

IT IS NOT NEW, IT IS A BOOK

IT IS NOT NEW, IT IS A BOOK is the first in a series of exhibitions to be presented in the Library and Documentation Centre of the Reina Sofía Museum. The title is a quotation from the video work “Le livre est au bout du banc” (1992) by Jacques Louis Nyst, in which the artist proposes a poetical fiction centred on the book. The aim of this series is to present every aspect of the artists’ book. Both individual and thematic exhibitions are programmed.

Artists’ books emerged in the early sixties when artists of all artistic tendencies were exploring the book as a creative space. They no longer considered the book as a container for information but as an artwork with its own significance. The artist’s book created a new genre of art in a period where conceptual art and intermedia art forms were very influential. Most books have an essentially conceptual character; if not in terms of their style then in terms of the perception of the space of the book and the consideration of how the book can be made into one coherent artwork.

The books selected for this exhibition are pertinent examples that illustrate the book in the most lapidary way. Conceptual analysis runs like a thread through the ensemble. Developing from page to page, they become pure reflections on the concept of the book itself. They convey no images, texts or stories, or only in such a way as reduces the subject to itself. They are books in the strictest sense of the term because the object represents only itself. Most of these books can therefore be considered as tautological works.

The book has always been reflected in works of art, either directly or indirectly. We have seen innumerable pictures in which the book plays a prominent role, bearing titles like *Reading*, *Young Girl Reading*, *Old Man Sitting Reading*, *Woman with Book*, etc. Writers, too, have turned their attention to the very subject of their reason for existing. Roland Barthes in *Le plaisir du texte*, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Maurice Blanchot in *L'espace littéraire*, Rainer Maria Rilke in *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula*, Patricia Highsmith in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, Gertrude Stein in *How Writing is Written*, Camilo José Cela in *La lectura, afición y aversión* – we could carry on indefinitely in similar vein. All these works reflected literary creation, the role of the writer, the role of the reader, and the act of reading. These reflections were by writers, because the book has always been the privileged domain of the writer. Visual artists generally occupied subordinate roles as illustrators. The books in this exhibition, on the other hand, are entirely conceived by visual artists. These artists reflect upon the book not only intellectually but also formally. In so doing they question the literary act and the roles of author and reader, but primarily they question the very essence of the book, both visually and theoretically.

The common denominator of the works in this exhibition is that they represent attempts to perceive the book absolutely objectively, each in their own objective way! The following description of the artworks/books is given with the same attempt at objectivity.

BOOK (1964/72) by **George Brecht** is the book reduced to its simplest expression. On its white cloth are the words printed: "This is the cover of the book". Inside are 28 pages, on each of which, soberly printed, is a sentence indicating the function of the page within the book. For example: "This is the title page of the book".

A.R. Penck's book *JE SUIS UN LIVRE ACHETE-MOI MAINTENANT* (1981) consists of about 400 pages in a hardbound cover with an ordinary type face. On each page is printed a sentence, sometimes a word. On one page we can read an affirmation, on the following a negation, on another page nothing. Every page constitutes a reflection upon the book. These words are addressed to the reader, to make him aware of the object he is holding in his hands as well of its content. The sentences slide imperceptibly towards considerations of an ethical nature, and there is the constant confrontation between book and reader, a privileged, unique relationship.

Isidoro Valcárcel Medina prints the text of his book *ALICIANO* (1970) on transparent sheets. Even closed, the book immediately allows us to perceive its entire content as it is presented to us after we have read it.

In his style of twisted shapes, mostly geometric, **François Morellet** produces *A BADLY BOUND BOOK* (1982) by including a badly folded sheet of paper in a cover. A similar statement, albeit with a very different approach, is evident in **Milan Mólzer's** book *DIE GEGENWART* (1975) in which the word "jetzt" (now) is printed on each page. This word emphasises the evidence of the moment of reading.

Several artists have commented radically on the physical aspects of the book by creating white books containing only white virgin pages. The title *RAUM* (1977) by **Heinz Gappmayr** refers to the inner space of the book. **Sara MacKillop** presents in her book *16 PHOTOCOPIED PAGES* (2009) photocopies of blank pages and their shadows. In *BOOK NO. (49)* (1987) **J.H. Kocman** reduces an existing book to pulp, out of which he manufactures new paper to produce a new book. **Michael Gibbs** assembles hundred pages of different books to produce the book *PAGES* (1976), following the numeration of the original pages. **Timm Ulrichs** and **John M. Belis** both address the physical aspect of the book. The title *DEM LESER DEN RÜCKEN*

ZUKEHREND [1970/77] by Timm Ulrichs refers on the book spine as it faces us in libraries, bookshops or at home. VOLUME (1976) by John M. Belis consists of a label to be glued on the front cover of the book of your choice. It reduces the book to the fact that it is also only a volume, irrespective of the author or the title of the publication

COMMUNIQUER (1990) by **Marie Orensanz** misleads the reader through a series of page fragments cut horizontally. If we follow the arrows and other directional signs from left to right, from up to down, from one page fragment to another, we act like a reader who lacks concentration. In SEE PAGE 13! (1973) by **Jiří Valoch** the author leads us from page 13 to page 8, from page 8 to page 2, from page 2 to page 6 etc. We gallop through the book as if seeing a new book for the first time.

The book TITLE (1973) by **Maurice Roquet** consists of an A4 sheet folded in three to obtain a 16-page booklet. At the bottom of each page, even on the front and back cover, a schema of the folded A4 sheet indicates the place and number of each page before folding and cutting. There are no text or images, only the book reduced to its physical essence. In a similar vein **Bernard Villers** also conceived his book IN OCTAVO (2007) as an A4 sheet folded in three. On each of the formats he obtained is printed its denomination: 'in plano', 'in folio', 'in quatro' and 'in octavo', which gives the book its title. On the back cover is the word FORMATS, the conceptual definition of the publication.

Browsing through the 10 pages of the work UNTITLED (1974/1997) by **Jiří Valoch** you will read the sentence "page / by / page / you / discover / the / mystery / of / this / book". Several other artists such as **Vagrigh Bakhchanyan** in TRIPTYCH (1980),

Ken Friedman in COMPLETION (1973) and **Bernard Villers** in NOW (2004) reduce their books, in one sentence or reflection, to their most essential aspect. In A

NEW (1973), **Eric Andersen** explains in a few sentences what his book could have been but not what it is.

Kristof Tuerlinckx and **Jiří Valoch** reduce the book to its most elementary form, each in their own way. In PAGE (2008), Kristof Tuerlinckx scratches the word “page” on a single sheet of paper, but indicates all bibliographical information, even the weight of the sheet. Jiří Valoch prints FRAGMENT OF A BOOK THAT DOES NOT EXIST (1973) on a single sheet, and this is obviously also the title of the work.

REALITY [1972] by **Jaroslav Kozłowski** could be a reflection on Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, reducing a chapter of his *Critique of Pure Reason* to the punctuation signs. The result becomes a purely visual work, or a space open to the reader’s imagination.

Initially it seems that the biographical information and text contents of **Roland Topor**’s TOPOR SOUVENIR (1969) have been erased by drawing over the text. Closer inspection reveals that there was no initial text. The cynicism of this work is accentuated by the fact that the only information on the book, the author, title and publisher, are present on a strip of paper wrapped around the book. This band will get lost in most cases.

In PLAN FÜR EIN KONZEPT KUNST BUCH (1971), **Sol LeWitt** invites the reader to interpret and obtain a Sol LeWitt work through eight propositions clearly instructing him to intervene in the sentences that are proposed. The creator and interpreter plays a specific as well as individual role in the final aspect of the work. **Dan Graham** offers a similar plan. In his PLAN FOR POEM “designed to be set up in its final form by the editor of the book in which it would appear in print” (1966/1997) he gives a blueprint for producing a work for a particular book according to specific editorial requirements.

Timm Ulrichs’ work NT (n. d.) proposes a book by the artist himself to be made by

any individual, merely by scratching all the sentences from an ordinary book and leaving only the page numbers.

In BOOK (1974) **Richard Tuttle** delivers a key to all possible written language. All 26 letters of our Latin alphabet, from A to Z, are printed in capitals on separate pages. One can imagine that this is the essence of all texts.

Hans-Peter Feldmann and **Peter Dowsbrough** always chose to publish an artists' book for their exhibitions rather than a catalogue. The artists' books BÜCHER (1999) by Hans-Peter Feldmann and BOOKS/BÜCHER (1993) by Peter Dowsbrough were their first catalogues. Hans-Peter Feldmann chose to reproduce full-page photos of all his previously published books. Peter Dowsbrough lists all his books with a visual comment. On the inside cover he shows a map of Bremen, the city where his show BOOKS/BÜCHER was held. His catalogue starts and ends with huge square brackets.

Allen Ruppersberg's THE NEW FIVE-FOOT SHELF OF BOOKS (2003) invokes encyclopaedic projects which aim to gather knowledge on literature, science, etc. The artist leads us into a labyrinthine "memoire novel" of about 400 pages, a reflection on what books are and why they exist. The extension of his project to a website might refer to a possible future of the book or, to be more precise, to its content. LIVRE, PUBLICATION, ÉDITIONS (2006) by **Eric Watier** is an exhibition invitation. Inside the double page is a photo of a detail of a library filled with publications with mainly white covers. As a counterpoint to encyclopaedic knowledge, **Thomas Hirschhorn** names in his EMERGENCY LIBRARY (2003) 37 books that are important to him. In LIVREILLISIBLE (1964) **Pierre Cordier** renders Jorge Luis Borges' book "The Library of Babel" illegible and incomprehensible through technical manipulation. He transforms the original into a visual reflection upon a certain inability to communicate.

The two only books in this selection that contain images are those by **Gottfried Bechtold** and **Jean-François Bory**. In POCKET-FILM [1973] Gottfried Bechtold shows a man browsing in a book in which is represented the same man looking at image of the man browsing in a book. In Jean-François Bory's UNTITLED (1974) a multitude of images are devoted to one or another form of language. The book ends with a series of photographs of a book drawn in the sand about to be effaced by the rising tide. On the next page the sentence "It is all over" is written under the book.

In LIVRE ÉTALON = STANDARD BOOK [1982] **Robert Filliou** gives the recipe for evaluating literature: "All literature – past, present and yet to come – can at last be objectively evaluated, thanks to *Livre etalon* which alone permits us to measure works infallibly and to indicate implacably their relationship and their contribution...".

In 1972 **Ulises Carrión** realised his book PRINTED MATTER. Later he reproduced two of its pages as a diptych on which he prints laconically in large letters "DEAR READER", "DON'T READ".

Dear viewer and reader, all of the works selected for this first exhibition represent attempts to perceive and to analyse an object that has existed for centuries. Although the book itself was not new, the idea of an artwork in the shape of a book was new. Visual artists create works of art in the shape of books. These works of art can only exist as books and they celebrate and give new life to the book.

Guy Schraenen