

ARTISTS' BOOKS

Stephen Bury: Artists' Books – The Book as a Work of Art 1963-2000

Michael Hampton: Unshelfmarked – Reconceiving the Artists' Book

Twenty years after its first publication, Stephen Bury has updated his survey of artists' books, the subtitle creeping forward from its original end date of 1995 to the more emphatic 2000. Bury is a true bibliophile, starting his career as a temporary assistant at Blackburn Public Library and Art Gallery in 1973. His interest in art was piqued when the Fluxshoe tour arrived at the library, and he was inspired to join the progressive Chelsea School of Art library in 1978 (a year after the influential Clive Phillpot left to run MoMA's library), later being appointed chief librarian at New York's Frick Collection in 2000. This background is evident in the publication; it feels like a teaser introduction to the world of artists' books for curious librarians. The first 20-page section consists of short chapters – brief essays, really – introducing a history and thematic exploration of artists' books. This is followed by the meat of the publication, 130 pages of photographic reproductions of artists' books (tantalisingly, however, these generally only depict the covers). The illustrations are followed by a further 60 pages of informational text: a selective bibliography of artists' books, a brief chronology, a general bibliography and an index. In short, a librarian's dream, and when Bury quotes Sol LeWitt as insisting that the artist 'functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise', such 'mere cataloguing' has perhaps never been spoken of with such warmth.

Just as with Phillpot's *Booktrek* (Books AM377), Bury clarifies that any attempt at categorisation is necessarily flawed, noting that all history is 'the retrospective study of the present, and our interests now determine what we decide are important figures, movements and moments: this history can only be partial and temporary'. His goal, like Phillpot's, is to distinguish trends and typologies rather than to rigidly categorise. And yet, however fluid the distinctions, this is undeniably a taxonomy. Indeed, there is a single defining rule that Bury returns to: artists' books are books made by artists. This may seem tautological, but it allows Bury to insist that the books of Stéphane Mallarmé, however influential they may have been to artists, cannot be considered artists' books. This is just one

of the many tensions inherent in Bury's project, which is largely an attempt to survey a category that in many instances inherently challenges the boundaries of the form. Nevertheless, Bury sets out his stall and delivers the goods.

Quite another approach is adopted by Michael Hampton, who deliberately attempts to avoid categorisation, a method hinted at in the title of his publication, *Unshelfmarked*, which is about as anti-librarian as you can get – he refers to some of the items he references as 'post-Deweyed' and cherishes the term 'book-like thingies'. Here, Hampton introduces 50 diverse 'publications' – from a 17th-century collage to a mobile app, from the 8th-century Lindisfarne Gospels to Charles Babbage's punch cards, from a newspaper sausage to a Twitter account – in an effort to redraw the boundaries of the artists' book (not least the

know what to do with. And perhaps it is this 'not quite knowing what to do with it' that is central to Hampton's aesthetic; he values wilful cross-category play and an awkward in-betweenness.

All of this hints at enduring tensions in the discipline. The simplest definition of the artists' book is that it is a publication, but the essence of a publication is its seriality and this is not always the case with the artists' book. As Bury says, 'one characteristic of the artists' book is the constant problematic of uniqueness/multiple and expensive/cheapness' – while one strand is drawn to the utopian ideals of democratic reach, another is drawn to the democratising principle that anyone can easily make a book, even if it is individually produced in an edition of one. This gives rise to another paradox that Bury identifies: 'Ironically, the larger the edition, the more subject

WHILE IT IS COMMON FOR LITERARY BOOKS TO BE DESCRIBED AS UNFILMABLE, PERHAPS ARTISTS' BOOKS ARE UNWRITABLE.

hackneyed notion that William Blake invented the category with his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1790, a critical error, Hampton argues, that ties the discipline too closely to romanticism and the format of the codex, rather than, say, the format of the pamphlet or other artefacts such as the Ice Age plaque. *Unshelfmarked* also contains a wide-ranging bibliography and a number of engaging and occasionally dizzying essays that guide us through the sometimes delirious terrain of Hampton's widened discipline, but again the meat is in the list of publications. Hampton's list, however, is more pragmatic than ideological; beginning with the cultural evidence rather than a cultural definition, it is a personal rather than an academic list, personable rather than institutional (he specifically calls out the fact that artists' books are perhaps most at home within the idiosyncracies of a personal collection rather than an institutional archive). The sensibility of Hampton's project, however, is entirely celebratory. He wants us to realise that these diverse artefacts expand the notion of reading in a way that goes beyond literary conventions and instead promote a mindset that matches the cognitive approaches we utilise in galleries. Hampton calls this a 'rich, productive reception' and he wants to encourage it. So what we have here is a selection of essays – a 'commented bibliography' – that celebrates the category-defying nature of publications that revel in the sophistication of their ontological games, be they centuries-old archived treasures held by national museums or the kind of ephemera one might pick up from an exhibition and not quite

to damage and disappearance the artist's book is over time, while the limited edition has tended to survive in private and public collections.' So the democratic idea of unlimited editions can paradoxically lead to a vanishing publication. And it might even be considered that the time of the book as a way for text to reach a broad audience has passed; the web has liberated (or eviscerated) the book from being the main conveyor of textual meaning (the struggle for reach has now been replaced by its converse, the struggle for privacy) and this has in turn freed the book to explore its non-textual qualities. This, of course, lands the surveyor with an intractable problem: how to convey the qualities of an artist's book, something that both authors wrestle with in their own ways – and, as contributors to this magazine, their styles will be familiar to *AM* readers. While it is common for literary books to be described as unfilmable, perhaps artists' books are unwritable. So, if you really want to understand artists' books, get thee to a library – or, if you follow Hampton's advice, a para-library. ■

Stephen Bury, *Artists' Books – The Book as a Work of Art 1963-2000*, Bernard Quaritch Ltd, 2015, 258pp, 130 illus, hb, £60, 978 0 9563012 9 1.

Michael Hampton, *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the Artists' Book*, Uniformbooks, 2015, 176pp, pb, £12, 978 1 9100100 6 8.

DAVID BARRETT is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.