

# Artists' books

## A world of openings

Peter Di Sciascio

Regular readers of this journal will probably have realised that if you scratch the surface of any one of the University of Melbourne's 32 cultural collections, gems can be found. This is what I discovered when I embarked on a Cultural Collections Student Project in the second half of 2009, working in Special Collections at the Baillieu Library on the artists' books collection. My brief was to conduct a significance assessment of the collection using the national protocol that is being applied across the University,<sup>1</sup> and to draft a collection policy to help guide the artists' books collection into the future.

By now I can already hear you asking: what are artists' books? One of my first tasks was to grapple with this question of definition. I found even those in the art world often had little understanding of artists' books. Most of the articles and reference books I consulted dedicated space to this question, as did conferences and symposia on the topic.<sup>2</sup> Defining a genre of art is not something that we are used to doing. We all know what a painting, a sculpture or photograph is, but if we think further we can also think of art, especially contemporary art, which can straddle more than one genre or even question our ideas about what art is; that's where you will find artists' books.

In the simplest terms, Alex Selenitsch (artist, poet and a senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Melbourne) writes that it is 'a book made by an artist, and is meant as an artwork'.<sup>3</sup> Others have explored the literature and discovered many definitions. I collected these and came up with 23 that I thought were worth noting.<sup>4</sup> I then synthesised these, considered the history of artists' books, the University's collection and the direction of the art, and came up with the following proposed definition for use in the collection policy:

Artists' books are books or book-like objects, over the final appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control: where the book is intended as a work of art in itself and/or is presented by the artist as an artists' book.<sup>5</sup>

Even the name of the genre took nearly ten years to be settled. In 1973 a landmark exhibition of artists' books was held at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> It was at this exhibition that the term *artists' books* was generally agreed upon, although the use of the apostrophe is still debated.<sup>7</sup> Until then they were also referred to as *bookworks*, *bookart* or *book objects*.

### A recent history

As an artistic genre, artists' books have a fairly short history. They first appeared in the mid-1960s in Europe and North America, part of the mounting counter-culture and the growth of conceptual art. Artists wanted cheap, readily available, transportable 'art for the people' that could bypass the established art market. The format of the book provided a portable medium and allowed the artist to directly involve the viewer in turning the pages, taking the journey, and discovering connected or disconnected worlds with each opening. Many of the early artists' books were cheaply hand-made on the kitchen table, often distributed for free, or were commercially produced in large editions under instructions from the artist.

An early example of the commercially produced variety is Michael Snow's 1975 artists' book *Cover to cover*, a copy of which is held in the Lenton Parr Library at the Southbank campus of the University's Victorian College of the Arts and Music. *Cover to cover* (illustrated opposite) is of the conceptualist photographic type of artists' book; it contains no text and as the title implies, can be read forwards and backwards, converging towards the

Michael Snow, *Cover to cover* (artists' book, 150 leaves, all photographically illustrated, height: 23.0 cm), Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975. Lenton Parr Library, University of Melbourne.

centre. Both the front and back covers are illustrated with a photograph of a wood-panelled door. The appearance of figures, cameras, images within images, blank sheets of paper, windows and doorways on each page creates a thread to connect what might otherwise be disparate images.

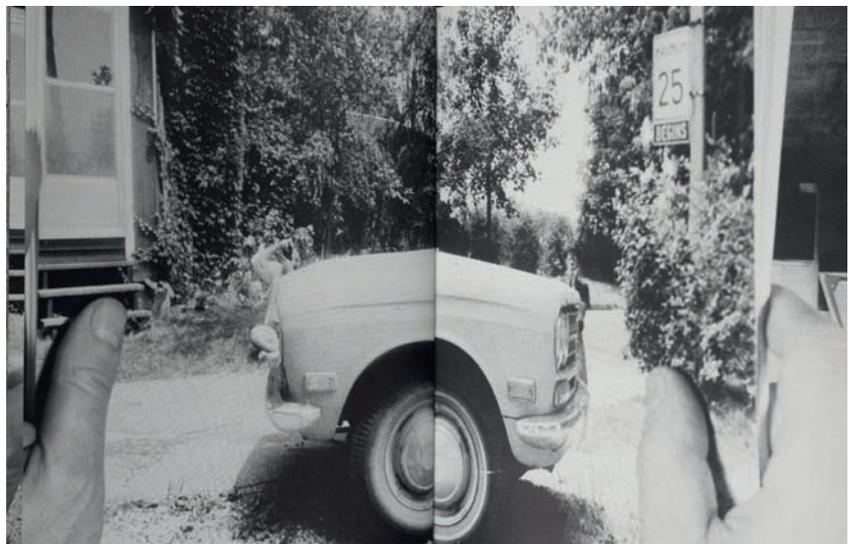
An Australian artist involved in the early days of the movement is Robert Jacks. Jacks was in North America from 1968 to 1977 and started producing small, hand-made artists' books, often using his trademark feature of hand-stamping. Designs were made, old-fashioned rubber stamps produced, and the pages of the books were hand-stamped with the designs. At times, Jacks distributed them freely.<sup>8</sup> Special Collections in the Baillieu Library and the University of Melbourne Art Collection (managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art) each hold a copy of this series of hand-stamped books made by Jacks between 1973 and 1982 (illustrated on page 16).

As time progressed, artists explored the genre further, pushing the boundaries as they often do. No one type dominates. Some examples are sculptural, involving metal, wood and other mixed media in a book-like form. Others use altered books—found books altered in some way to present a different idea from that of

the original book. Then there are those that mix poetry or literature in a visual journey, sometimes referred to as concrete or visual poetry. Many involve original works of art on paper—such as prints or drawings—while some are totally photographic, with the images conveying a story, concept or idea. Bindings can range from simple and handmade to elaborate and finely executed examples of the bookbinder's craft. Artists' books may be unique (i.e. only one copy is made) or, more usually, of limited edition (often fewer than ten copies), although larger editions still occur, as do unlimited editions. Limited edition artists'

books are commonly signed and numbered by the artist.

Since about the year 2000, Special Collections in the Baillieu Library has become a dedicated collector of artists' books. The University now has approximately 225 artists' books in the collection, representing a range of styles. Most are by Australian artists, with a good representation of contemporary practice since the mid-1990s. A recent acquisition is a book by Melbourne artist Angela Cavalieri, titled *Le città continue*. It is a large (57.0 cm high) example of the concertina book type (illustrated on back cover). The artist's statement best describes the work:



Robert Jacks, *12 hand stamped books, 1973–1982* (colour impressions from rubber stamps, printer's ink, staples and colour cloth tape, black buckram box with red ribbon; 11.5 x 12.5 cm, in slipcase 12.0 x 13.0 x 5.0 cm), New York and Sydney: Robert Jacks, 1973–1982. Each volume separately titled. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Another set is held in the University of Melbourne Art Collection (accession no. 1989.0059.001.013, gift of Julienne Jacks, 1989, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne). © Robert Jacks. Image courtesy of the artist and Peter Anderson. Photography by Ian H. Hill.



*Le città continue* (*Continuous cities*) is based on text from the Italian version of Italo Calvino's, *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible cities*). In particular, *Le città continue* is one of the 'cities' invented by Calvino and I chose this city because it gave me a sense of space and infinite time.

I wanted to create the sensation I often have when entering and re-entering a city. For me it feels like a continuous journey and although cities vary, it appears you are in the same 'space' and you can dissolve into it.

Through the book you are entering from one passage way into another but they appear to be the same 'space'. The arch symbolises this 'passage way' and on opening this book you view a large arch which slowly diminishes into the last page.<sup>9</sup>

This work by Cavalieri is a good example of the best of current artists' books, having won the Geelong Art Gallery's annual Acquisitive Print Award for 2009.

One enjoyable aspect of my project has been the discovery of artists' books in various branches of the University Library. These were not counted in the number cited above, as they are not part of the Special Collections Artists' Books Collection. My research, involving hours of mining the Library's catalogue, uncovered an additional 70 artists' books, both international and Australian, dating back to the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> While some were identified as an artists' book in the catalogue by use of various subject headings, 70 per cent were not. A future project for someone will be to review the cataloguing of artists' books in the University Library to capture all the examples held and to ensure consistency in the cataloguing style.

A collection is now in place at

Photographer unknown, Visitor views the display of artists' books from the Franklin Furnace at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, University of Melbourne, 1978. Photographic slide. George Paton Gallery Collection, 90/144, University of Melbourne Archives. © George Paton Gallery. Image reproduced courtesy of the George Paton Gallery and the University of Melbourne Archives.

the University which can provide a valuable resource for visual art students, artists and anyone interested in art, artists' books and books.

### A pre-history

While it appeared that the genre of artists' books just sprang out of the 1960s, a closer look at the preceding years can identify books that contain elements of today's artists' books, or could in fact be classified as artists' books with a retrospective application of the definition.

An example of the latter is the Australian book by Violet Teague and Geraldine Rede, *Night fall in the ti-tree* (illustrated on page 19 and on front cover). Not only did this book break new ground in its use of hand-coloured woodcut prints, but it was entirely conceived, handmade and hand-bound (with yellow silk ribbon) by the artists. The University is lucky to hold three copies of this book.

Other examples from this pre-history of artists' books (which I refer to as antecedent artists' books) are: French *Livres d'artiste*; fine/special press books; Dada publications; Surrealist publications; Italian Futurist publications; Russian avant-garde/Constructivist publications; concrete and visual poetry; works by Stéphane Mallarmé; and works by William Blake. Many of these types

contain elements of artists' books, such as significant involvement of the artists, hand-making and production in limited editions. They are visually artistic or representative of an artistic movement.

### A connection to place

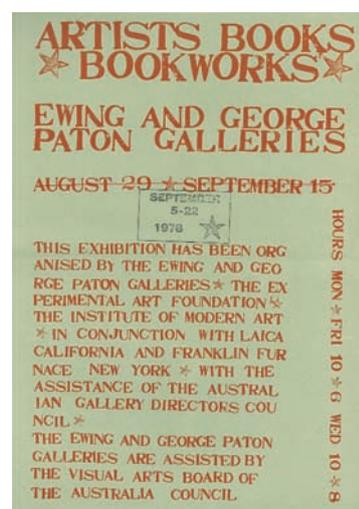
The project also allowed me to connect the University to a number of events important to the history of artists' books in Australia.

In 1978 the University's Ewing and George Paton Galleries held an exhibition of artists' books, believed to be the first of its kind in

Australia.<sup>11</sup> The University Library holds two copies of the extensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition,<sup>12</sup> which included a selection of recent artists' books and ephemera from the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, one-of-a-kind books from the Franklin Furnace Archive,<sup>13</sup> as well as a selection of Australian artists' books curated by Noel Sheridan of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. Following its season at the University, the exhibition travelled to Sydney and Brisbane. The quirky, handmade look of the advertising



*Artists books: Bookworks*, poster for exhibition held 5–22 September 1978, at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, University of Melbourne. Poster lithograph; 45.0 x 32.0 cm. System number 001779618, National Gallery of Australia Research Library. © George Paton Gallery. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia Research Library.



poster (illustrated above) is in keeping with the nature of some of the artists' books of the time. As one of the library staff commented to me, 'cool typography'.

A history of the George Paton Gallery has recently been published.<sup>14</sup> It seems that the artists' book exhibition was in line with the Gallery's program of presenting cutting-edge art, which continues to this day. In the Gallery's records, now held at the University of Melbourne Archives,<sup>15</sup> I found a collection of slide images from the 1978 exhibition. One slide depicts a woman viewing a selection of artists' books from the Franklin Furnace Archive laid out on a table (illustrated on page 17). Note the visitors were allowed to handle the artwork!

The Australian section of the 1978 exhibition then travelled to the USA in late 1979, firstly to the Franklin Furnace in New York, then to other locations. The exhibition, titled *Contemporary Australian book/works*, was curated by Jill Scott and co-curated by Kiffy Rubbo of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries and Noel Sheridan of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. This is believed to be the first international exhibition of Australian artists' books. Unfortunately a catalogue of this

momentous exhibition was not found, but I did find flyers, correspondence and a selection of photographic slides in the George Paton Gallery archive.<sup>16</sup>

From 30 June to 22 July 1983 the George Paton Gallery held a second exhibition of artists' books.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition, in two parts, was of international artists' books put together by a Canadian, Tim Guest of Art Metropole, Toronto, and an Italian, Mirella Bentivoglio. Guest's exhibition featured 28 international artists' books including works by leaders in the field Dieter Roth, Michael Snow and Edward Ruscha.<sup>18</sup> An image from an artists' book by Luigi Ontani was included on the front cover of the catalogue.<sup>19</sup>

Bentivoglio's exhibition included works by 22 Italian artists.<sup>20</sup> The George Paton Gallery's director noted that both these exhibitions drew a large number of people to the gallery.<sup>21</sup> *The Age* art critic, Memory Holloway, reviewed the exhibition and after asking the question 'When is a book not a book, but a work of art?', she noted that 'You are invited by the gallery to put on a pair of white gloves and then to move in and around the white tables which are strewn with books.'<sup>22</sup>

In May 2006 the Baillieu Library held a symposium to accompany the exhibition *Art bound: A selection of*

*artists' books*.<sup>23</sup> The core of the exhibition of 72 works was drawn from the Baillieu's strongly developing collection of artists' books. Additional works were sourced through the Art in the Library Program, including examples from students of the University's School of Creative Arts. The exhibition was held in the Baillieu Library's Leigh Scott Gallery and the books were displayed in glass cabinets.<sup>24</sup> The symposium brought together a range of interested parties and speakers, including a number of practising artists who presented on the topic of artists' books.<sup>25</sup>

At about this point my project time was fast running out. I had learned more than I could have imagined about artists' books, and discovered some of the delights of Special Collections and the University of Melbourne Archives. Artists' books are a living and evolving art form. The opportunity exists for the University to expand the collection along with the art's development and maintain what is a significant collection.

I would like to thank Pam Pryde (Curator), Susan Millard (Deputy Curator) and all the staff in Special Collections at the Baillieu Library for their assistance with this project, as well as Karina Lamb, Acting Student Projects Coordinator (Cultural Collections), who provided valuable support along the way.

Violet Teague and Geraldine Rede, *Night fall in the ti-tree* (illustrated book, designed, illustrated, printed and hand-bound by the artists; colour woodcut; 32 pages), London: Elkin Matthews, 1906. Joyce Thorpe Nicholson Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



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#### Notes

- 1 Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, *Significance 2.0: A guide to assessing the significance of collections*, Adelaide: Collections Council of Australia, 2009.
- 2 See Stefan Klima, *Artists books: A critical survey of the literature*, New York: Granary Books, 1998, pp. 21–40; and Betty Bright, *No longer innocent: Book art in America 1960–1980*, New York: Granary Books, 2005, pp. 1–15, 258–265.
- 3 Alex Selenitsch, *Australian artists books*, Parkes, ACT: National Gallery of Australia, 2008, p. 5.
- 4 The definitions were drawn from various sources. Both Ford and Turner are particularly helpful. Simon Ford, 'Artists' books in UK & Eire libraries', *Art Libraries Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1993, pp. 14–25. Silvie Turner (ed.), *Facing the page: British artists' books, a survey 1983–1993*, London: estamp, 1993, pp. 4–11.
- 5 This definition borrows substantially from that of Stephen Bury, *Artists' books: The book as a work of art, 1963–1995*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995, p. 1.
- 6 Moore College of Art, *Artists books* (exhibition catalogue), Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1973.
- 7 Sue Forster, 'Editor's note', *Imprint*, vol. 44, no. 1, Autumn 2009, p. 12.
- 8 Peter Anderson, *Jacks: The artist's books of Robert Jacks*, Bendigo: Bendigo Art Gallery, 2009, p. 12.
- 9 Angela Cavalieri, *Le città continue*, 2009, artist's statement provided by Gallery 101.
- 10 Michael Snow's *Cover to cover* is an example of the artists' books found elsewhere in the University Library.
- 11 The gallery is owned and operated by the Melbourne University Student Union. It was previously called the Ewing and George Paton Galleries but is now called the George Paton Gallery. See Helen Vivian (ed.), *When you think about art: The Ewing and George Paton Galleries 1971–2008*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 2008.
- 12 *Artists books, bookworks* (exhibition catalogue), Melbourne: Ewing and George Paton Galleries, 1978. Copies held in Special Collections, Baillieu Library, and Lenton Parr Library, University of Melbourne.
- 13 At the time the Franklin Furnace Archive was the archive of artists' books and a centre for artists' books knowledge. In 1993 the archive was taken over by the Museum of Modern Art in New York where it still exists as a distinct collection. See Alexandra Anderson-Spivy, 'The museum acquires a pioneering collection of artist books', *MoMA*, no. 16, Winter–Spring 1994, pp. 7–9.
- 14 Vivian, *When you think about art*.
- 15 George Paton Gallery Collection, accession no. 90/144, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 16 For poster, advertising flyer and press release see George Paton Gallery Collection, accession no. 90/144, box 3, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 17 Vivian, *When you think about art*, p. 132.
- 18 *Artists' books: George Paton Gallery* (exhibition catalogue, curated by Tim Guest), [Parkville]: The Gallery, 1983.
- 19 Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, 1974, cat. no. 17, in *Artists' books: George Paton Gallery*. A copy of Ontani's book (Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, 1978 edition) is in the George Paton Gallery Collection, accession no. 90/144, box 9, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 20 *Not(e) books: Exhibition of object books*, (exhibition booklet, curated by Mirella Bentivoglio), Parkville: George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1983.
- 21 *July gallery report*, 26 July 1983. George Paton Gallery Collection, accession no. 90/144, box labelled 'George Paton Gallery – Exhibitions 2, 1983', University of Melbourne Archives.
- 22 Memory Holloway, 'Art', *The Age*, 20 July 1983, p. 14.
- 23 University of Melbourne, Information Services, *Art bound: A selection of artists' books: 23 May – 26 July 2006* (exhibition catalogue), [Parkville]: University of Melbourne, 2006.
- 24 Note that we had progressed from white gloves and there was no handling of the art. More recent exhibitions of artists' books I have attended still have the books under glass but include digital flat screens with scrolling images of the pages of the artists' books. Some can be interactive and one example included the sound of the turning pages, something like the sound of turning parchment pages, thus mimicking the full experience for the viewer (e.g. *Working through/turning pages: The artist's books of Robert Jacks*, exhibition held at Bendigo Art Gallery, 24 October – 29 November 2009).
- 25 The proceedings of the symposium are available at [www.library.unimelb.edu.au/art/exhibitions/past/artbound/symposium](http://www.library.unimelb.edu.au/art/exhibitions/past/artbound/symposium) accessed 9 December 2009.