

Sandow Birk

HYPERALLERGIC

The Power of Artists' Books to Bind Together Radical Ideas

An exhibition at the Getty Research Institute illustrates the myriad ways that contemporary artists have pushed the boundaries and definitions of the book.

By Matt Stromberg
August 27, 2018



Front: Lisa Anne Auerbach, "American Magazine #2: The Age of Aquarius" (2014), back: Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an" (2005-14)

LOS ANGELES — Artists' books occupy a liminal space between a fine art object and everyday book. Generally produced in limited editions, sometimes as small as one, they are similar to prints in that artists can use them to work out ideas, or produce variations on a theme, but, like any other book, they entice you to touch and interact with them. Even if they are protected behind glass, the action of picking them up and turning the pages is implied. Are they aesthetic objects, meant to be collected, curated, and exhibited, or tactile assemblages of words and images, intended to be handled, shared, and pored over?

An exhibition at the Getty Research Institute, *Artists and their Books / Books and Their Artists*, does not answer this question, but rather further complicates it, illustrating the myriad ways that contemporary artists have pushed the boundaries and definitions of the book. The over 40 examples culled from the GRI's Special Collections do not limit themselves to printed and bound pages. Instead, they break free from their bindings, reconfiguring themselves into cityscapes like Johanna Drucker's "Bookscapes" (1986–88), or folding into a puzzle box, like "The Philosopher's Stone" (1992) by Barbara Fahrner and Daniel E. Kelm. Some unfurl with an accordion fold, while others hang on the wall like a suite of prints. The one thing they all have in common is that these books don't illustrate other works of art; they *are* works of art.

Other than that fact, the show lacks a sense of coherence, opting instead for a heterogeneous sampling as opposed to a narrowly focused thesis. Several examples explore the material properties of the book as art object, such as Tauba Auerbach's "Stab/Ghost" (2013), a mesmerizing stack of clear sheets of Lexan, onto which colorful shapes have been silk-screened. A plexiglas cover bends back on itself in an acrobatic curve. Olafur Eliasson's contribution "Your House" (2006) is a laser-cut 3D rendering of the artist's home, a dollhouse assembled one page at a time. Turn the pages to tour the house. It is a coldly technical feat, devoid of intimacy. On the opposite end of the spectrum is a series of books by Dieter Roth that revels in abject humor. One book incorporates painted bagels while another makes sausage from ground-up books. The centerpiece is "Poemetrie" (1968) whose urine-soaked pages continue to yellow and ferment over time.

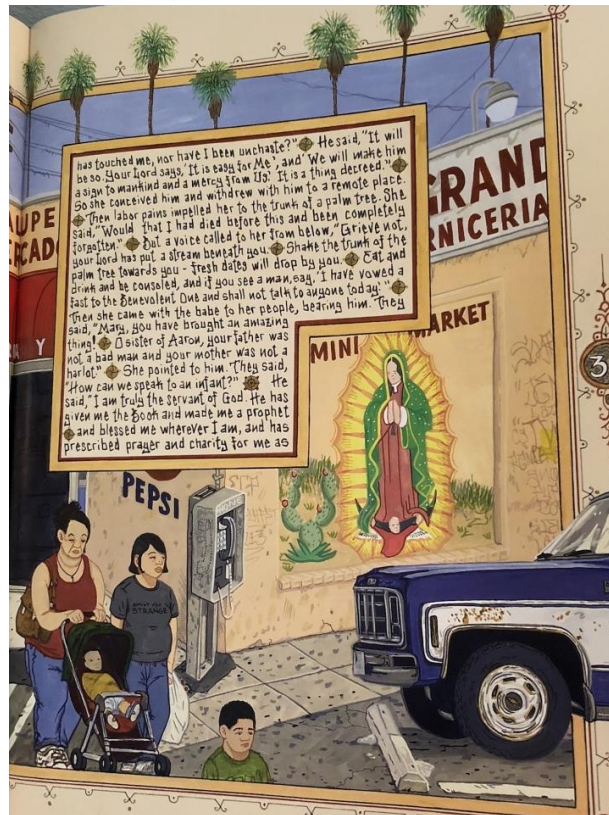
By far the most compelling works in the exhibition, however, are those that fulfill the social function of the book, that further its democratizing role begun over 500 years ago with the invention of moveable type. Once books were able to be mass-produced, knowledge, information, even visual pleasure, were no longer confined to a select elite. Although these artists' books are not meant for wide distribution, they still carry with them this historical precedent. More than that, many address issues of social or political justice, "often acknowledging sources in and sympathies with less privileged classes," as exhibition co-curator Marcia Reed writes in an accompanying volume.

The exhibition includes several works from Latin America, where there is a robust history of publishing as a subversive tool against authoritarian regimes. Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg fled his home country for England in the wake of the political unrest of 1968. "[A]very close friend of ours had been arrested and sentenced to 14 years in jail for having used a mimeograph in Mexico, allegedly 'for subversive reasons,'" he recalled, "so for me, it was a very dangerous tool." His contribution is "Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergenesis" (1990), a fold-out frieze of hand-cut stenciled images. Vibrant images of skulls, cowboys, palm trees, and TV

sets are juxtaposed in an enigmatic pictorial narrative that recalls pre-Hispanic codices. Argentine artist Leandro Katz also digs into the history of the region with his 1971 set of lithographs that reproduces the letter “ñ” in various colors. While the ñ is unique to the Spanish alphabet, most words that begin with that letter come from one of several indigenous languages. By focusing on a ubiquitous and overlooked facet of language, “Ñ” tells the story of Spanish conquest of the New World.

Mexico City–born artist and performer Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s and Felicia Rice’s “DOC/UNDOC: Documentado/Undocumentado” (2014) is an aluminum box lined with faux leopard and zebra fur, filled with various items that explore the immigrant experience, including an illustrated fold-out book, a lucha libre mask, and clips of sound art. Although it may bear some resemblance to Duchamp’s “Boîte en Valise” — the original “art box” filled with miniature versions of his works — it also recalls the baroque kitsch of Mexican altars.

Several US artists also tackle political and social issues, like Lisa Anne Auerbach, whose “American Megazine #2” (2014) contains images of storefront psychics in Los Angeles. At over five feet tall, it is a tongue-in-cheek critique of American excess, but also an invitation for grass roots collaboration, as two people are needed to turn the unwieldy pages.



Sandow Birk, “American Qur’an” (2005-14)

Sadow Birk's book is the most traditional in format, but offers a radical take on a sacred text. His "American Qur'an" (2005–2014) is a lavishly illustrated English translation of the Muslim holy book. In the space between central blocks of text and ornate, decorative borders, Birk has painted a wide-ranging selection of American scenes: downtown Manhattan seen from above, surfers with their boards, corner mini-markets with Virgen de Guadalupe murals.

Two artists make use of the photocopy machine, which had much the same effect as the printing press in levelling the playing field, allowing anyone to get their message out. Andrea Bowers' "Labor is Entitled to All It Creates" (2012) is a compendium of flyers from every Los Angeles–based labor organization the artist could find, bound into a binder-like book. When opened, the cacophony of brightly colored pages of all different sizes bursts forth like a messy cornucopia of radical activism.

At a panel discussion last month at the Getty, Bowers recalled an anecdote from her childhood. At her high school in Ohio, the girls had to make scrapbooks for the athletes at her school. Instead of parting with hers, she kept it, not willing to give up her creative labor in support of an outmoded patriarchal trope. "That's when I became a feminist," she told the audience. Her 2002 work "Sentimental Bitch" is another kind of feminist scrapbook. In search of "a feminist history to give me the courage to keep making things," Bowers collected every issue of the seminal music zine *Bitch*, which featured female writers covering women in rock. She photocopied the entire run of the zine, presenting the bound archive on a large stack of stone slabs, balancing the ephemeral nature of the material with a monumental heft. Another book features collages and ephemera, offering a more personal and poetic perspective on the publication's importance.

Forty years before Bowers was using a photocopier as a tool of empowerment, Barbara T. Smith was using one to make her own kind of deeply intimate, feminist artist books. In the mid-'60s, Smith was at a crossroads in her life. Her marriage was falling apart, she had recently been rejected by esteemed print house Gemini after walking in and naively asking if they could print her work. She leased a Xerox 914 copy machine and put it in her dining room, a decision that would lead to her becoming a pioneer in the use of the photocopy machine in art. "Lithography is a 19th-century medium," she remarked. "What is the medium of the 20th century? Business machines. Xerox is a completely new technique. Toner is plastic, not ink. The machine is immediately responsive." She photocopied her body, her children, even her breath. Her *Coffin* series from the mid-'60s captures a dynamic portrait of a moment in Smith's life as a woman, mother, and artist through a delightfully diverse array of effects, processes, and papers.

Where Bowers's works show the power of the book to support and advocate for under-represented groups, Smith's "coffins" illustrate their potential as a form of meaningful representation for the individual. "Sometimes it can be the precisely the humble origins of a work," exhibition co-curator Glenn Phillips writes, "the seeming smallness of its initial radius that lends a work its power."

Artists and Their Books / Books and Their Artists *continues at the Getty Research Institute (1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles) through October 28.*