hoff, one of the founders and directors of Primary Information, there were more than 70,000 downloads during their first week of release.

Digitisation enables greater circulation of what would otherwise remain collectors' items to be viewed or read in the special collections of universities or museums or alternatively displayed in cabinets where the pages cannot be turned. A second session of the research network called 'Translating the Medium' showcased a range of projects to dazzle and amaze. One was the British Library's digitising project called 'Turning the Pages'. For the reader, the effect of surround sound reproduces six different speeds of page turning; each sounds a bit different and the order is scrambled to add authenticity, which one presumes is to give a more satisfying experience. Clive Izard from the British Library pioneered 'Turning the Pages' not only to render easy access for rare manuscripts but also to create research forums and discussion networks for individual books on the site. Surely the task is to use the technology to create a new form, not a digital book as such but something more fluid. Helen Douglas demonstrated some possibilities with an iPad app which uses the gliding and scale shifts of the equipment to show pond life in saturated colour.

The term 'apophenia' is defined by Wikipedia as 'the experience of seeing meaningful patterns or connections in random or meaningless data'. Sometimes I wonder

whether research is a process driven by a desire for an impossible completion to make interconnections between data transparent. Dust, fluff, rust, stains and detritus, the overlooked signs of wear and decay, the asides within the mass can often be more illuminating and poignant than the central thrust of the so-called serious issues. Signs of decay are an aspect of artist books that the digital could perhaps simulate but it would be at best an equivalent. For instance, what of the impassioned reader – one who bends back the pages, or whose annotations on the text frequently contribute to interpretation but leave traces so despised in our libraries; or the dutiful reader who reads without leaving a sign of his presence, the spine left primly intact.

Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) marked his shifting practice from poetry to the visual arts

©Jo Melvin
August 2012

Jo Melvin is BA/FA Theory Coordinator, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London.

The Transforming Artist Books research network held a series of workshops in 2012 to discuss the potential of the digital to change the understanding, appreciation and care of artist books.



by a shrewd sleight of hand. *Pense Bête* was the title of the last poetry anthology he published in 1963. In 1964 he encased the remaining fifty odd copies he had not sold in plaster to create a new art work, which was also his first essay into sculpture. The work was also entitled *Pense Bête*, but this time the books could only be looked at in a transformed condition, not to be read or opened but to be contemplated, the title playing interpretative games with the residual *aide memoire* which is the meaning of the expression.

Digital artist books potentially open up new creative possibilities and are not simply analogues, though this is important. The best definition for the term will be a question for archivists and cataloguers.