

# What Is It, If It Is Not This?

Exploring artist's books through an  
auto-ethnographic design practice



Thomas Cumming

What Is It, If  
It Is Not This?

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# Contents

8	Abstract	48	Akin to Portable Exhibitions <i>'Artists' books' &amp; the cabinet of curiosities</i>	04	'Artists' Book' Theory	75	Conclusions
10	Acknowledgements	51	A Codable Mode for Curation <i>Avoiding systems of the library</i>	82	Section Preface	146	Section Preface
01	Introduction	53	<b>978-0-473-74052-8</b> This Number is a Sentence	85	An Elusive Term <i>The slipperiness of 'artists' books'</i>	148	The Potential for a New Canon <i>Thoughts on a 'designers' book'</i>
15	Wonder <i>Preface</i>	57	Mapping the Unknown <i>Identifying edges of practice</i>	91	<b>How Dare You:</b> An Ode to Ida Applebroog	149	Embodied Book Design
17	A Book With No Orientation <i>Existing work</i>	59	<b>Eight Passes of the Press</b> As Liminal, On Liminal	95	Vital Aspects <i>Other attempts at a canon</i>	149	Holistic Book Design
20	144 Pages <i>Existing work</i>	03	Methodologies & Research Questions	105	<b>A Book Filled With Scans of Books Filled With Scribbles of Books</b>	151	<b>A Cabinet of Wonder</b>
21	A New Term <i>Discovering 'artists' books'</i>	64	Section Preface	109	<b>Of Nine</b>	154	Another Closing (Opening) Statement
02	Foundational Context	68	A Playful Practice <i>The Oulipo</i>	113	<b>Matarangi Automata</b>	156	Bibliography
26	Section Preface	69	Making as Method <i>Practice-led research</i>	117	<b>Matarangi's Response</b>	161	Appendix <i>Contemporary Cabinets</i>
29	<b>The Most Perfect Book</b>	71	<b>SYZGY</b>	120	Literature <i>Literature and the books form</i>		
32	The Quintessential 20 <sup>th</sup> -c. Artform <i>Origins of the 'artists' book'</i>	75	A Stone In My Shoe <i>Auto-ethnographic Design Practices</i>	123	<b>Parallel Conversations</b>		
37	A Short History of the Historical <i>The cabinet of curiosities</i>	77	<b>Can You See?</b> An Allegory of The Bat	127	<b>58 Ways to Define a Book</b>		
43	Skeletons in the Cabinet <i>Conceptualising the cabinet's themes</i>			137	<b>PANZ Workshop Blizzard Books</b>		
45	<b>Untitled</b> A Book Matrix			141	<b>Knot A Book</b>		

# Abstract

*What Is It, If It Is Not This?* explores the 'artists' book' landscape, and my position within it. As a practice, the development of 'artists' books' encompasses a wide range of material qualities and conventions, resulting in many and varied book and 'book-like' formats; however, there is a significant dissonance regarding the terminology used to describe such work, and, as a book designer with an interest in experimental publications, I've found myself producing work that could be considered a part of this practice. The encyclopaedic curatorial practice of the cabinet of curiosities provides a unique conceptual framework regarding taxonomies, objects of wonder, and personal sense-making to examine the potential boundaries of the 'artists' book'.

This research was conducted through an auto-ethnographic design practice, acknowledging the centrality of the values, perspectives and experiences of myself as the designer. In utilising iterative practice-led research and research-led practice, and an alignment with Oulipian playfulness, the process of creation throughout this work has been responsive and intuitive.

To identify the margins of what could be considered an 'artists' book', a collection of bookworks have been designed that explore, subvert, or embrace the different facets of 'artists' books'. In doing this, I've gained insights into existing theory and begun to add to the discourse surrounding 'artists' books', and a designer's place within them. This work enabled moments of self-reflection and the initial development of such language has resulted in a more confident sense of identity in regards to my place in this area of practice.

# Acknowledgements

As with any body of work, this could not have been completed without these key people:

Firstly, to the Collinsons for providing the support to young designers to pursue further study, without your generosity I would not have been able to undertake this Master of Design.

To my friends and family for having kept me sane, your company and encouragement was deeply appreciated and the joy that you all bring me a welcomed distraction.

To Anna Brown and Jo Bailey for the tireless discussions surrounding the proverbial bounds of the book, your enthusiasm for this work was a lifeline. It was an honour to learn from you both.

And lastly, thank you to Krista Barnaby — a partner in life and in books — this work is as much yours as it is mine. The endless revitalising words, late-night musings, and unwavering kindness you offered over the last twelve months played no small part in what was produced. I hope that there are many more books to be made in our future.

01

# Introduction



Fig. 1, *WONDER*  
Designmuseum  
Danmark  
2022

## Wonder Preface

I won't begin this by saying I've always loved books, because I haven't. What I have always loved, however, is language. Words and their meanings, and the complex relationships between them. My friends can attest to this through numerous recounts of me complimenting their use of particular words I'm fond of, or painfully listening to me explain that the smell of rain is called *petrichor* for the hundredth time. During my time as an undergraduate at Toi Rauwhāangi — College of Creative Arts — I grew to admire books for what they could be: intricate, intimate, and incredibly designed objects. Since then, my fascination with the book as an experimental form has continued to grow.

This Master of Design research was born out of a series of pieces falling into place; a moment of limbo in my life that saw me finish my contract at work, complete an exhausting year-long design project, and begin a six-week-long trip to Europe. Throughout this trip I kept close hold of a book titled *A Philosophy of Walking* by Frédéric Gros. This book is a collection of anecdotal, factual, maybe fictional, but definitely philosophical notes on walking as a practice for thinking. There were many memorable passages from this text, the most memorable however, was this:

*...many books exude the stuffy odour of libraries... Lightless rooms, poorly ventilated... Other books breathe a livelier air; the bracing air of outdoors, the wind of high mountains, even the icy gust of the high crags buffeting the body; or in the morning, the cool scented air of southern paths through the pines. These books breathe (104).*

The way in which Gros personifies the book painted great images in my mind of mythical tomes found atop mountain ranges, ones designed to exist not just as vessels for information but wondrous objects in their own right. Design and art history plays a large role in my design practice. I constantly draw upon theory, aesthetic, and methods from specific movements. One such piece of history that has always stood out to me is the 'cabinet of curiosities' — a 16<sup>th</sup> century European curatorial practice concerning the rooms of wonder. The links between experimental book design, the cabinet of curiosities and its ties to unique objects, and Gros' poetic prose gave form to an idea. During my travels, I was fortunate enough to encounter a beautiful cabinet in the Design Museum Denmark in Copenhagen (Fig. 1). Sitting there, drinking in the wide range of wondrous objects housed within, cemented my interest in the potential for the cabinet of curiosities to be a useful tool to better understand the area of practice that I find myself pursuing.

# A Book With No Orientation

*Existing work*



Fig. 2, Book-cover  
Krista Barnaby &  
Thomas Cumming  
2021

*A Book With No Orientation*, completed in collaboration with Krista Barnaby, examined the relationship between a book's form and the content within, proposing a deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of a 21<sup>st</sup> century reading experience. This BDes Honours project culminated in a series of experimental volumes, where elements of the traditional book were pulled apart to be examined, questioned, and challenged. To give the work structure, we named 24 of the most crucial characteristics of a book, both literal and abstract, to be the inspiration for the volumes. These characteristics soon became the basis of a manifesto, elevating *A Book With No Orientation* from a series of experimental book formats to the beginning of a debate regarding the relationship between content and form. Fourteen volumes were produced in total: two foundational pieces in *A Book With No Orientation* (Fig. 3) and *Coalescence 01 & 02*, alongside 12 explorations (Fig. 2); each volume tackling one, or more, of the elements that we thought were imperative to books and their design. This project was a chance for us to push our understanding of book design and introduced us to a mode of working that proved to be deeply fruitful in the form of playful exploration through making *A Book With No Orientation* was an influential piece of work for us, and it opened our eyes to the disparate world of experimental book design. What follows is the 'closing statement' from the project, which, when read now, is a rather vindicating way to begin this Master's of Design project:

*'It's fitting that this project ended on an opening statement rather than a closing one. As newly emerging designers we were not ready to accept the rules already written regarding book design when we had no say in their conception. A Book With No Orientation was our chance to proclaim what we think book design should look like, however naive. As with any opinion, we are aware that it will drift, morph, and solidify as time passes and as such we are not finishing with A Book With No Orientation but merely starting it.'*

Fig 3, *A Book With No Orientation*  
Krista Barnaby & Thomas Cumming  
2021





## 144 Pages *Existing work*

*A Book With No Orientation* sowed the seed for Krista and me, as we have continued to nurture, experiment and explore beyond our undergraduate research. During 2023, this took the form of a year-long self-initiated project in which we designed a new publication each month — each one in collaboration with a new creative practitioner (Fig. 4). The key tenet of *144 Pages* was the continuation of the relationship between content and form as proposed in our manifesto. It became a tool for us to continue designing the things we wanted, and needed, to design. Over the course of each month we researched, explored, planned, tested and produced a publication that reflected a piece of each collaborator, their practice, or a shared interest. Each piece of work was self-funded and self-made, utilising tools and materials that were affordable and readily available, leading to an environment that encouraged Oulipian\* thinking regarding the limitations we faced; the project became as much about the design of the piece of work as it did the production of it. Throughout this process, our engagement with the extremities of experimental book design deepened as we made not only books but pamphlets, zines, and bookish-objects (of which we considered them all to be equally book-like), continuing to feed our growing curiosity regarding the subject.

Fig. 4, *The House Without Walls (A Book With No End)*  
Henry Mabin, Krista Barnaby &  
Thomas Cumming  
2024

\*See page 70 for further writing on the Oulipo

## A New Term *Discovering 'artists' books'*

These two pieces of work helped me enter this project as a designer deeply invested in experiential book design and production; however, during these last few years an ambiguous understanding of classification has hung over us like a petty cloud, brought to attention each time we were asked to explain what it is exactly that we do? We would reach for words we did not know, because simply saying book design would lead us down a rabbit hole of: *is it the cover? Oh, so you pick the colours? You typeset it... what is typesetting?* And at first, the task of disarming the loaded answer of 'book design' was a fun challenge as we would go on to explain *A Book With No Orientation*, and more recently *144 Pages*, but over time it became increasingly difficult to define the books we designed, this difficulty being directly proportional to our increasing fascination with the next output. As we strayed further away from traditional book formats, so too did our ability to articulate our practice. Some of the many titles we have used in an attempt to describe our work include such things as: Books, "Books", *Books*, Odd Books, Stupid Books, Bookish-objects, Coffee Table Books, Book-like-things, ... and many more from an inexhaustible list of other ways to say what I would come to know as something akin to *artists' books*. This term, *artists' book*, was new to us, but once we had learned of its existence we latched onto it with ferocity, as it gave us some sort of lifeline in this deluge of muddled terms we were trying to navigate. In doing this, I've come to have this realisation: I am a designer, who has found themselves designing and making *artists' books* — an identity-confronting predicament, I think.

An 'artists' book' refers to the format and structure of a book when used to convey artistic expression, rather than merely acting as a container for written content. This term seems like a fitting one, but it's significance is deeply rooted in the curious and autonomous artist, not the designer; an immediate signpost being the distinct use of the apostrophe after the 's' to denote the genre of book produced to be done so by book artists, of which I am not. This idiosyncratic language was the beginning of my scepticism regarding my use of the term 'artists' book' and as such, each subsequent use, where the conception of the term is being examined, will be marked in quotations.

To further distinguish between the 'artists' book' theory and the design outputs produced to challenge, reflect, or embody said theories, the term 'bookwork', borrowed from artists' book pioneer Ulises Carrión, will also be used. As Carrión defines them: 'In a bookwork the message is the sum of all the material and formal elements.' This is an important and impartial definition, and acts as a neutral staging ground for the considerations that catalysed this new research.

Books, “Books”  
*Books*, Odd Books  
Stupid Books  
Bookish-objects  
Coffee Table Books  
Book-like-things

02

# Foundational Context

# Section Preface

This chapter contains an overview and a discussion of the cabinet of curiosities and the ‘artists’ book’ key terminologies. These will then be used to outline the importance of the cabinet as a conceptual framework, highlighting the key characteristics that shaped its use.

Alongside this, the ‘bookworks’\* that make up the design output of this research will begin to be weaved in. To better discern them the wider theory on ‘artists’ book’, these sections will follow an alternate orientation. Each piece of work that has been designed, each entry into my cabinet of curiosities, has happened organically. To best reflect this flow of creation as it happened, each bookwork has been unpacked in response to the reading and learning that surrounded its inception. To paraphrase Assoc. Prof Jason O’Hara: ‘it is the narrative surrounding the work, the words you use to tell the story of its creation, that makes this work interesting, and in doing this, you foreground yourself as the designer.’

\*See page 21 for further writing on the term ‘bookwork’



Bookwork—01

28—31

# The Most Perfect Book

# 01

Within *The New Art Of Making Books*, Carrión states that the most beautiful book in the world is one with only blank pages. Drawn from the train of thought that new art is reductive in nature, leading to a conclusion in which 'every book of the new art is searching after that book of absolute whiteness, in the same way that every poem searches for silence' (4).

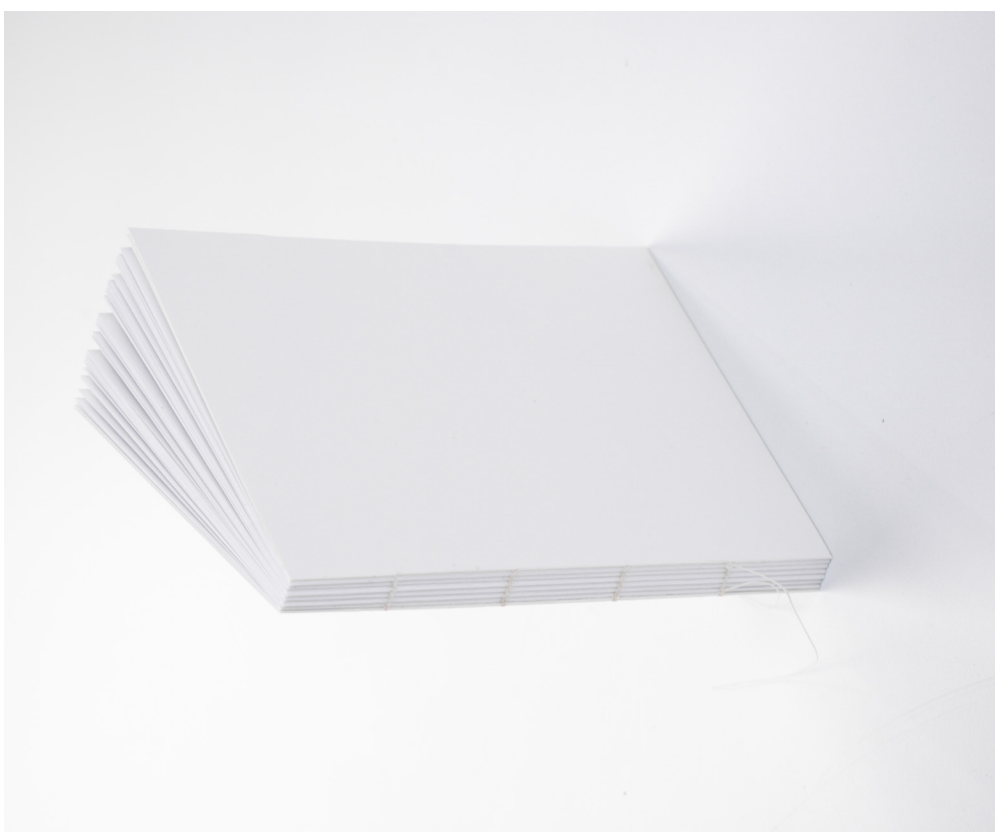
*The Most Perfect Book* has been constructed using, what I call, a vertical French Fold – each signature has been made by folding larger pieces of paper in half, twice, before being collated with the shorter of the folds at the bottom. The result is a text block in which each leaf is a sleeve of two pieces of paper open at the head and fore-edge but joined at the tail. This altered the book to mimic one of the core definitions of a book brought up throughout this project, as it becomes a literal *container for information* with the sleeves being able to retain smaller ephemera. An 80gsm paper stock has been chosen to facilitate this use, allowing for a large amount of 'read-through' so that anything within the pages can remain visible. The book now exists in a liminal state in which it can be written in without being written in, retaining Carrión's proclaimed perfectness as a perfectly white book. As a book-object, *The Most Perfect Book* is a contribution to my cabinet, as well as being a cabinet in, and of, itself.

*The New Art Of Making Books*  
Ulises Carrión  
1975

*'The words in a new book might be the author's own words or someone else's words. A writer of the new art writes very little or does not write at all.'*

*The most beautiful and perfect book in the world is a book with only blank pages, in the same way that the most complete language is that which lies beyond all that the words of a man can say.'*

– Ulises Carrión, *The New Art Of Making Books*





## The Quintessential 20<sup>th</sup>-c. Artform *Origins of the 'artists' book'*

As a contemporary field of practice, 'artists' books' have only come into their own within the last century. The term, while still debated, is widely considered to have spawned following the 1973 Philadelphia exhibition titled *Artists Books* (sic). American author, book artist, and visual theorist Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* provides an important written account of the many contributing factors that led to what we might now know to be the 'artists' book'. Stating that *'in many ways it could be argued that the artist's book is the quintessential 20<sup>th</sup>-century artform'*, Drucker portrays 'artists' books' as ubiquitous to every major art and literature movement of the last century (1). It is particularly odd then, that a pivotal area of practice such as 'artists' books' is shrouded in such dispute as to what *exactly* it is. This is further framed by Drucker as she remarks on how shallow the critical work surrounding 'artists' books' is (1).

A foundational understanding of the term requires outlining the two key genres that it *does not* encompass, that of the 'fine press book' and 'livres d'artiste'. A fine press book refers to a finely crafted book, usually a special edition of a classic title, where the production quality of the book itself is of particular value. Livres d'artiste, literally translating to 'artist's book', was popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The codices were created by publishers to pair illustrations by famous artists with well-known texts. Sharing the antecedent notion of democratising art, the medium of the book provided an opportunity to produce works with a potential wider reach, while leveraging associations with the artist's more renowned work. Despite its innovation, the livre d'artiste often contained a repetitive approach to the relationship between text and image and, more importantly, lacked the marriage between content and form. As with many attempts to define 'artists' books', there are exceptions to this; a unique example of one such work is Pierre Bonnard's edition of *Parallelement* (Fig. 6), where text plays

Fig. 5, *Die Träumenden*  
(*The Dreaming Youths*)  
Oskar Kokoschka  
1917

a more active role as it is arranged with the illustrations. But as Drucker cements, livre d'artiste *'...are productions rather than creations, products, rather than visions, examples of a form, not interrogations of its conceptual or formal metaphysical potential'* (5).

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneers came from a variety of movements; of them, Russian Futurists were the most influential. Many of the practitioners during this period trained in both the visual arts and poetry, which led to a unique perspective regarding verbal and visual language. This was further strengthened by drawing inspiration from the Symbolist and Arts and Crafts movements, where a deeper appreciation and application of materials led to an understanding that the material qualities of the book *'...were as much an aspect of communication as was the thematic content of the work'* (Drucker 45–46). Austrian artist and poet Oskar Kokoschka, and his work *Die Träumenden* (*The Dreaming Youths*) (Fig. 5), is a special example of a considered approach to the creation of a book. The importance of such artists is the context in which they produced their work, as it *'...reflects the fact that books could be done by artists, with limited means, by making use of the skills and technology at their disposal'* (50). This characteristic became a large part of how 'artists' books' were, and still are, practiced, as with the ability to produce and distribute their own books, practitioners gained further autonomy over their work.

The boom that occurred in the 1960s was in part due to the rise of conceptual art. With links back to Marcel Duchamp's *readymades*, the term took form in a few variations before solidifying as the popular movement. Conceptual art, as understood today, is art where the concept is the most important aspect. As a reaction to the burgeoning notion of formalism, wherein art mediums are reduced to their essential qualities and anything more is frivolous, conceptual art encouraged dematerialisation by lessening the significance of physical forms. This quality lent itself to conceptual art becoming a practice that critiqued and avoided the commodification of art. In an attempt to bypass gallery institutions, practitioners placed the value of their work in the thought processes and methods of production. The international collective of interdisciplinary creatives Fluxus contributed to conceptual art greatly. Their work focused on experimental art performances emphasizing the artistic process over the finished product, and the medium of the book provided a unique space to practise this. Practitioners produced a number of notable 'artists' books' during this period; Dieter Roth's *Literature Sausage* (Fig. 7) and Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (Fig. 8) being just two great examples. Conceptual art was imperative to the growing 'artists' book' because it championed a mode of thinking that placed as much value, if not more, on the idea behind an artwork.

Fig. 6, *Parallelement*  
Pierre Bonnard  
1900





Fig. 7, *Literature Sausage*  
Dieter Roth  
1969



Fig. 8, *Grapefruit*  
Yoko Ono  
1964



Fig. 9, *Dell'Historia Naturale*  
Ferrante Imperato  
1599



Fig. 10, *Kunst- und Raritätenkammer*  
Frans Francken  
1636

## A Short History of the Historical *The cabinet of curiosities*

Cabinets of curiosities were 16<sup>th</sup> century European proto-museums and encyclopaedic curatorial devices. Although named cabinets, these collections would take form as entire rooms (Fig. 9 & 10), only transitioning to smaller, more cabinet-like arrangements, in later periods (Fig. 11 & 12). Most commonly dealing with natural history phenomena, the objects contained within these collections would also include geological and archaeological marvels, religious or historical relics, automata, antiquities, and works of art. There were many instances of the fantastical being represented too, items such as unicorn horns, feathers of a phoenix's tail, or the fabled zoophyte: the Scythian Lamb (Fig. 13). Through the act of collecting and displaying, curators of these cabinets employed narrative devices as a means to generate interplay between the various objects contained within — a necessary step due to the innate differences found in the rare items that subverted other collection archetypes. In practising the use of narrative devices, the curator stepped into the realm of the artist and began engaging in storytelling. As elaborated on by academic Dominika Bugno-Narecka, this act was a deeply personal one, becoming 'a projection of one's thinking about oneself, one's origin, and one's place in the world' (15).

The power of the cabinet lay in the construction of visual analogies — by way of hyperbolic juxtaposition, symmetry, and synthesis — creating space for subtle play in-between art and science, artist and curator. This manifested as eclectic collections of objects that shared little with one another but even less with the wider world. When viewed through American historian Lorraine Daston's theory of 'talkative things', the cabinets' objects melded matter and meaning, '...instantiat[ing] novelty, previously unthinkable combinations...' as '[t]heir thingness lends a vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience that break old molds...' (24). The apparent haphazardness of this was underpinned by an openness that posed ontological questions of what brings these diverse objects together?

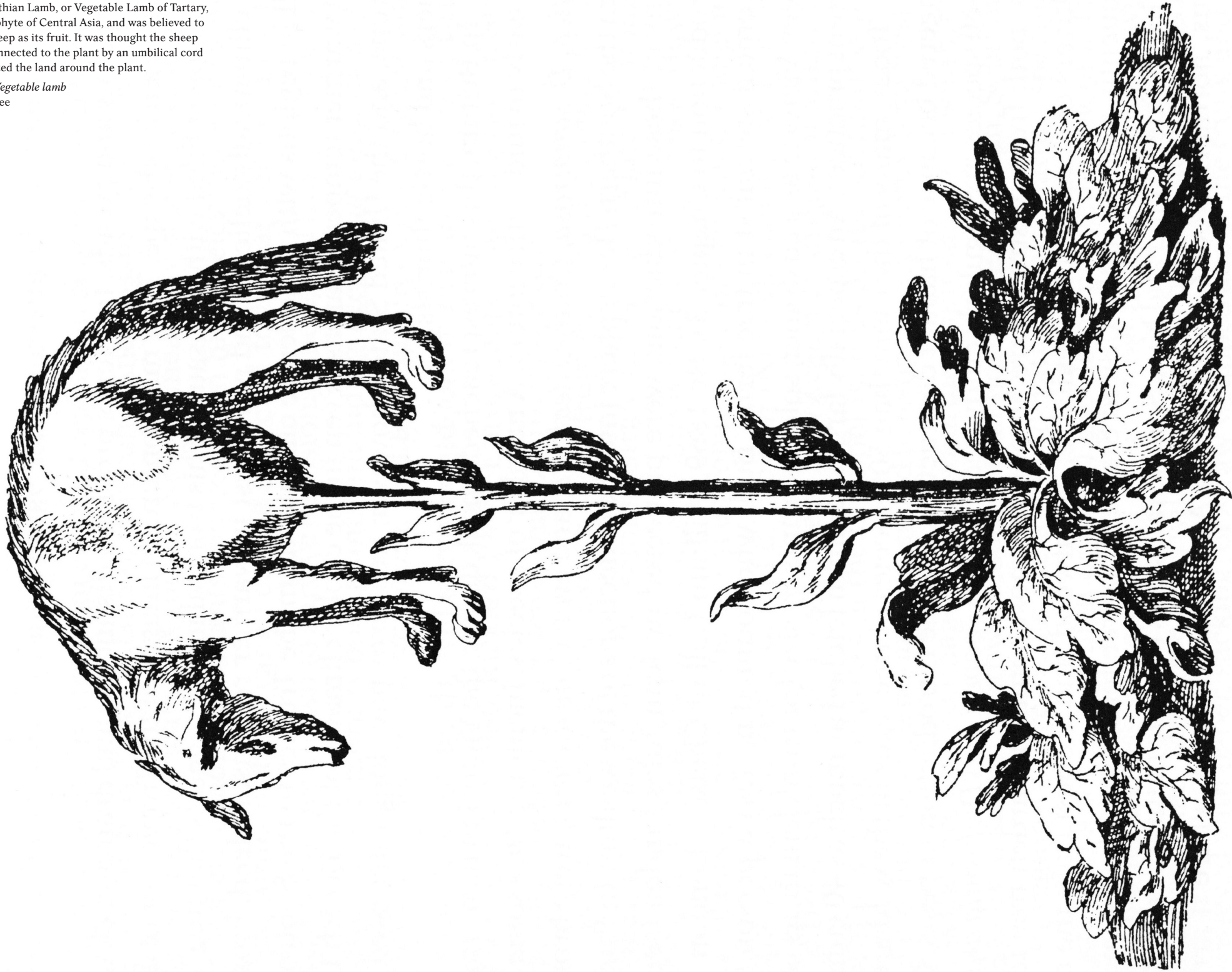
The paradigm of the cabinet functioned in part due to the fundamental wondrous nature of the objects contained within them but equally, this wonder was only as binding as it was when observed, questioned, or absorbed by participants. Imbued with thought, the cabinet generated a dynamic aura, altering it to be more than just a piece of furniture but a living repository of stories and imagination — blurring the line between fact and fiction in a distinctly delphic dance. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as Enlightenment thinking hastened advancements in scientific rationality and modern taxonomies, the interest in the cabinet of curiosities as a repository of archaic wonders waned.



Fig 11 & 12, *Cabinet*  
Melchior Baumgartner &  
Jeremias Sibenburg  
1903

The Scythian Lamb, or Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, is a zoophyte of Central Asia, and was believed to grow sheep as its fruit. It was thought the sheep were connected to the plant by an umbilical cord and grazed the land around the plant.

Fig. 13, *Vegetable lamb*  
Henry Lee  
1887





## Skeletons in the Cabinet

*Conceptualising  
the cabinet's themes*

The cabinet of curiosities has been a source of inspiration for both the theory surrounding this research and many of its resulting bookworks. But, viewed from 2025, there are elements that are deeply problematic. Acts of colonisation and appropriation were commonplace when dealing with so-called 'primitive' art or antiquities (Fig. 14). With more time, I would have critiqued these areas more thoroughly but as it stands, a focus was necessary. Two key aspects I've aimed to embody in my modes of working were curiosity and wonder, as I see these aspects as integral to the true utopian appeal of the cabinet — and of books. I approached each bookwork with these attributes in mind, as I believe that there should always be moments of wonder and curiosity during any book's reading experience, regardless of the content and regardless of the form that content has taken. This is born from our relationship with information and the way in which we derive pleasure from knowing, our innate curiosity guiding us to unpack the world — real and fictional — around us.

To call back to the closing statement from *A Book With No Orientation*, Krista and I used the word naïve when discussing the attitude we held. Naivety in that context referred to our understanding that we may not have the whole picture figured out, and that that was a good thing. Embracing our fledgling status allowed us to be more receptive to the new environments that we found ourselves in. That is not to say that unknowing and ignorance were wanted, but that a small amount of idealistic 'why not?' was a valuable trait. I have aimed to keep this attitude while working on this project, realising how strongly it aligns with the cabinet of curiosities' unique characteristic of arrangements underpinned by crafted visual analogies. For *What Is It, If It Is Not This?*, this archetypal visual analogy played an altered but integral role in the overarching relationship between the bookworks; bringing ideas together, ones that seem insignificant in relation to one another, to curate a journey.

Underneath this, I was encouraged to pursue a personal approach to this work, the natural sense-making tones of the cabinet of curiosities pushing me to embrace an auto-ethnographic design practice.

Fig. 14, *Eclecticism and accumulation — André Breton in his Paris Apartment*  
Sabine Weiss  
1960

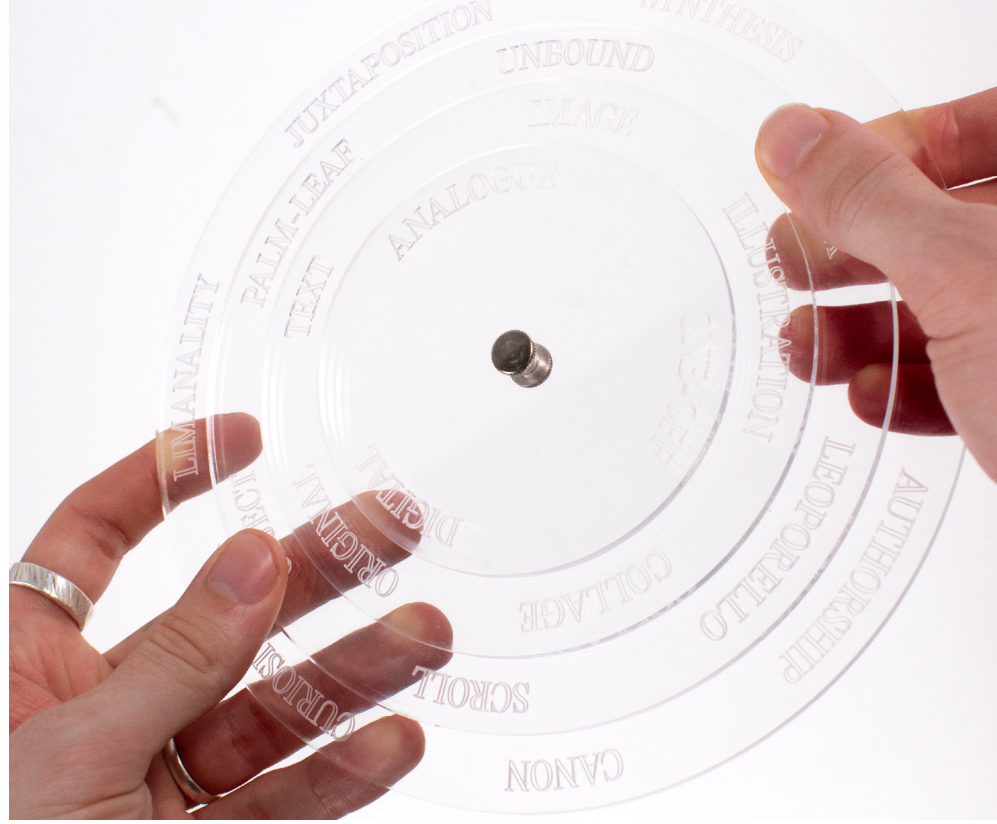


Bookwork — 02

44 — 47

# Untitled A Book Matrix

As a result of my grappling with the cabinet and its themes, *Untitled*, *A Book Matrix* was conceived as a tool to help distinguish between the many subtypes of bookworks I was encountering. The rotating discs were a functional stepping-stone, allowing for the different keywords to be aligned — each ring representing a different layer of information. Moving outward, the different layers are: printing method, content medium, binding method, and cabinet theme; although many other categories and keywords were considered. Though a by-product of legibility, the clarity I gained from pondering what keywords were most relevant became an unsung benefit to this research; my shift in focus from arbitrary book archetypes to cabinet themes being particularly pertinent. Originally envisioned on paper, the first acrylic test resulted in an object with a weight reminiscent of the familiar feel of a book. Although the disc-like pages were initially a functional choice, the more I interacted with them, the more I turned them — familiar weight in my hands — the stronger the urge to name this object a bookwork became. From this point onwards, the use for *Untitled*, *A Book Matrix* morphed as it became a bookwork for generating ideas. Contained in a clear, albeit unique, reading experience, pages are turned, as with any book, and information is gleaned. *Untitled*, *A Book Matrix* is a distinct representation of an 'ambiguous' bookwork and was a key part of my initial explorations, especially when I was unsure of where those explorations should be heading.



# Akin to Portable Exhibitions

## *‘Artists’ books’ & the cabinet of curiosities*

To outline the relationship between the cabinet of curiosities and this research’s exploration of the ‘artists’ books’ landscape, I will raise four key points that link the two unique practices together. As letterpress revivalist Jon Beacham mentioned when discussing his work in *Books: Art, Craft & Community*, ‘...books in themselves are akin to what I feel are portable exhibitions’ (38). This is reiterated by art historian and writer Lucy Lippard when she describes the ‘artists’ book’ by saying, ‘with few exceptions, it is all of a piece, consisting of one serial work or a series of closely related ideas and/or images — a portable exhibition’ (45). While not explicitly exhibitions, and while not explicitly portable, cabinets of curiosities share the same sentiment in that they make use of ‘closely related ideas and/or images to build a narrative.’

### **01. The Avoidance of Taxonomies**

The dissonance between theorists and their associated terminologies marks a very apparent issue in the language surrounding ‘artists’ books’, and it could be reasoned that the ‘zone of activity’ represented by the term sits outside our current taxonomies. The cabinet of curiosities, born at a time when scientific rationality was in its infancy, was deeply rooted in the exploitation of a lack of categorisation. Many collections were interested in objects that specifically questioned the current understanding of the natural world. ‘Artists’ books’ align with the cabinet in this interest at the intersection of known and unknown, of objects that challenge standing knowledge and encourage progression.

### **02. Intermedia Tendencies**

Cabinets of curiosities during the Renaissance were eclectic in nature. There were still collections of art or natural material that favoured repetitive quantity but cabinets made use of visual analogy, which was best implemented with varied items. From landscapes of moonlit scenes to preserved tropical marine fish to small pieces of amber, it was the relationship between these objects that collectors used to construct narratives. Books share this intermedia trait; with the capacity to house not just text and image but also a wide range of marks and materials, and for these elements to overlap in limitless combinations. ‘Artists’ books’ emphatically make use of this quality (Drucker 70). Johanna Drucker highlights a further similarity, noting the qualities of the book afford ‘...potential to stretch from the sublime to the ridiculous, the ordinary to the unusual, the inconspicuously neutral to the absolutely outrageous...’ (70).

### **03. Sense-making**

This body of research was born from a lack of language to discuss our practice and a desire to better understand the ‘artists’ book’ landscape. The cabinet of curiosities spawned from a desire to better understand the wider world, and one’s place within it (Bugno-Narecka 15). Because of the analogous nature of the curatorial practice employed by those creating cabinets, the collector was at the centre of the process. Auto-ethnographic design achieves a similar stance, that of the designer at the centre of the process, by ‘...binding research, expression, and one’s own personal exploration’ (Kaethler and Schouwenberg 21). Furthermore, ‘artists’ books’ themselves have the ability ‘...to express personal, political, or abstract ideas’ (Drucker 70). Each of these three aspects — auto-ethnographic design practices, ‘artists’ books’, and the cabinet of curiosities — apply a similar filter of personal view to their process in an attempt to unearth new perspectives.

### **04. Curiosity and Wonder**

When discussing housing ‘artists’ books’ in libraries, artists’ book scholar Clive Phillpot talks to the potential immeasurable mystification factor of stumbling on any such unique book. As he puts it, he would like to encourage ‘...the creation of opportunities for people to get that wonderful moment of not understanding’ as they ‘...become mystified or be given surprises by coming across puzzling artists’ books...’ (15). Although focussing on the outcome of a practical application of the library system, the sentiment of an unexpected reading experience seen in an expected context stands. One of the greatest traits of the ‘artists’ book’ is that these moments described by Phillpot are present in the works themselves — that mystification, curiosity, and wonder, among many other emotions, are at the core of the practice. The book, as an expected medium, provides space for many unexpected reading experiences. As Drucker says, ‘*Presses and artists for whom books are the core of their work continue to emerge with every possible profile of practice imaginable: small, limited editions, funky work, strategic volumes meant for social intervention, objects of wonder, popular and esoteric pieces are all part of the current scene* [emphasis added]’ (VIII).



Fig. 15, *Box in a Valise*  
Marcel Duchamp  
1935–41



Fig. 16, *Everson Museum Catalogue Box*  
Yoko Ono  
1971

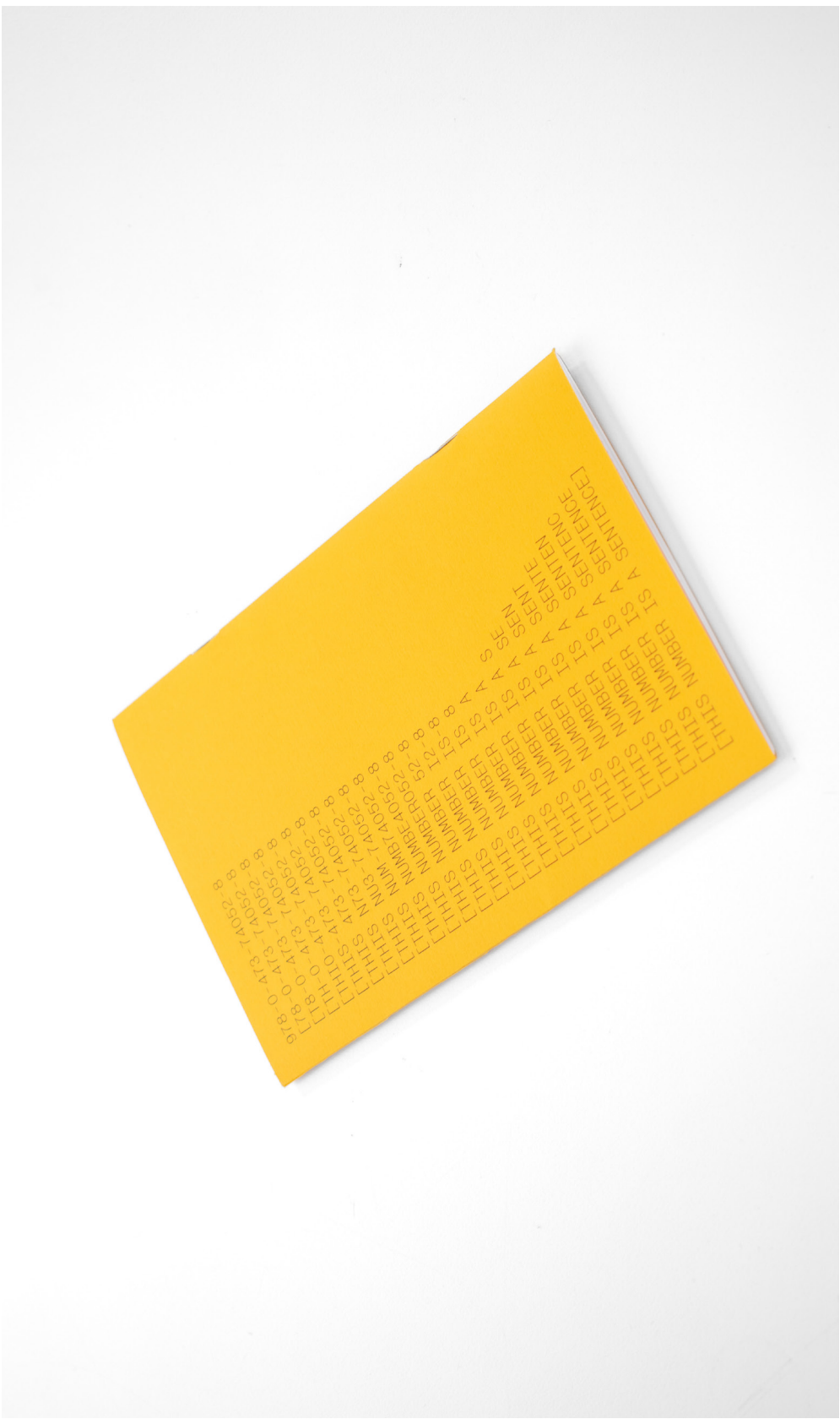
## A Codable Mode for Curation

### *Avoiding systems of the library*

As Clive Phillpot writes in *Booktrek* regarding the polarising task of attempting to house ‘artists’ books’: ‘If you are going to have a collection that is publicly accessible, then these books, sometimes referred to as a ‘democratic art form’, really should be accessible...’ and although I have steered clear of the library in favour of the museum’s precursor, I still agree with Phillpot’s statement on a fundamental level. Objects with multiple pages do not lend themselves to museum display cases, as the necessity to engage in any book’s reading experience is of the utmost importance.

I use the words precursor purposefully, as, while certain procedures have remained the same and others changed, most modern museums follow a similar structure dictated by taxonomies. Libraries, while resulting from, and continuing to follow different procedures, impose similar structures. The importance of this lies within both institutions’ tendency for order, as the collecting of books, or objects, into public archives requires some level of categorisation to function. With my ultimate goal being to establish an understanding of an ‘artists’ book’ landscape, and *my* position within it, the structure of this research became not only about the necessary interaction with the pages of the book but my ability to move uninfluenced by either institution. By avoiding library structures, I avoid previous ideas regarding the categorisation and handling of books. Many cabinets employed the familiar ‘no touching’ of modern museums but objects were often kept unboxed; although this does not bridge the issue of turning pages, it did provide a more intimate interaction with the objects. This quirk has led me to interpret the cabinet not as a facsimile of the modern museum but as a codable mode for curation and storytelling.

Heavily inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s *Box in a Valise* (Fig. 15) and Yoko Ono’s *Everson Museum Catalogue Box* (Fig. 16), *What Is It, If It Is Not This?* takes form as a liminal object — between the library and the cabinet, between the institutional and the personal — and resides somewhere next to a uniquely shaped ‘home library’.



**978-0-473-74052-8**  
**This Number is a Sentence**

# 03

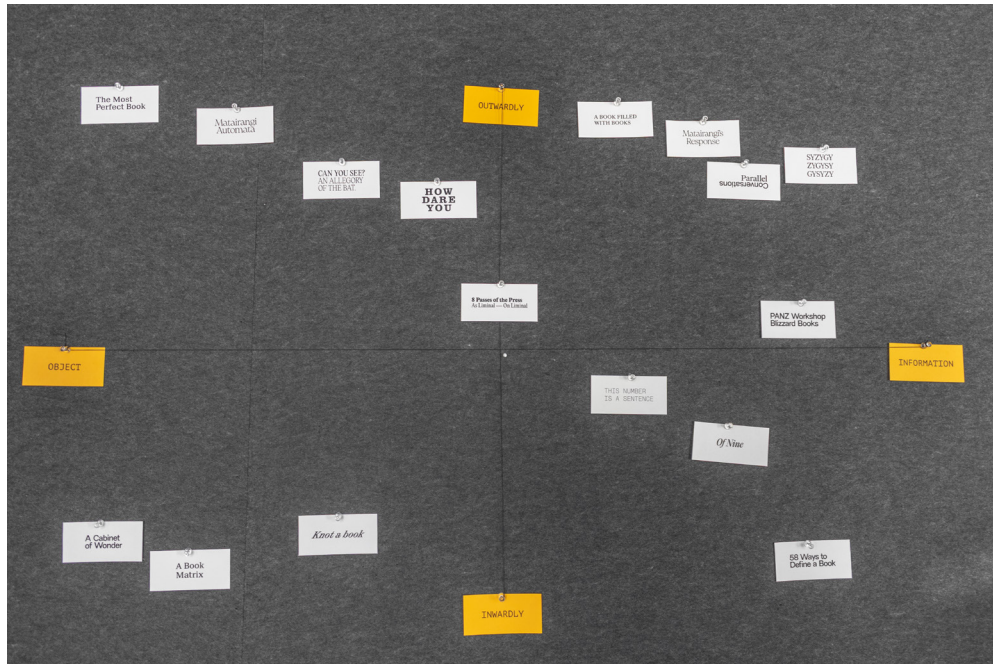
When artists' book scholar Clive Phillpot served as the Director of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he employed the constraint that an artists' book must be published in a print run over 100 for it to be accepted into the museum's collection, citing that this trait displayed *'that the artist was committed to the multiplication and potentially wide distribution of their work, was committed to the Gutenberg revolution, and not to artificial scarcity'* (16). Alongside this, in many instances for a book to be considered 'published', it must be assigned an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and be publicly available.

Produced in a print run of 100 and stocked in bookstores, and having an assigned ISBN, *This Number is a Sentence* is a book by definition. Containing a poem toiling with the detachment that occurs when a book is reduced to a number, the bookwork's text has been written using ISBNs of existing publications. To read *This Number is a Sentence* as it was intended, the numbers found on its pages must be converted back to the words they represent.

There will only ever be 100 copies of *This Number is a Sentence*, which is just enough for it to exist, supposedly.

Produced in collaboration with Krista Barnaby





# Mapping the Unknown

*Identifying edges of practice*

Throughout this project I have developed a form of mapping (Fig 17) for the work I have made. This was a tool for me to acknowledge what had been made and what needed making, with the goal of probing as many combinations of bookworks as possible. By identifying edges of practice I hoped to gain a better understanding of what the different types and subtypes of bookworks may be. The initial inspiration for this came from an excerpt from the book: *1000 Artists' Books* in which book artist Peter Thomas explains his thought process when discerning what may or may not be considered an 'artists' book'.

*Generally, if an object has book-like qualities recognizable by either the maker or the viewer, then it is fair to call it an artists' book... I find it more interesting to discover what the book-like qualities are by asking questions such as: "Where on the scale of object to information does it fit?" (6-7)*

I understand Thomas' scale to be bookworks that oscillate between fixed and interactive. A bookwork that leans towards information offers an opportunity to be picked up and read, to get something from the *experience of reading* it. A bookwork that leans towards object is more sculpture than book — a sculpture that maintains book-like qualities, but a sculpture nonetheless. You may be able to observe an object-bookwork, to read something in it or take away something from it, but you are not able to pick it up, to turn its pages (if it has any), or, most importantly, enjoy the *reading experience* with it. Clive Phillpot proffers the word 'mute' as a descriptor for object-bookworks in his pivotal publication *Booktrek*. Although not used in my map, 'mute' reinforces my interpretation of Thomas' label — object-bookworks are mute in their existence.

Unlike the horizontal axis, the vertical axis labels have shifted constantly. The first set of labels to be used were 'inwardly' and 'outwardly' in an attempt to acknowledge the internal nature of a book artist's intent. Over the course of the project however, this gave way to words that looked more at the autonomous existence of a bookwork once it has been produced. 'Book-ish' and 'unbook-ish' existed for a brief moment before being rightfully replaced with the terms 'ambiguous' and 'obvious'. These labels reflect a bookworks ability to be identified as a bookwork. With many instances of 'artists' books' abandoning traditional book tropes, this is a necessary step in identifying 'artists' books'.

The axis of the map were constantly in flux but what the map represented was persistent — the perimeter of the graph acting as my current understanding of the proverbial borders to the 'artists' book' landscape, and each new entry was a sound wave reverberating off of them.

Fig. 17, *Boundary Map*  
Author  
2025



Bookwork — 04

58 — 61

# Eight Passes of the Press As Liminal, On Liminal

# 04

Near the start of my research, blogging as a tool for summarising and archiving my thoughts was suggested. I thoroughly liked this idea, it gave me cause to write (every book designer's bane being a lack of content), although the use of a literal blog seemed ill-fitting for this body of work. Inspired by Marshall McLuhan's *The medium is the Massage*, *8 Passes of the Press* is the first instalment in a series of small bookworks that attempt to capture my exploration of the different characteristics that make up the cabinet of curiosities.

Drawing on Peter Thomas' original axis labels used in the making of *Mapping The Unknown*, *8 Passes of the Press* represents the cabinet of curiosities' liminal qualities. The growing distinction between archaic and proto-contemporary knowledge placed the cabinet in a transitional moment – acting as a threshold object, and in turn a threshold concept. The underlying notion of object-to-information is pivotal in understanding the cabinet in its entirety, for that is what it was; a spectrum of both object and information, of informed and uninformed, of known and unknown, and the importance of the cabinet lay in the space between. Printed using a traditional printing press and engraved plate, each page after *8 Passes of the Press*' first was reprinted using a *ghost-print* of the original – the plate retaining less and less ink as more prints were completed – generating a gradient of legibility. One side of the work embodies information and the other object. Designed using a leporello format, the spectrum that the bookwork represents is able to be viewed in its entirety once the dust jacket has been removed, and it stands that somewhere in the middle there must be the perfect representation of an 'artists' book'.



03

Methodologies  
& Research  
Questions

# Section Preface

This chapter introduces the research question and its iterations followed by a wider contextual framing regarding the Oulipo, and more specific sections detailing the use of auto-ethnographic design practices in tandem with the notion of iterative practice-led research and research-led practice.

How can the notion of the cabinet of curiosities be interrogated and implemented as a framework to explore, develop and redefine the genre of ‘artists’ books’?

Through an auto-ethnographic approach to design, of the notion of the cabinet of curiosities be interrogated and implemented as a framework to explore the ‘artists’ books’ landscape, and my position within it.

How can auto-ethnographic design practices be used to explore and contextualise the landscape of ‘artists’ books’?



## A Playful Practice

### *The Oulipo*

Introduced to me by the late Lee Jensen, the French literary group, the Oulipo — Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle — have been a vital influence on the way I approach ‘artists’ book’ design. Conceived in 1960 by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, the art-mad savant and the math-mad poet, the Oulipo resolved to invent novel literary forms and new ways to tell stories. While their work is rooted in the construction of a piece of text rather than the format that the text takes (Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Fig. 18), the founding work of the Oulipo, being a wonderful exception) their playful attitude resonated with me. Described as ‘rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape’ by Queneau himself, the Oulipo’s playfulness was underpinned by a systematic use of constraint to tighten the parameters of the creative process, encouraging unique, and often nonsensical, outputs. Performance art practitioner Dr Oliver Bray, elaborates that: *‘the [O]ulipian final goal, if there is one, connects to their pataphysical lineage through a desire to have completed every possibility, privileging a process that playfully depends on the idea of summation, while acknowledging its impossibility’* (42). There is a link between the Oulipian completionist mindset and that of the cabinet of curiosities as an attempted encyclopaedic panorama of the curator’s, or my, peripherals.

Fig. 18, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*  
Raymond Queneau  
1961

## Making as Method

### *Practice-led research*

When I learn a new word, one that really captures my attention, it often catalyses a wellspring of ideas that manifest as making. This reflexive habit has been a steady source for many of the design outputs that make up this body of work, and beyond; in this sense, making is how I truly understand something.

My making as a responsive means to ground new knowledge aligns with the iterative cyclic web of practice-led research and research-led practice developed by academics Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean. Combining several cycles and sub-cycles, their model highlights the links between academic research, practice-led research, and research-led practice, culminating in a holistic view of how a creative research practice might function. A distinguishing feature is the ability to move both clockwise, and counter-clockwise, through the stages, and to move ‘spider-like, to any other’ (Smith and Dean 19); most importantly however, is the ability to *repeat* stages when needed. This leads to many defining points of entry into their proposed structure, suggesting the diverse range of approaches that a creative research practice might begin with, before permeating into other areas of research. Smith and Dean acknowledge the similarities between this aspect of their model and the philosophical Deleuzian rhizomes proclaimed in-betweenness of knowledge, as Deleuze and Guattari remark: *‘A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo’* (qtd. In Deleuze and Guattari 25). The overlapping qualities of in-betweenness start to develop further, drawing a parallel between ‘artists’ books’ intersectionality and the cabinet of curiosities. Existing in this in-between allows for a practice that moves away from the traditional flow of known to unknown and towards a more interesting one of unknown to known. Artist Graeme Sullivan elaborates on this, noting that *‘the artist intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched’* in ‘a reflexive process’ (Smith and Dean 28). This cycle of learn, ruminate, make, only to learn again foregrounds a design process that allows for a reflective practice.

As this work was exploratory in nature, it was important to let my responsiveness lead many of the avenues I examined, ‘serendipity and intuition’ being essential parts of experimental inquiry for their ability to *‘direct attention to unanticipated possibilities’* (Smith and Dean 48).



Bookwork—05

70-73

**SYZYGY**



# JWBV JWVI

## A Stone In My Shoe *Auto-ethnographic Design Practices*

My fixation with the book has been something of a stone in my shoe because it has never really felt justified. It's always seemed self-indulgent; always coming from *my* view of things, always using *my* experiences and interests to shape the work. I've now come to understand this as an auto-ethnographic practice. As a research methodology, auto-ethnography begins to blur the line between researcher and researched, author and subject (Smith and Dean 28). Within design specifically, auto-ethnography alters the design process itself — acknowledging the centrality of the values, perspectives and experiences of the designer — shifting the act of design from something that is consistently seen as a pragmatic response to externalities into something that is self-reflexive.

In their book *The Auto-ethnographic Turn in Design*, editors Michael Kaethler and Louise Schouwenberg elaborate on this new design process as one that *'...doesn't start with a problem or issue to address but rather a tension to explore'* (19). Am I an artist or a designer? It is through this body of work that I aim to gain a better perspective on this mystifying identity touchstone I seek so desperately; and it is through *'...binding research, expression, and one's own personal exploration'* that *'design can play a crucial role of sense making..'* (Kaethler and Schouwenberg 21). The unity of individual expressionism and the vast entity of design gives way to space in which objects of deeply personal sentiments may thrive, ones that convey: *'traumas, fears, obsessions, hopes, fascinations, passions, and more'* (Kaethler and Schouwenberg 13). Auto-ethnographic design is a tool for sense-making, for locating oneself in the world — for echolocating.

A conclusion drawn from a conversation between Jo Bailey, Anna Brown, and myself. It must be noted (for Jo's sake) that Jo did not explicitly call me a bat but instead proffered up the idea of echolocation as a metaphor for this work and how I approached it. I leaned wholeheartedly into it.

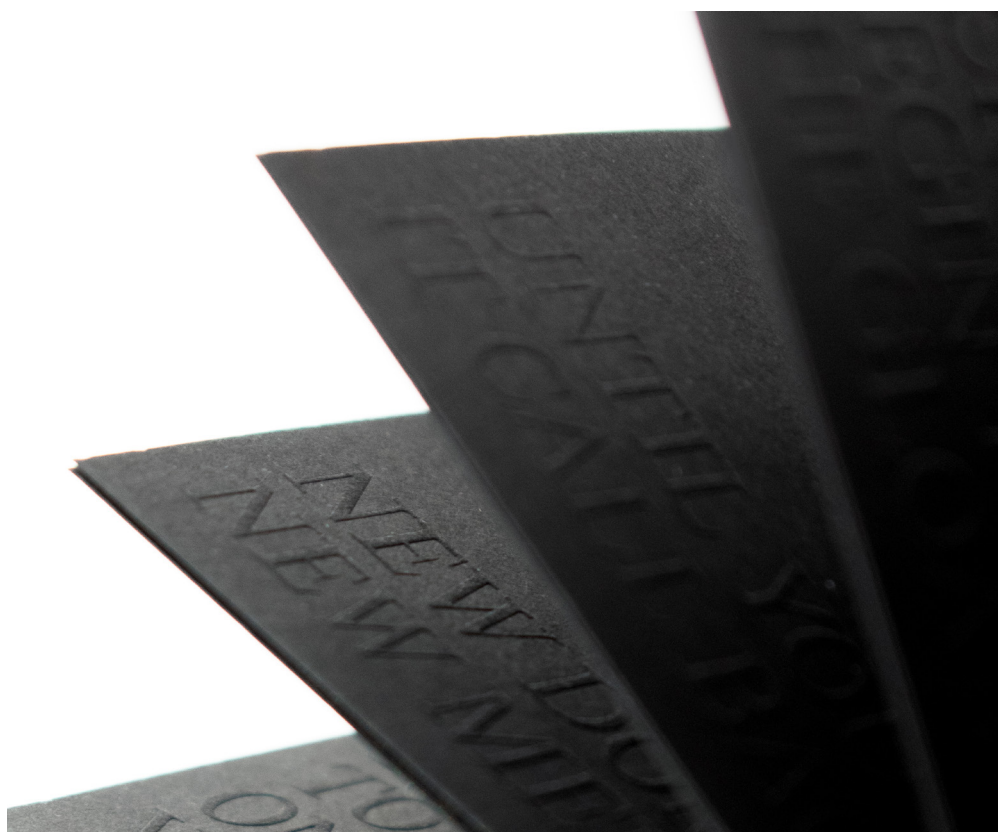


Bookwork—06

76–79

# Can You See? An Allegory of The Bat

Written as a short allegory that unpacks the metaphor of echolocation further, *Can You See?* tells the story of a bat that has yet to make that leap of faith into the unknown, having not found trust in its ability to see in the darkness. Only once hunger has set in, spurring it on, and it hears back the call of what *might* be the walls ahead, does it set out – knowing that it will have to rest again, hopefully in an unfamiliar, yet welcoming, territory. The metaphor of bats, and their echolocation, unfolds on a few different layers: firstly, the proportions of the work and the orientation of the text within mimic their physicality and common upside-down posture; and secondly, the method of printing, known as a blind-deboss, allows the words of the allegory to be marked on each page without the use of ink. This technique utilises the material as part of the message, so to seem that the darkness is speaking back. A fitting by-product of a deboss is that it leaves an inverted emboss on the reverse side of printing – something of a trace, an echo. *Can You See?* is an example of the organic inspiration that so commonly finds a place within the 'artists' book' practice, and it acts as a marker for a turn within this work that better cemented my cognisant position in this design process.



04

‘Artists’ Book’  
Theory

# Section Preface

This chapter begins by further unpacking the slipperiness surrounding the ‘artists’ book’ term, as well as some more specific and pivotal historical moments that led to its current understanding. This is followed by noting some of the different approaches that theorists have taken in an attempt to define the area of practice. Each approach is analysed and critiqued so as to feed my discussion regarding the potential for a ‘designers’ book’.

*‘Perhaps the hardest thing to do in connection with the artist’s book is to find the right language for discussing it’*

— *Dick Higgins*

## An Elusive Term

*The slipperiness of ‘artists’ books’*

The edges of the ‘artists’ book’ practice are an known-unknown. As a metaphorical landscape, the boundaries of the term sit just out of reach, with attempt after attempt to finitely mark its borders falling short. This is not due to a lack of trying, with many terms, lists, and definitions being proposed over the years but, as American artist Dick Higgins recognises, *‘Perhaps the hardest thing to do in connection with the artist’s book is to find the right language for discussing it’* (12). As time has passed, more and more ‘artists’ book’ practitioners, theorists, and even critics have begun to oppose the idea of an exact definition altogether. The debate regarding what constitutes an ‘artists’ book’ is such a struggle in part due to the manner in which the area of practice came to be. With so many overlapping art, design, and literary movements dabbling in the mutable form of the book over the last century, and with these movements rooted in such varying mediums, it became a cradle for experimentation. Rather than naming a concise set of definitions, Johanna Drucker opts to instead call her work in *The Century of Artists’ Books* a ‘zone of activity’. As she reasons, *‘If all the elements or activities which contribute to artists’ books as a field are described[,] what emerges is a space made by their intersection...’* (2). And as artists’ book scholars Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden proclaim, *‘Book arts needs to [be] open, interdisciplinary and flexible enough to allow all who wish to join a place’* (9). Phillpot assures this by noting that, *‘Artists’ books are distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation, and literature all come together’* (33). It becomes clear that some of the most influential theorists have rightfully left the idea of a singular area of practice behind, recognising that *‘one of the characteristics of the field is its mongrel nature’* (Phillpot and Lauf 33). So why is it then, if there is a growing understanding that the term needs to be more open — more interdisciplinary — that the word ‘artist’, or indeed any variation of it, is still in use? And why is it then, if the term is interdisciplinary, that the word ‘design’ is not included when discussing its intersections?

*‘A Preface’ Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook,*  
Dick Higgins  
1987

Both ‘artists’ books’, with the distinct use of the plural possessive apostrophe, and ‘artist’s book’, with the singular, have been heavily criticised during the term’s contemporary theorising; with many critics having acknowledged the detrimental nature of the term. American artist and author Richard Kostelanetz hones in on the terms denotation of the artist, outright calling it a failure because of its narrowness, as ‘...it defines a work of art by the initial profession (or education) of its author, rather than by qualities of the work itself. Since genuine critical categories are meant to define art of a particular kind, it is a false term. The art at hand is books, no matter who did them; and it is differences among them, rather than in their authorship, that should comprise the stuff of critical discourse’ (28–29). Artist and author Michalis Pichler unpacks this further as he states that, “*Artist’s book*” as a term is problematic because it ghettoizes, enforces the separation from broader everyday practices and limits the subversive potential of books by putting an art tag on them.’ Pichler adds ‘Lawrence Weiner once cut through the Gordian knot by concluding: “Don’t call it an artist’s book, just call it a book.”’ When many of the visual arts are distinguished by the medium, this highlights the most glaring oddity in the inclusion of the word ‘artist’. Terms such as video art and performance art exist, or even simply paintings or sculptures, so what about ‘book art’ or again, even simply ‘books’ (Phillpot, *Real Lush*)? The concerns surrounding the term stretch so far as to say that ‘artists’ books as a term refers only [to] itself...’ (Bodman and Sowden 6) and as a distinctly esoteric area of practice, but one that is deeply concerned with the democratisation and circulation of its outputs, the term itself should never be esoteric.

Something that becomes even more apparent while sifting through the swathes of definitions, interpretations, and unpackings, is that the word design almost never surfaces. Even when discussing so-called peripheral practices, design is still one of many other off-handedly mentioned disciplines. The further that this research has gone on, the more this absence of ‘design’ has left a very apparent lacuna. This reinforcement is addressed loosely by looking at initial practices associated with the art and design movements that were so prolific prior to the generation of the term ‘artists’ book’. Much of the printed matter that was being produced during this period was functional in nature — manifestoes, leaflets, pamphlets, magazines, and books — with the writers, designers, typographers only ever viewing their work as aiding in the effectiveness of literary form (Phillpot, ‘Some Contemporary Artists and Their Books’ 101). Phillpot further condemns design as he declares that: ‘*Their art was something separate.*’

A parallel can be drawn then, between this separation and the separation occurring when ‘...the term “artists’ books” incorporates the suggestion that such work should be set aside in a space separate from writers’ books — that, by implication, they constitute a minor league apart from the big business of real books’ (Kostelanetz 29). The potential for the term ‘designers’ book’, may perpetuate the isolation that is occurring. Instead, if the perspective shifts regarding what the primary goal of ‘artists’ books’ are as a medium, and the role of circumvention is lessened — recentering on the exploration and exploitation

of the form of the book — then a more open, more interdisciplinary, and still independent term may be established; as a meaningful by-product of a medium such as the book is the accessibility it offers. In doing so, we hopefully may find that the inventive application of the book’s form comes to the fore, and that the process becomes auxiliary (Bodman and Sowden 9).

Another common viewpoint considered by theorists is that maybe ‘...artists’ books are best defined as whatever isn’t anything else’ (Lippard 56). Phillpot affirms this as he notes: ‘It is true one could say that artists’ books today are more defined negatively, ie. by what they are not (a standard exhibition catalogue or monograph, for instance), than by what they are’ (8). When pondering what it is that makes ‘artists’ books’ so hard to pinpoint, Lippard put it best when she said, ‘Artists’ books spread the word — whatever word that may be.’ as, although said in reference to the imperative aspect of circulation, they can be *whatever* (10). So one could see merit in an approach that favours the subtractive definition. However, this stance outwardly disregards the most important ethos of ‘artists’ books’ completely. If the term focuses on the negative, on what isn’t done, then the practice’s ability to think using the imaginative *what if?* is diminished; as ‘*Perhaps this negative definition defines the trap of inaccessibility artists’ books have fallen into.*’ (Lippard 56)

To end, I quote Bodman and Sowden’s interview with visual artist Ulrike Stoltz: ‘...the discussion about artists’ books might end up with a question that Sartre used to ask Simone de Beauvoir when she started writing: *What do you have to say?*’ (9). And I’ve found, when designing any experimental publication, the question that must be asked is: what is it that this book is trying to say?

*What do  
you have  
to say?*

Quote from a paraphrased  
interview with Ulrike Stoltz.  
*A Manifesto for the Book*  
Sarah Bodman & Tom Sowden  
2010



# How Dare You: An Ode to Ida Applebroog

Regardless of what else the term might encompass, I am of the opinion that an artwork made by an artist, utilising formal qualities of the book and where the book's form is its first and only medium, should be described as an 'artists' book'.

Self-titled 'generic artist', Ida Applebroog was a prolific New York artist whose work often discusses themes of power, violence, gender politics, and female sexuality. Among the many mediums she explored, Applebroog produced a number of 'artists' books', with one of her pivotal pieces being: *The Blue Books: a performance (in 7 parts)* (Fig. 19). The work consists of a set of seven 20-page stapled paperbacks, each book housing a single illustration – done in Applebroog's distinct style – repeated across the majority of the pages, deviating only to make singular topographic interventions or, occasionally, leave the page blank. What makes the work so inventive is Applebroog's understanding that these works are performances, or stagings. Her subtle interrogation of the book's form takes place as the page becomes a physical space in which her performers act out their scenes, while simultaneously subverting the traditional flow of time, normally signified by the page turning, by repeating illustrations. I consider Applebroog's *The Blue Books* to be an example of a true 'artists' book'.

Fig. 19, *The Blue Books: a performance (in 7 parts)*  
Ida Applebroog  
1981



*How Dare You: An Ode To Ida Applebroog* mimics *The Blue Books* aesthetic qualities – making use of similar typefaces, arrangements, and line qualities. However, I was particularly interested in the typographic interventions present in Applebroog's narratives and how much context the words, and the typefaces they are set in, offer. In a subversion of elements, *How Dare You* consists of many typographic fragments and a singular illustration, more importantly however, it uses the turning of the pages, and the characteristically short amount of them, to express the passing of a few brief moments of conversation. *How Dare You* is an ode to the subtle but powerful way in which Ida Applebroog engaged in the practice of 'artists' books', and represents my performance as an artist producing what I would consider to be an 'artists' book'.



The Artist's *Book* as Democratic Multiple *(division 01)* / The Artist's Book as Rare and/or Auratic Object *(division 02)* / The Codex and its Variations *(division 03)* / Self-reflexivity in *Book* Form *(division 04)* / The *Book* as Visual Form *(division 05)* / *Books* as Verbal Exploration *(division 06)* / The *Book* as Sequence: Narrative and Non-narrative *(division 07)* / The Artist's *Book* as an Agent of Social Change *(division 08)* / The *Book* as Conceptual Space (Performance and Exhibition) *(division 09)* / The *Book* as Document *(division 10)* / Metaphor and Form: The Artist's *Book* in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century *(division 11)*

## Vital Aspects

### *Other attempts at a canon*

Before discussing any of the other terms used in an attempt to more accurately describe the area of practice known as 'artists' books', I must first reassure my use of the term 'bookwork'. While I am not of the opinion that 'bookwork' accurately and recognisably describes the 'artists' book' 'zone of activity', it is, in my opinion, the most appropriate of the terms commonly discussed. Not only does a 'bookwork' refer to 'the sum of all the material and formal elements' but also to '...books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work' (Carrión, *Bookworks Revisited* 8). However, there is a further distinction to make here; many of Carrión's interpretations of the term allude to the visual arts but never outright include them, whereas Phillpot often cites 'bookworks' as '...the work of art in book form...' (Phillpot 147) or '...the artwork that is dependent upon the book structure to articulate its content' (Phillpot 149). I would argue that if art-work is the terminology for the visual high arts (painting or drawing, say), 'bookwork' should more accurately and broadly refer to any such visual/verbal work that subverts, exploits, or questions the traditional form or practices associated with the book. The key distinction being the avoidance to label the work as artwork, when the book is its own, separate, entity.

Johanna Drucker has avoided any such debate by instead discussing the more conceptual aspects of the medium. In *The Century of Artists' Books*, the 14 chapters subside into 11 divisions of 'artists' books'. The discussions raised in each of the chapters are poignant to the overall discussion of the 'artists' books', while rarely interacting with the term itself. What makes this set of ideas so relevant, is the attention to the spirit of the medium, as each division represents a key pathway that is readily explored — as, once again, exploration of the fundamental book elements is imperative to the area of practice.

My interpretation of Drucker's  
proposed divisions of 'artists's books'  
*The Century of Artists' Books*  
Johanna Drucker  
1995

In contrasting fashion, Peter Thomas offers this list of terminology related to the materiality of ‘artists’ books’. While not discussing the potential overarching term, or the theory behind it, Thomas’ index offers peripheral information regarding the formal qualities of the outputs the definitions are concerned with. While a tenuous task, it is important to keep in mind the seemingly limitless potential that the medium of the book offers. This becomes particularly relevant if a subtractive definition where to take hold, as excluding work based solely on what is and isn’t considerably book-like, or more importantly pseudo-book-like, may be an appropriate approach.

In their work *A Manifesto for the Book*, Bodman and Sowden attempted to provide a new term to the current discourse. Their criteria included the potential incorporation of screen-based work and audiobooks, fine press books and livres d’artistes, as well as artists producing codices, and their various forms, in multiple — this goal led them to ‘Artists’ Publishing’. While they themselves acknowledge the many flaws in this term, the biggest issue is the removal of the word book. The swap to ‘publishing’ provides the intended reach for work normally too far removed from the book by its nature (the likes of ebooks and audiobooks) but in doing so begins to sever the most important part of any ‘artists’ book’ definition — the book. There is the added caveat that, by its very nature, the word publishing implies work produced en masse, or at least multiple, with aims to distribute. The practitioners engaging with Bodman and Sowden’s body of work (Fig. 20 & 21) recognised this too, with traditional bookmakers resisting due to feeling like the term ‘...excluded them on the grounds that they did not ‘publish’ art’ (5). Through this attempted introduction of ‘Artists’ Publishing’, it becomes more clear that the word ‘book’ is imperative to any potential term, whatever it may be, as it is the categorical questioning of standard book forms that makes ‘artists’ books’ so enticing. Without the word book included, the term loses its power.

My interpretation of the Thomas’ information for structural genres

*1000 Artists’ Books*  
Peter Thomas  
2012

### Codex Books *books with pages joined to make a spine:*

Books made with single-fold pages, joined to make a spine:

*pamphlets, case bindings, designer bindings, long stitch bindings, coptic stitch bindings, stabbindings, French door bindings*

Books made with single sheet pages, joined to make a spine:

*perfect bindings, drum bindings, flip books, stapled pamphlets, post and screw,*

### Single-sheet Books *books with single-sheet pages:*

Books made with single-sheet pages attached by a single fastener, staple or sewing station:

*fan bindings, palm leaf books*

Books made with single-sheet pages placed in a container that acts as a cover:

*portfolio of prints, Tibetan books*

Books made with single-sheet pages rolled up:

*scrolls*

### Sculptural Books *books made from objects and objects made into books:*

Collections with at least one codex, folded or single-sheet book:

*shrines, reliquary, vessels, containers etc.*

Book-referential objects or book

*artworks: altered books, wearable books, edible books, game boards, hinged blocks,*

3. Work referencing the intent, use, experience, etc. of books:

*installations, objects with letters on them, environmental books*

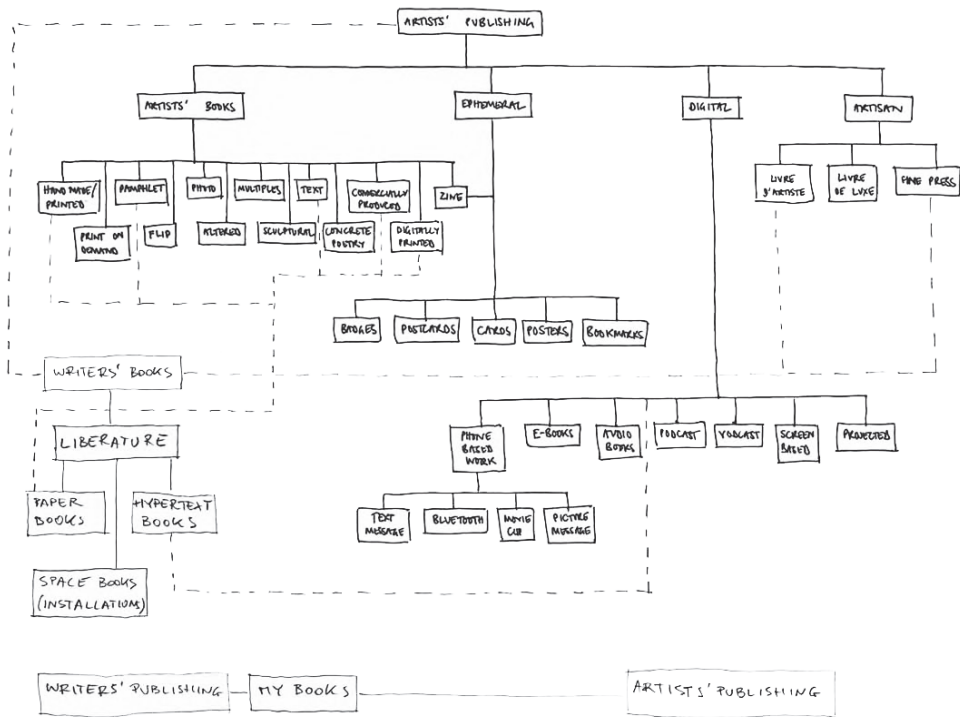


Fig. 20, Radoslaw Nowakowski's  
ABTREE diagram  
Sarah Bodman & Tom Sowden  
2010

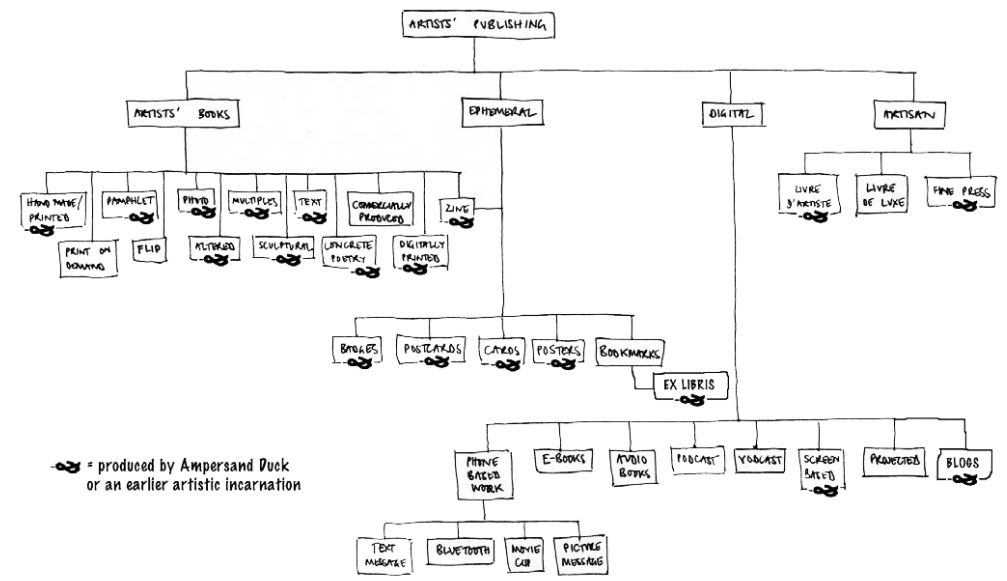


Fig. 21, Ampersand Duck  
ABTREE diagram  
Sarah Bodman & Tom Sowden  
2008

## (Art)

Work usually produced by the use of skill and creative imagination

## (Art Book)

Book of which an artist, or art, is the subject

## (Artist's Book)

Book belonging to an artist

## (Book arts)

Crafts utilised in the making of books

## (Bookwork)

Artwork dependant upon the structure of the book, or, a book that supports or contains artwork

## (Book)

Set of sheets usually fastened together along one edge and trimmed on the other edges

## (Artist Book)

Book of which an artist is the author

## (Book Object)

Artwork that only alludes to the book form, or, a book rendered unusable of an artwork

## (Book art)

Artworks that utilise books or the book form

When establishing the Artist Book Collection while working as the Director of the Library at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Clive Phillpot held highly the importance of publishing in relation to 'artists' books'. He curated an array of works but for a time they were majority paperback '*integrated visual/verbal*' codices. He was specifically interested in works that were produced in either 'open' editions or editions of 100 copies or more — citing that this trait displayed '*that the artist was committed to the multiplication and potentially wide distribution of their work, was committed to the Gutenberg revolution, and not to artificial scarcity*' (Phillpot 16). Phillpot shows his particular interest in the exploitation of mass-production methods here, and, although this is one of the many aspects of the book that can be explored, it is not, and should not be, the sole.

In his book *Booktrek*, Phillpot takes a much more pragmatic approach to the theoretical distinctions in the 'zone of activity'. Drawn out from the publication, this poster — designed by Shiori Kawasaki & Victor Sira — provides a neat grouping of Phillpot's definitions for each of the components that make up the common contemporary discourse surrounding the 'artists' book'. While 'artists' book' itself is not included, Phillpot defines them as '*...mass-produced books or booklets, published in numbers limited only by demand, in which the artist documents or realises ideas or artworks*' (Phillpot 41). He also recognises that '*In this book — Booktrek — readers will see that the meaning I myself give to terms slips and slides over the years*' (Phillpot 5). It is interesting to note that the seemingly most accurate term listed, despite its exclusion of the word 'art', is 'bookwork'. This grouping of terms can be added to the extensive list of ever-evolving diagrams (Fig. 22 & 23) that Phillpot has produced over his career.

Each of these groupings, each of these approaches, highlights differing, yet vital, aspects of the terminology surrounding 'artists' books'. I won't assert that any one perspective is correct, however, I will undoubtedly proclaim that without all three — the conceptual, the material, and the theoretical — the discourse surrounding 'artists' books' would further fragment.

My interpretation of Kawasaki & Sira's poster based on Clive Phillpot's definitions from *Booktrek*

*Bdp Newsprint Poster*  
Shiori Kawasaki & Victor Sira  
2015

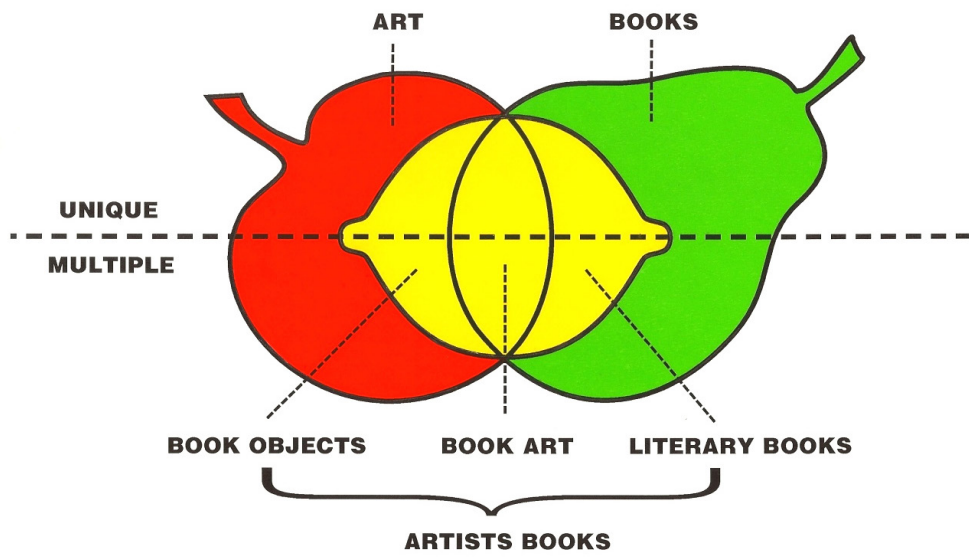
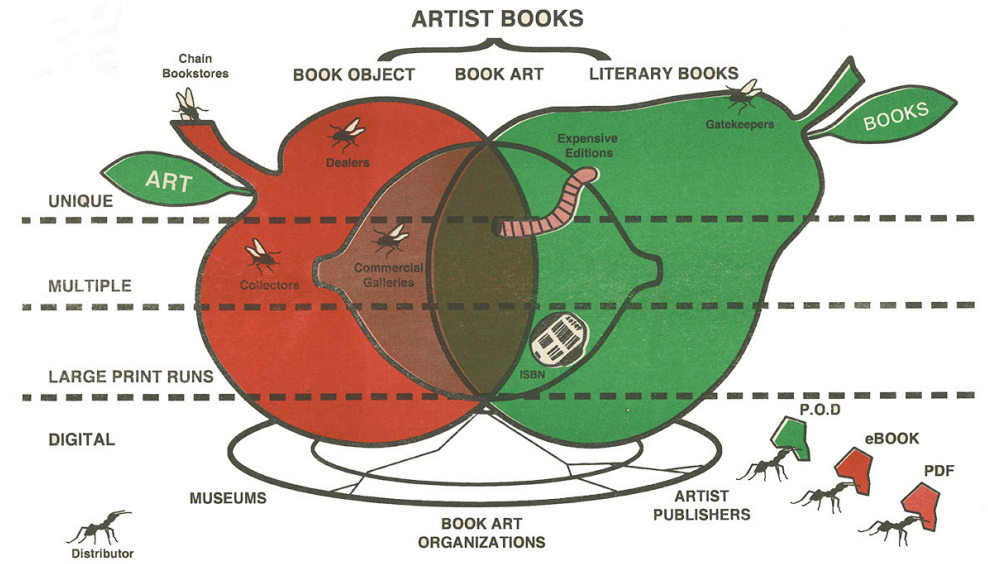


Fig. 22, *Fruit Salad Diagram*  
Clive Phillpot  
1982



Clive Phillpot's diagram updated  
to illustrate new complexities in  
the age of digital publishing.

Fig. 23, *Fruit Salad Diagram*  
Kione Kochi, Half Letter Press  
2013



# A Book Filled With Scans of Books Filled With Scribbles of Books

During this research, I began to collect small depictions of books as an index for a budding visual language. There is something charming about the unique simplification of the book's potentially complex form that the small icons capture. *A Book Filled With Scans of Books Filled With Scribbles of Books* became a daily diary, capturing moments of creativity and exhaustion, of obsession and awe, and the displaying of these drawings briefly gives view to these personal reflections.

*A Book Filled With Scans* documents notebooks generated in a nightly ritual to sketch 'a book' initially, my inspiration was musings on perspectives and forms but this became more responsive to the books I was encountering. The bookwork is casebound with a cloth covered exterior, the formal format and materials acting as a contrast to the informal nature of the contents. I used a variety of coloured crayons to illustrate and match the book that inspired the illustration; match the tone of the book's silhouette or shapes, or to match an emotion that I had felt strongly that day.

An artist's diary or sketchbook is sometimes swallowed by the term 'artists' book'. The sketchbook could be seen as a stepping stone towards 'artists' books' term when used in tandem with the book's most obvious capacity, documenting information. The notion of the 'book as document' amplifies the already intimate nature of the book as an object that invites touching, observing, and attention. Drucker uses Sol Lewitt's *Autobiography* (Fig. 24), which consists only of small photographs depicting Lewitt's possessions, to unpack this idea further. As she explains, 'the images ask us to take them as a record but don't reveal their connections to each other or the lived space from which they are extracted' (335).



Fig. 24, *Autobiography*  
Sol Lewitt  
1980





Initially used to describe fan-made magazines, 'zine' can refer to any self-published work constructed of either original or appropriated texts, images, and illustrations; and is most often produced on a layman's photocopier in small-scale runs. The origin of the zine links back to marginalised groups finding space to voice their opinions with like minded individuals or communities. A strong do-it-yourself ethos resides within the practice, born not only from a low, or no, profit mindset but also an aversion to institutionalised knowledge.

Designed across a series of nine traditional eight-page zines, *Of Nine* is a set of democratic multiples that talk to, and subvert, the cabinet's themes of juxtaposition and synthesis. When folded, each zine discusses one of the many ways juxtaposition is expressed within the cabinet. Each expression is discussed as an absolute, providing not only contrasting ideas within each zine's theme but also across all nine zines. Each text teases elements of typeface, grid structure, scale, and content length so as to embody the themes discussed. When unfolded, the reverse side of each zine can be arranged to form a sentence that outlines the cabinet's idealistic use of synthesis. The text's high-contrast typeface mimics the discordant nature of the themes. While historically many zines utilise lightweight, cheap, and readily available paper, *Of Nine* is printed on a heavier and expensive set of stocks. The wider format subverts ease of distribution and circulation as multiple multiples are needed to read the full bookwork.

Although stemming from different social and political environments, zines and 'artists' books' both took on the role of an independent medium, allowing for the dissemination of art, or information, removed from institutions (Drucker 70). *Of Nine*, a bookwork and potential 'artists' book', takes the form of a set of zines. Not all zines are 'artists' books'; but the heavy overlap between the two mediums gives an interesting insight into the nuanced contrasting evolutions of self-publishing.





Bookwork—10

112—115

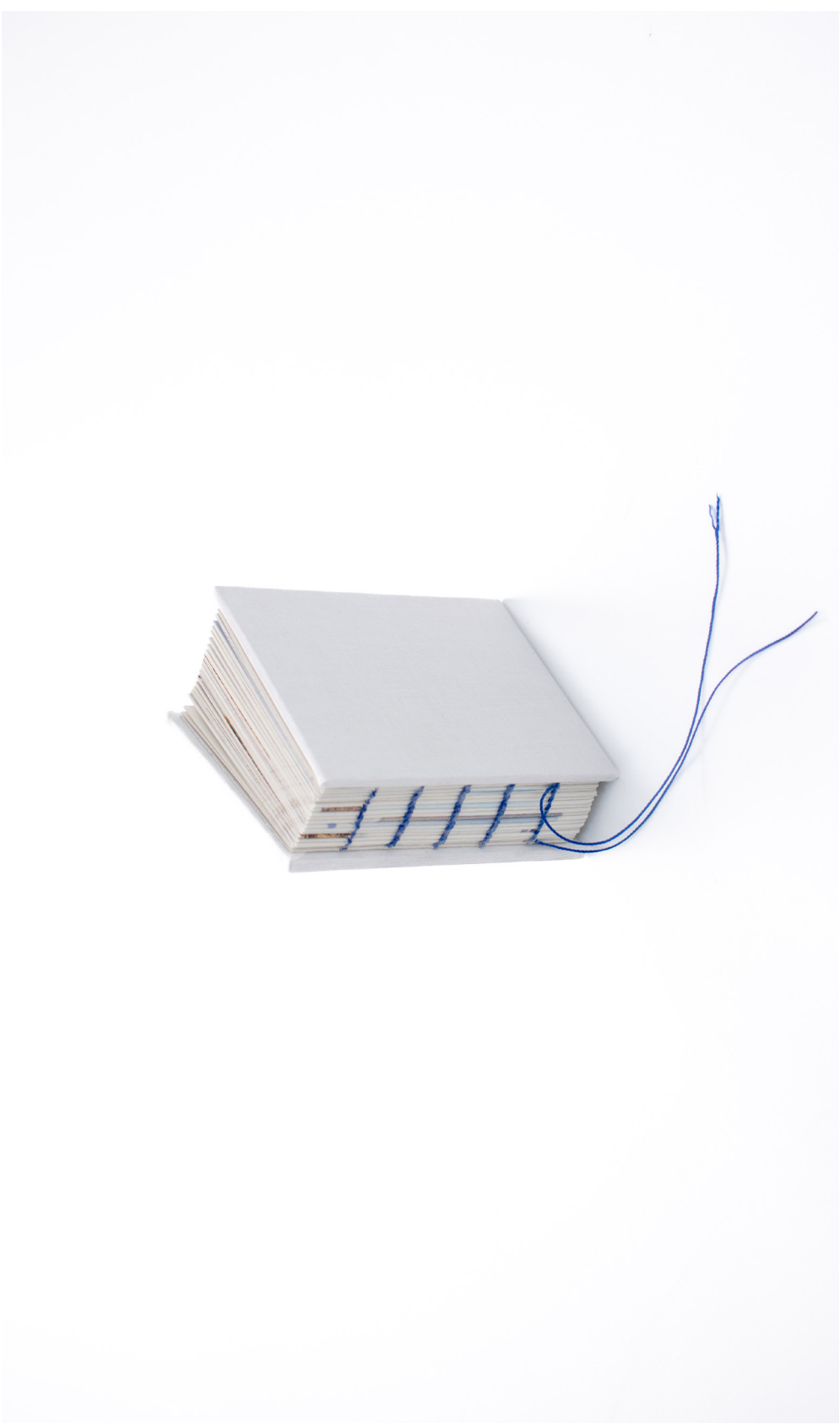
# Matarangi Automata

# 10

I've resided at the foot of Mount Victoria, Matairangi, throughout the course of this project. Each day I walk through, around, or over it as I make my way into town. On the occasions that I would make my way up to the summit, the wind would make itself known.

Designed at a scale that feels impractical to hold, *Matairangi Automata* is an auratic performance book inspired by the words of journalist and poet Frank Morton and a windy walk he took up the summit over 100 years ago. Traversing the dialect of man-made and natural objects, this work comes to embody the cabinet's frequent examination of the automated machine. With covers made from laminate outdoors fabric, and eyelets placed in its covers allowing for guylines to be drawn and pegged to the surface of the mount, *Matairangi Automata* exists as a machine to be assembled, observed, and recorded. The passage by Morton has been broken up to allow for Matairangi's winds to turn the pages and reinterpret what was written about it. Only truly readable when assembled, the record of the performance becomes the only depiction of the book in its full form, alluding to the idea of object aura. Raised by Drucker as one of the key areas of 'artists' books', auratic books are ones that: *'generate a mystique, a sense of charged presence. They seem to bear meaning just in their being, their appearance, and their form through their iconography and materials'* (93). In this sense, *Matairangi Automata's* unique size, materials, and protocols establish an intriguing aura but it is only when considered in tandem with German Philosopher Walter Benjamin's notes on the subject of aura does the full picture of the work unravel. Benjamin's theories refer to mechanical reproduction in the face of uniqueness, stating that *'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'* (3). For *Matairangi Automata*, this speaks to the recorded observation being the only way in which one can experience the performance of the book in its first, and true, context. This plays an interesting role in creating a dichotomy between original and unoriginal, striking a division between the original book object, the original performance, and the reproducible recording as it takes on the role of an original-unoriginal.





# Matarangi's Response





## Liberature

### *Literature and the books form*

As an intermedia discipline, ‘artists’ books’ often remove text altogether. This raises the question of: if a piece of text is conceived requiring a specific physical format for the themes, message, or even syntax to form coherently, does that designate the creator as author or artist or designer, or something else entirely? Conceived in 1999 by Polish poet Zenon Fajfer, and further developed by Polish historian Katarzyna Bazarnik, ‘liberature’ (Latin *liber*, meaning ‘a book’) refers to a piece of text that considers the form of its output as part of its concept. The term stemmed from the need for authors of uniquely physical works to avoid the label ‘artists’ books’, and in turn artist. In this sense, liberature exists to perceive the potential origin of a book being through the formation of a text in its entirety. Bazarnik and Fajfer describe the inception of the term as a reaction to dealing with words *and* material; as they put, they ‘...were writing books rather than texts’ (2). Bazarnik and Fajfer’s *Oka-leczenie* (Fig. 25), liberature’s founding work, is an ingenious blend of literature and materiality as each formal decision further expresses the narrative of the text.

In response to Clive Phillpot’s sentiment that regardless of a ‘writers’ book’ intervention, any such additional term may be subsumed under the seemingly impervious ‘artists’ book’, Bazarnik and Fajfer exclaim that: ‘writers using the book in its materiality... should not and cannot be and, in fact, in the majority of cases are not, classified as “artists involved in the art of the book or making artists’ books”’ (7). This reaction is punctuated with the recognition that, while evidently valuable, they perceive

Fig. 25, *Oka-leczenie*  
Zenon Fajfer & Katarzyna Bazarnik  
2009

‘artists’ books’ as belonging to fine arts, design and fine printing, regardless of the visual similarities between the two terms causing works of either practice to retain the ‘epithet of eccentric, odd or transgressive among literary scholars and critics’ (7). Liberature provides critics a word that delineates the work accurately and advocates for an avoidance of galleries and exhibitions in favour of institutions like libraries and bookshops, as the goal of any text — and in theory, book — is for it to be read. To provide further context, Bazarnik describes three distinct sub categories of bookworks. These are: SUB-TEXT, where the works are considered ‘artists’ books’; CON-TEXT, where the works contain equal parts graphic design and textual elements, and that each provides context to the other; and finally, PRE-TEXT, where the importance lies in the linguistic but the author maintains awareness for the book as its medium (14–15).

Liberature is one of the most important terms adjacent to ‘artists’ book’ theory. In acknowledging the myriad of ways in which a book may be conceived, and the fundamental understanding of the ‘artists’ book’ as a blend of independence from institutions and a dependence between material and content, it stands that both terms act parallel to one another regarding the far-reaching expressive form of the book. And so I find myself with two terms describing bookworks — one where the message is the sum of all the material and formal elements — and one originating from the perspective of the author and the other from the artist; what then, *again*, about the designer?



Bookwork — 12

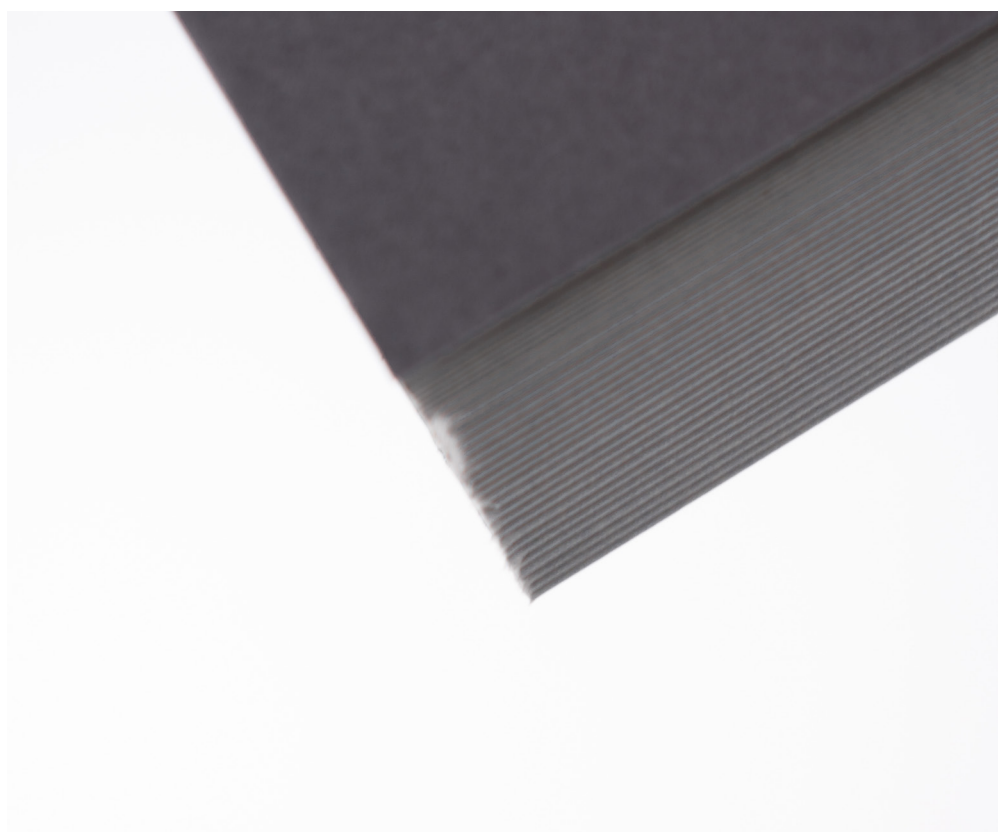
122 – 125

# Parallel Conversations

# 12

As an act of Liberation, *Parallel Conversations* demands a specific format, both to function and contextualise the subject of the piece of text. *Parallel Conversations* is written as a dialogue, and simultaneously two identical but opposing monologues. As it explains, it is a book: *One that has longer pages every so often... And it would alternate between the two sizes... And in this book there will be two conversations... One running forwards and one running backwards*. The book uses the same mechanic a Svengali Deck, a trick deck of cards (which I owned and loved as a child). The unique construction of the mechanic enables easy card, or page, forces: when riffled front to back, the longer pages and their monologue are shown; when riffled back to front, the shorter pages and their monologue are shown, except both directions read the same due to the latter being written in reverse order. Because of this structure, when the book is read in the traditional manner, front to back and one page at a time, the two monologues begin to converse with one another.

The subtle choice of stock, unusual use of two different page numbers, and complementing serif and sans serif typefaces all allude to the deeper relationship between the lines of text. All of these aspects speak to the potential visuality and materiality and meaning of literature.





# 58 Ways to Define a Book

It occurred to me early on in this research that if I were to attempt to name the definitive edges of an 'artists' book' practice, I must first know what exactly the word 'book' might contain. Defining anything can be a laborious task; a handful of words can be thrown at any idea and eventually a few will stick in a meaningful way. Challenging myself and others, I asked for a definition to be written in three words exactly. The three words could be written as a list or a short phrase, whatever felt more appropriate. The result is a bookwork: *58 Ways to Define a Book*.

To keep some visual order between the different personalities of the written word, I provided each participant a black sharpie and a small 50x100mm piece of card. I then began to collect 'artists' book' definitions too, incorporating 'B' and 'AB' pips into the top left corner of the cards to differentiate them.

The cards are housed in a Peller Case, the box acting as a literal '*container of information*'. With threads bound to the two arms \of the box, and set through the central portion housing the cards, the cards are lifted as the box is opened. Resembling the cables of a suspension bridge, the threads are a nod towards artists' book practitioner Claudia De La Torre's practice and her, coincidentally three word titled, work: *Books Are Bridges*.



B  
Escape from reality

B  
Experience  
Respite  
Imagination

B  
Hard cover  
imagination

B  
Physical  
Temporal  
connection  
(Reader ↔ Author)

B  
learn something  
new

B  
Hard-Cover  
& Textural

B  
information  
[Moment in time]

B  
loosing myself  
completely

B  
analogue  
connection  
involvement

B  
knowledge  
story  
teller

B  
• READ  
• PAPER  
• WORDS

B  
Tactile  
Information  
Layers

B  
A Book  
- knowledge  
- Paper  
- Mass production

B  
Comforting

B  
made by  
people

B  
container  
of beauty

B  
• Words  
• Paper  
• Images

B  
Communication  
Portable  
tangible

Creative + image + words

Putting things together.

Tells a story

- object  
- read  
- look

Something to read.

"Tells" A STORY

Make me  
THINK  
FEEL

Markings  
Paper  
Hands

Block / organized  
information

A collection of  
thoughts.

Content, Container,  
Cover

PHYSICAL INFORMATION  
CARRIER

visual communication tool

STORE  
OF  
KNOWLEDGE.

Artifact  
stimulation  
inspiration.

1. tangible  
2. information  
3. container

STORING  
INFORMATION  
THING

- reflection  
- imagination  
- story/animation

an **object** of wonder

B. Encapsulated mediums (of) information

STORE OF KNOWLEDGE.

B. **SOUNDS**

Squeaky rubbing paper.

B. PRINTED TANGIBLE ARTEFACT

B. Orientated Spine Hardcover

tactile **Pages**

B. text on paper

B. inform read Document

B. FOLDS OPEN. PAGES

B. Something you read

B. transportation de-digitalisation page-Creak


a **container** of content

B. CONTAINER OF THINGS

B. Tactile, time Spent

B. CAREER OF INFORMATION

B. Passes in time

B. 1. Voice 2. Form Tangibility 3. Estimate Inform 



# PANZ Workshop Blizzard Books

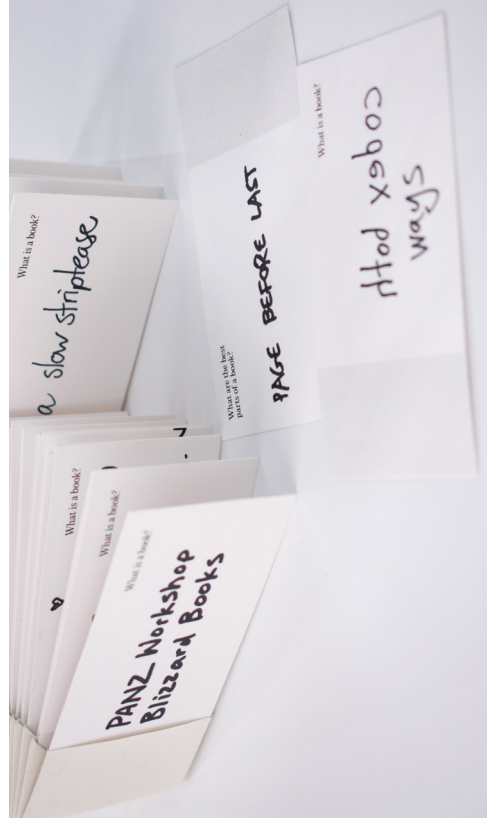
The Publishers Association of New Zealand (PANZ) established the PANZ Book Design Awards to promote excellence in, and provide recognition for, the best book design in New Zealand. During the 2024 awards, the 2023 reprint of the publication *Rat King Landlord* (Fig. 26) was entered. The judging panel subsequently questioned its validity as a book due to this edition being printed as an ultra-low cost, full-colour, traditional tabloid. This point of tension led to a discussion surrounding the question of: *what is a book?* With this as the starting point, I was asked to contribute a workshop session that elaborated on the different facets of books, and book-like-objects, uncovered in parallel as I was dissecting the notion of the 'artists' book'. The session I put together combined elements of exposition regarding *A Book With No Orientation, 144 Pages*, and this research, with discussion and participation through the sharing, and gathering, of book definitions.

The responses gathered during this session were collated and bound into three separate books – utilising a pre-made blizzard binding – constructed during the workshop. The cards used were an augmentation of the existing 'B' and 'AB' cards, consisting of a greyed-out binding margin and clearer, more relevant prompts.

In comparison to the definitions I had been receiving, the perspective on the book shifted. As PANZ is a celebration of book design hosted by Aotearoa's Publishing Association many of the answers alluded to a different, more commercial perspective regarding books.



Fig. 26. *Rat King Landlord*  
Murdoch Stephens  
2023





Bookwork — 15

140 — 143

# Knot A Book

Part of my preparation for the PANZ workshop was gathering peripheral book definitions. Some were official definitions from the likes of PANZ, the National Library, and UNESCO; others were from artists, historians, and academics concerned with the book. The definition that stood out the most was Dieter Roth's confounding but elegant statement originating from Roth's artists' book *246 Little Clouds* (Fig. 27) that: 'A book is a knot' *Knot A Book* is a pair of one-metre long fabric bookworks, containing a collection of screen printed excerpts from my many companion notebooks. I find that my notebooks serve two opposing purposes; the first, and obvious one, is to provide a space for my thoughts to be recorded. But I've come to learn that the manner in which I record these thoughts also facilitates a second purpose, which is the reinterpretation of ideas – as I am, unfortunately, a terribly messy writer. My messy note taking system has often meant that when it comes time to reread a recent, seemingly life-changing, epiphany, I find myself in unfamiliar territory. Wrestling with incoherent sentences and half-drawn letterforms, I am constantly gaining unexpected understandings from my initial notes as I piece together their fragments.

A large part of 'artists' books' is the questioning of existing dynamics, this includes all elements of the book, from size to stock. Blake Rayne's *Almanac* (Fig. 28) is an outstanding example of a bookwork that explores the potential materiality that different mediums of stock could offer, and was a large inspiration for me to explore the medium of fabric. *Knot A Book* has been designed to not only bluntly embody Roth's words but to also further facilitate the remixing of my musings. Untying and retying the bookworks pages provides an everlasting combination of thoughts.

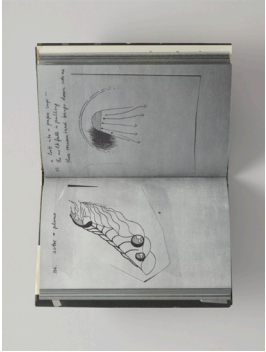


Fig. 27, *246 Little Clouds*  
Dieter Roth  
1968



Fig. 28, *Almanac*  
Blake Rayne  
2013



05

# Conclusions

# Section Preface

Stemming from a passion for experimental publications, this research has been an unexpected journey. In its early stages, questions were raised, by myself and those around me, about the relevance of the cabinet of curiosities. But the connections between the two practices have proved fruitful, shaping the way in which I set out to better understand the area of practice that I find myself in. Through an auto-ethnographic design approach, I've embraced a playful practice-led research and research-led practice with myself positioned at its centre. This shifted the project's perspective towards sense-making, and in doing so aligned with the cabinet of curiosities' panoramic goal of representing the world around the collector.

Through the making of various bookworks, I have explored potential boundaries of the term 'artists' book'. The nature of the objects associated with both practice show a systemic avoidance of existing flawed taxonomies, and the more fluid interpretation of knowledge associated with the cabinet facilitated my navigation of this. By using similar techniques to the cabinet, I've brought together not just a range of 'talkative' objects but constructed a larger narrative through the positioning of their concepts. And, after a year of exploring the term 'artists' book', and acting as designer, artist, author, and curator, that I find myself rejecting the term.

# The Potential for a New Canon

## *Thoughts on a 'designers' book'*

Throughout this research, I have toyed with the idea of offering up my own 'artists' book' definition. I am sceptical to name the 'designers' book' as a potential term. As expressed in the section *An Elusive Term*, the use of any such label will perpetuate the *'...suggestion that such work should be set aside in a space separate from writers' books — that, by implication, they constitute a minor league apart from the big business of real books.'* And in fervorous agreement with Kostelanetz's sentiment, *'One thing I wish for my own books is that they not be considered minor league'* (29).

Before discussing further, there are two distinctions I must make: firstly, the terms 'artists' book', literature and the phantom 'designers' book' should not only refer to the exploration and exploitation of the book's form but also to the overarching theoretical contexts that each contains at its core. Secondly, Carrión's 'bookwork', as a neutral description referring to books where 'the sum of all the material and formal elements' and '...in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work', is an appropriate subordinate to all three terms (Bookworks Revisited 8). 'Bookwork' provides necessary supplementary vocabulary to describe the physical outputs produced under any of the terms. With that said, what would a so-called 'designers' book' actually be? Or, more importantly, what would a 'designers' book' represent? I conceive this as an approach to book design that uses the potential material and formal qualities of the medium, and the equal application of verbal and visual language, to facilitate narratives. The goal of such books is to aid in the dissemination of *information* through the designing of more immersive reading experiences — these books could be viewed as *applied 'artists' books'*. To avoid outright naming this general idea, as whatever I could assert would have been conceived without real critique, I will not state a singular term, instead I propose two: Embodied Book Design and Holistic Book Design.

# Embodied Book Design

Embodiment was the word I kept ruminating on as a term. As a descriptor for representing a quality or an idea, the notion of 'embodied book design' seems a fitting one. If a set of ideas, information, images or other form of content contains an overarching theme or concept, then an 'embodied book' realizes this through purposeful use of the material and formal qualities of the medium — specifically, the 'embodied book' *responds to, and realises, an idea.* In addition, to quote a person I very much admire, book designer Professor Anna Brown uses the notion of embodied interaction to describe her work, *The endless book — exploring the online, offline.* Drawn from Paul Dourish's explanation, where he states: *'Embodiment is about engaged action rather than the disembodied cognition'* (189), Brown's 'embodied book' *'...encourages the user to read and interact with it as an object to elicit meaning and understanding of the work'* (27). It is in this sense that an 'embodied book' generates immersive reading experiences. However, I must reiterate the importance for any term used here to denote meaning in an accessible manner. Much of the current confusion regarding the 'artists' book' lexicon comes from using common words in uncommon contexts, and 'embodied' is used here in a niche interpretation. I hold high hopes for the 'embodied book' going forward but I fear that it may suffer from the same symptoms as its predecessors.

# Holistic Book Design

The other term I feel carries potential is 'holistic book design'. 'Holism', as a theory, refers to when parts of a whole are deeply interconnected in such a way that they can only be explained in reference to the whole, resulting in a belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A 'holistic book', or 'holistically designed book', then views every element — material, formal, textual, graphical, conceptual — as equally important. It is only through the design of each aspect's interaction that a 'holistically designed book', in its realised state, can exist. In doing so, it becomes an object with a deeply considered reading experience that could be viewed as greater than the sum of its parts. The most important aspect of this term though, is a potential wider understanding of what the general word means, and that meaning is more intrinsically aligned to what a 'designers' book' may do. As an overarching term, I think 'holistic book design' might achieve the desired results; however, when attempting to describe a specific bookwork as a 'holistic book' it seems to fall short, as this could now refer to the contents of the book and not the manner in which it was designed.



Bookwork — 16

150 — 153

# A Cabinet of Wonder

Over the last few years, I have occasionally used my grandmother's old suitcase (Fig. 29) as a means to transport the books I have had a hand in producing – finding that the proportions of it are accommodating to a wide range of book shapes. Due to its use, the suitcase has become associated with my book design practice and, in hindsight, may have acted as a precursor to my interest in the cabinet of curiosities.

Designed and finished in a manner to reference this suitcase, *A Cabinet of Wonder* serves an integral role in the wider research of *What Is It, If It Is Not This?* as a physical space to house my collection of bookworks. The affordance of a physical cabinet of curiosities is the much needed ability for bookworks to be arranged spatially, providing the opportunity to more intimately curate the relationship between them. A key proponent of *A Cabinet of Wonder's* design was the avoidance of a stationary bookshelf in favour of portability, as referenced on page 49. The cabinet's orientation has also been altered from the suitcase's original horizontal bearing so that its silhouette and interactions more closely resemble that of a book.

*A Cabinet of Wonder* has been included in the bookwork section intentionally, asserting that its two pages contain a multitude of intermedia content and provide a very distinct reading experience.



Fig. 29, *My Grandmother's Suitcase*  
Author  
2025



# Another Closing (Opening) Statement

I think it is fitting that this research also ends with an opening statement rather than a closing one:

Collecting is a patient practice, one that rewards perseverance in the act of pursuing fascinations. *What Is It, If It Is Not This?* has allowed me to deepen my understanding regarding two fascinations of mine, and provided a space for me to form my own opinions regarding this enigmatic area of design that my practice resides in. My metaphorical (and occasionally literal) cabinet of curiosities will grow as I continue to explore the landscape of experimental publications, and in doing so continue to question the discourse that I am now a part of. Who knows, maybe there will be another moment of vindication in the future when this becomes the start of something new. One can only hope.

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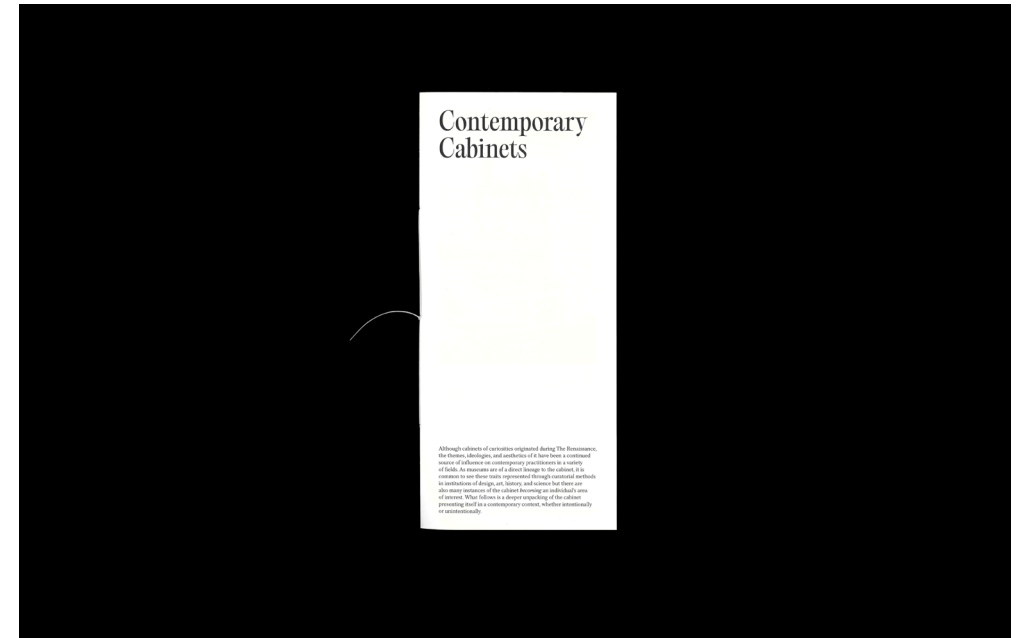
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# Appendix



Accompanying booklet containing further writing on contemporary cabinets of curiosities





# Contemporary Cabinets

Although cabinets of curiosities originated during The Renaissance, the themes, ideologies, and aesthetics of it have been a continued source of influence on contemporary practitioners in a variety of fields. As museums are of a direct lineage to the cabinet, it is common to see these traits represented through curatorial methods in institutions of design, art, history, and science but there are also many instances of the cabinet *becoming* an individual's area of interest. What follows is a deeper unpacking of the cabinet presenting itself in a contemporary context, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

# Cabinet of Marine Debris – East Coast/West Coast *Mark Dion, 2022*



American conceptual artist Mark Dion's practice heavily revolves around themes of institutional influence on knowledge of the natural world — most notably known for his use of scientific presentations in his installations. His work, *Cabinet of Marine Debris*, showcases a clear, yet unique, use of the cabinet's practices. Drawn to the now natural — but entirely unnatural — existence of oceanic garbage hotspots, Dion makes commentary on such phenomena through the collecting and displaying of beach debris. Dion visited the islands off of the coast of Alaska, which are at the edge of one such hotspot known as the North Pacific Gyre, to produce the contents of this cabinet. Employing the same use of visual analogy through juxtaposition and symmetry, the shared physicality of the objects is put on display, establishing groupings based on colour, origin, size, and use. The cabinet itself, while reflective of traditional cabinets of curiosities, is reminiscent of what one might find in a fishing shack, further building on the narrative being told. The most interesting part of this work is the subversion being created by taking something entirely unnatural and placing it in under a paradigm rooted in the categorisation of natural phenomena, imposing a new understanding about the objects contained within.

*Cabinet of Marine Debris*, and Dion's wider practice, are an example of someone who has taken the cabinet's idiosyncrasies and used them as a foundation for the molding of a contemporary yet honorary practice. The cabinets long, complicated, and at times dark history was a key roadblock in my use of the subject, and Dion's act of retaining or discarding individual traits of the cabinet provided me a loose idea of interrogation that allows for judgements to be made about what is pertinent to this research.



## Collected Works, Volumes 1–20 *Dieter Roth 1969–1979*

The ‘artists’ book’ can be traced back far longer than the term itself has existed, although Swiss artist Dieter Roth must be noted as one of the ‘inventors’ of the contemporary understanding of the term. As a self-proclaimed writer first and foremost, Roth is quoted saying ‘I make art only to support my habit, which is to write and publish books’ (Goldstein).

Following his development of an extensive body of work, Roth began planning *Collected Works, Volumes 1–20* (*Gesammelte Werke, Bande 1–20*) in 1969. This project was a set of twenty self-published volumes that aimed to classify, organise, and showcase many of the works he had made to date. Interestingly, the books were published out of order, starting with Volume 15, with the volumes themselves not representative of a chronological account of Roth’s oeuvre either. Some small amendments were made to the original works but the biggest alteration was the addition of unique special edition covers, such as Volume 6’s croissant-cover.

The extensive range of content and styles found within *Collected Works, Volumes 1–20* combined with the large slipcase and unorthodox covers, has led me to interpret Roth’s work as a cabinet of curiosities. The objects produced by Roth distinctly blur the line between book and art, and showcase the reflexivity found in the process of bookmaking and publishing. The reinterpretation and curation that occurred when Roth sequenced the books in a specific manner also lends itself towards the more intuitive curatorial role present in cabinets of curiosities.

*Collected Works, Volumes 1–20* acts as a point between commercial book publishing and the unique potential qualities of ‘artists’ books’, and a series of objects that showcase that the medium of the book can be both a cabinet of curiosities, as well as a part of a cabinet of curiosities.



## Making Design

*Irma Boom, 2015*

Dutch designer Irma Boom, dubbed the ‘Queen of Books’, is one of the world’s foremost book designers. Although this can be attributed to her extensive design career, spanning over three decades and 300 books, I think the title more appropriately represents her inventive approach to the practice. Boom has explained that she treats books as a *space* in which she designs, often describing herself as an architect as much as a designer. There are many ingenious book designs that embody this idea in Boom’s oeuvre, works such as the 2136-page *SHV Think Book* or the semi-invisible narrative found in *N°5 Culture Chanel* — works that make use of experimental narrative structures and printing methods — but the publication that stood out to me the most was *Making Design*.

Commenced to mark the occasion of Cooper Hewitt’s reopening in 2014, *Making Design* was published to showcase a portion of the vast collection consisting of over 210,000 objects. At over 900 pages, the book aims to express the museum’s intent to inspire viewers to see how much design impacts their lives. There are many unique qualities to the book: it was released in a range of colour ways,; its cover is printed with glow in the dark ink; and a conclusive section, ‘*Making Making Design*’, was included, outlining Boom’s process for designing the book itself. Housed within the book is a showcase of more than 1,100 objects selected by Boom, the curatorial staff, and Smithsonian Design Library. The sequencing of this entries was entirely produced by Boom’s arrangement of them, lending itself to a mode of sense-making. To further this, parallel narratives intertwine between the objects and the 54 essays included, providing a space for viewers to unpack the collection in an intuitive manner.

*Making Design* is a pointed example of the medium of the book mimicking the cabinet of curiosities. This is not simply due to the archival capabilities of a collection of pages, or the historical nature of the content, or even Irma Boom’s unique semi-auto-ethnographic approach to book design but as Bugno-Narecka remarks, it’s ability as one of the many ‘*elaborate media products*’ to ‘*convey [an] image of the world and communicate the state of knowledge of a particular era and a specific “collector.”*’ (2) Boom, as the ‘collector’, has constructed a series of visual analogies, by way of spatial arrangement and subtextual interplay between narratives, to portray a unique view of the role of design as seen through the Cooper Hewitt collection.

