

On the Artist's Books

I began to make artist's books in 1993 in Vancouver, Canada under the pseudonym The Artery Archives. My first projects were photographic editions in which an ephemeral event or sculpture was documented and encapsulated sequentially. Over time, I started to use the components traditionally used for the binding of pages, namely thread and needle, as the tools for marking and configuring content. This became an opportunity to think critically about craftsmanship and to expand on delineations of drawing and mark-making within contemporary art, beyond book works.

My long-standing production of one-of-a-kind handmade objects represents an engagement with lineages of craft in a domain that has, for the last several centuries, increasingly been mechanized: first as print and most recently as digital dissemination. Like my manual transformations of other mechanically reproduced representations (charts, graphs, blueprints), my artist's books draw sensuous attention to the potentials of a form - the book - that, in its predominant mass-produced version, has come to seem little more than a neutral, even disposable medium for conveying information in linear sequence. By calling attention to the embodied physicality of the book, I push against this neutralization.

In terms of content, the artist's books pull together concerns with interdisciplinary translation. On the one hand, they address the translation between language and its material embodiment as text and image, as well as the translation between sensation and objects in the absence of language. On the other hand, they examine the translation between the unique particularities of a singular artistic work and its reproduction in public dissemination, and the translation between form and the order of experience, such as the experience of sequence and space.

Because I also work at a very large scale within architectural spaces, I have deliberately considered the overlaps between the structure of books and of buildings. In reading interviews with the architect John Hejduk, I encountered the allusion to entering a building and being "ingested" by it. While both artist's books and architecture have insides and outsides, the ingestion by a book is of a different phenomenological order than the ingestion of a body by a building. Artist's books, in their humble scale, can temporally swallow us up, but only metaphorically so. At the same time, the traversal of an artist's book activates movement within temporalities. The mental space produced within an artist's book is composed of physical pages or folios arranged into a sequence. Like rooms in a building, the way we move through that space is given meaning by the manner in which the sequence of pages generates content chronologically. In a book, as in a building, there is a general sense of chronological expectation akin to suspense: what will happen in the next room or in the next page remains to be experienced.

Though I propose that there are some similarities between architectural and book structures, I do not mean to suggest that buildings and artist's book are the same modalities of experience. Being engulfed by architectural space is a physical fact, not a metaphor. The shelter that books offer can become a form of psychic sustenance, but books are by comparison emblematic dwellings. In real space we work through the limitations and potentials of our bodies; we move around real obstructions and through actual thresholds; and we are subsumed by phenomena, factual, not represented. And yet, the artist book as "genre" alludes to the intimate scale and configuration at which an act of solitary reading and conjuring unfolds. Without the critical intimacy that artist's books and other small-scale objects open up for us to inhabit, we are left adrift in the spectacle.