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Foreword

Of late, libraries everywhere are publishing books highlighting their printed and manuscript ‘Treasures’. Notwithstanding that many of the works included may be illustrated online, perhaps more extensively, and for free, there remains a market for the instructive pleasure of browsing such curated selections, well printed and with authoritative and engaged commentaries. The book in hand has something in common with such compilations, though its plums—Prehistoric, Medieval, Renaissance and from each later century—would have to be abstracted from several top-class collections to realise this fantasy library. The popularity of these and other books about books owes much to the emergence, this last half-century, of book history as an academic, interdisciplinary vortex out of textual criticism, printing history, sociology, media studies and art history. The same period birthed the idea of book art and the term ‘artists’ books’.

The classic titles and bibliographic artefacts selected here are interspersed among a greater number of works produced since the 1960s, mainly by artists. Almost half of these date from the present century, which has seen a renewed surge of artists using bibliographic formats, modes and tropes, despite, and/or in active relation to, the various digital transformations now overtaking existing bibliographic arrangements. Naturally, fewer of these recent works have yet attained ‘treasure’ status, unlike either the de luxe *livres d’artistes* of the earlier 20th century, Russian Futurist publications or the work of Surrealist artists, although certain of them have some celebrity.

Shelfmarking generally manifests classification, the grouping and sequencing of books on library shelves, supposed to help the browsing reader who (it is assumed) shares the librarian’s preference for like with like. Not every library adopts this principle. Some store purely by size: it saves time, it saves space (it does at least reveal the order in which items were acquired) and a shelfmark still assigns a book a permanent home—it can be discovered, delivered, and audited. But probably no-one browses that shelf.

This book is an intentional act of *un*-shelfmarking, freed from constraints of collection management, access and accountability. The randomness of alphabetical listing reveals similarities among

approaches to the book space at different periods and to ostensibly quite different ends. Typologies, moveable parts, commentary, visual text and self-reflexive games as well as annotation, alteration and collage are among the formal and generic analogues.

New links and likenesses are stimulating, but are they significant? The highest duty of both books and readers is to produce meaning. Artists' books at best are *books*. They have information for us. They expose. They can be critical, and political. They turn over ideas, including ideas about the book itself; they are cybernetic, and they play. You can lose and find yourself in a book. Some poetry will out.

The great service of this commentated bibliography is to discover that the experience of artists' books encourages *the art of reading*: a rich, productive reception, such as people perform in their gallery-going. With minds and sensors thus attuned, why would you not turn the same attention outward and backwards, to the whole world of books: the texts and depictions that have been instantiated and promulgated in portable visual and material formats? The categorical ladder falls away.

Elizabeth James
Senior Librarian
National Art Library, V&A Museum

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