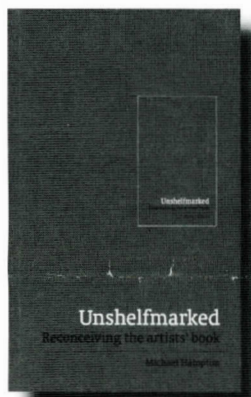


Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the Artists' Book

By Michael Hampton

Uniformbooks, 2015

£12.00/ 176 pp. (sb)



Ambitious discourse on artists' books has come about infrequently since the 1970s. A small but seemingly important part of the conversation has dealt with what even to call a book or publication artwork, yet the term "artists' book," with its plural possessive grammatical construction, often despite referring to a single author/artist's work, has somehow managed to last as a term used for serious research. Michael Hampton's list-heavy twenty-six page essay (sequenced by capital letters of the English alphabet, as op-

posed to page numbers, and sandwiched within an annotated list of fifty works) in *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the Artists' Book* begins with a definitive take on the history of attempts to establish a more formal criticism for the field. "The debate concerning the nature and meaning of the artists' book, and how it might be defined," what Michael Hampton calls "the Standard Model" of this critical inquiry, "has been vortical and bottomless for the last forty years." Now, he argues, it "is over and done with . . . the Snark netted. Now it can be seen how an often quarrelsome recursivity, part and parcel of the polymorphous artists' book becoming a serious discipline after the Second World War, represented the growth of an academic armature necessary to its acceptance as a cultural fact, not to mention market viability" (B). Hampton uses transdisciplinarity to get beyond how to define or understand the book as an art form. Some of the items representing his position are firmly within the standard model, while some are well outside the norm—particularly those works that aren't books at all, such as a mobile app, an online video, sculptures, photographs, facsimiles and reproductions, a laptop shot with bullets, a Twitter account, a forgery of a child's tool for learning language and math, a textile work, a volvelle, and punched cards for Charles Babbage's "Analytical Engine."

Several linked metaphors help to make sense of Hampton's expansive list. Their basis is Jorge Luis Borges's library-as-universe metaphor from the story "The Library of Babel" (1941), though Hampton explicitly references Borges just once, in a footnote citing the title of a group exhibition, *Unending* (June 24–July 26, 2014, at Westminster Reference Library in London), noting that it is taken from the quote, "the library is unending" (30). Hampton acknowledges many of his listed items as "belonging to a realm well beyond the one circumscribed under the heading Artists' Book, statistical outliers so to speak. My trick," he writes, "sets this 'dark flow' of inter-galactic objects free, disobliging them to make sense according to the logic of a mere substitutive system" (17). "Dark flow" is

a term Hampton "borrow[s] from particle physics which describes the still to be accounted for effects of dark matter" (18). Invisible and accounting for most of the universe, dark matter is described on Wikipedia as hypothetical but inferred from its apparent gravitational effects on observable matter. This metaphor is a stellar way Hampton makes clear the relationship between *invisible* artists' books and the visibly ubiquitous products of the art world and publishing industry, their "epigenetic influence finally come to permeate mainstream book design everywhere" (17). In Hampton's construction, the universe—the library—is shelfmarked, "the basic unit with its catalogued data of Dewey decimal classification by discipline, shelfmark and description, namely size, year of publication, condition etc, to be closely protected day in, day out, against the possible abuse and innate criminality of the general public" (149). And this library universe also contains purported dark matter, the unshelfmarked, these items he lists as placeholders for works that are "chronically unsuitable for shelfmarking or conceptually de-classed, estranged, and removed from the dominant epistemological shadow or hold of an institutional method of ordering, even if inside the rarified space of Special Collections" (17).

The unshelfmarked are representative of our current "highly dynamic, disruptive state of affairs" and "subtly vibrate across the mediascape of learning, cutting-edge thought, news and entertainment, no longer elitist or confined to any particular *habitus*" [emphasis in original] (W). Artists' books appear resistant to any single physical state and highly adaptable in these times, hence their ability to morph from one thing to another. Hampton cites the Booklive! International Symposium held in London in 2012¹ as reporting important findings across disciplines where the "re-invention of the artists' book in an age of enhanced e-reading" is a two-way "pathway from book as site to book as website" (V). Digital has so broken through barriers, he asserts, that there will be a time when it will be difficult to discriminate between an artist's book and any regular book, "creating a mixed super category, the artists' book revealed to have been the estimable VECTOR," which "carries several connotations, including that of a quantity with magnitude and force, an organism, such as a pollinator, and an agent, for example plasma carrying exogenous genes designed to alter a genome" (Z). Such a "super category" he likens to Timothy Morton's ecocritical philosophy of the "hyperobject," like global warming, so massive and widely distributed, so nonlocal, as to exist in its own nonspecific space-time (V).

Artist's book as *hyperobject*; as *VECTOR*; as having *epigenetic* influence; *dark flow*, as in particle physics, disrupting information science—these are but a few of the more conspicuous conjoiners Hampton uses to link across (trans-)disciplines. Do they make relatable sense for describing real book artworks and their potential? Not always. But the spirit of wanting the artist's book to be in communication with disciplines other than itself or simply the greater art or literary worlds provides a rush of vitality. Hampton offers the pleasures of making new connections, including the slightly sinister gratification that comes from upsetting the

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constraining status quo when connecting outside of what has become a too-familiar insular friends' group.

Yet what could be more familiar, more status quo in a critical inquiry into artists' books, than the inclusion of Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963)? It is one of the fifty items Hampton includes in his reconception of the field. Still, its inclusion seems somewhat fresh here, considering Hampton doesn't accept—as so many other critics have—that *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is "ground zero" for the artists' books outbreak, since widespread throughout the book environment now are thousands of Ruscha deadpan mimics (138). Rather, he focuses on its institutional disruption through its initial rejection by the Library of Congress, following the same line of thought as found in the conclusion of Douglas Crimp's 1981 essay "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject": "The fact that there is nowhere within the present system of classification a place for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is an index of its radicalism with respect to established modes of thought."²

But Crimp's observation is thirty-five years old; are artists' books like Ruscha's really still a problem for institutions? Hampton's argument here is that yes, they are, and part of the *institution* may indeed be earlier attempts at forming a discipline of artists' books to begin with. The same year *Unshelfmarked* was published, Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995), a landmark work for the field, celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Its publishing seemed to well up from interest mined starting in the 1970s by Ulises Carrión, Germano Celant, Susan Compton, Dick Higgins, Lucy Lippard, Joan Lyons, Clive Phillpot, Dianne Perry Vanderlip, and others. Three years before *Century* came a major monograph on *Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917–34* (1992) by Compton, and a British survey by Cathy Courtney. And the same year *Century* was published, so too was a collection of essays by Buzz Spector and a survey by Stephen Bury. Then, over the next few years, came further book-length studies by Cornelia Lauf and Phillpot, Renée Riese Hubert, Steven Clay, and Jerome Rothenberg, a historiography of the criticism by Stefan Klima, a book of artist interviews by Courtney, and other projects. The wealth of activity in the late 1990s peaked at the turn of the century as the digital revolution was becoming more of a pervasive institution itself. None of the above dealt with the digital turn, and all felt obliged to define what an artist's book is. Drucker turned this on its head, citing "no specific criteria for defining what an artist's book is, but there are many criteria for defining what it is not."³ Elsewhere in a *Journal of Artists' Books* essay, her "Critical Necessities" (1995) were "to put fundamental parameters into place for critical evaluation of artists' books as an artistic practice."⁴

Setting clarifying parameters and defining what books are *not* requires, well, discipline: order, training, control. Such an orderly state is anathema to Hampton's private program. Philosophically more in line with Wittgensteinian family resemblance, Hampton may call a thing an artist's book because it has features he finds common to artists' books. He calls artists' books "parvenu," the upstarts, from "a substantial ecosystem with a discernible

ethnographic affinity to and family resemblance with board games, automata, music boxes . . . the art of tying knots, knitting . . . origami and Vaudeville paper tearing . . . Xerox machines . . . hand-held home video, Post-Its, death masks . . . LEGO®, operating instructions of all kinds . . ." (N–O). This much-abbreviated list of a consummate list-maker is massive and filled with vernacular kinships far below the echelon of what the museum considers capital-A art, or what many a library might collect and protect. It feels great to read such an exuberant text unconcerned with, and challenging the need to form, an argument that will—maybe, hopefully, one day—earn artists' books a way out of their ghetto through higher-class, collection-worthy acceptance. Hampton's is an intellectual yet refreshingly unclassed grassroots approach, where artists' books are everywhere and perhaps nowhere, potentially everything and no single thing at the same time.

TATE SHAW is a writer and artist and is the director of Visual Studies Workshop.

NOTES 1. The Booklive! International Symposium, London South Bank University, June 8–9, 2012. 2. Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject" (1981), in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 11. 3. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), vii. 4. Johanna Drucker, "Critical Necessities," *Journal of Artists' Books*, 4 (Fall 1995), 4.

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