

The quiet democracy of the contemporary artist's book (or, why *do* artists make books?)

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As today's discussions are related to the concept of the 'artist's book' in the show *Blood on Paper - The Art of the Book* and Tom Lubbock's review in *The Independent*, I would say that those were not examples of artists' publishing in terms of democratic works. Yes, the books were impressive, large and attention grabbing, and were obviously of their time, but for me, they were not what artists' books are about. The show comprised mostly of very well known (predominantly male) artists, some of whom had produced only one artist's book ('produced' in the loosest term, as these books were mostly printed and bound by a studio publisher not by the artist), and made for a high-end art market, not for general public consumption. Most had no relation to the books made by artists today – these were made for money, not the message.

This was however, a show that was curated as part of a national museum's remit and needed to draw in a public audience, so perhaps we should be grateful that artists' books in any form were the subject of a major UK exhibition. Charles Sandison's *Carmina Figurata*, high up and out of reach, was perhaps the most accessible piece in the show; it wasn't behind glass, just floating above, with words moving like tiny creatures under a microscope as they formed fleeting connections with their neighbours. Physically untouchable, yet actually asking the viewer to spend time with it.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the V&A, the *Certain Trees* exhibition (which has also toured some great venues in Europe) provided a breathing space, a quiet and reflective history of independent publishing that honestly wanted to engage with the viewer/reader on a personal level. Those and the following examples of books here, don't shout "look at me!" from the rooftops, but they do whisper something your ear; a subtle and enduring message, that they want to stay with you.

So, why *do* artists make books? The short answer is because they want to - we don't ask painters why they paint, so why ask an artist why they work in the book format? The books in this selection are related to the ideas of artists' books from the 1960s and 70s (often simply produced as a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas, bringing art to a wider public through self-publishing).

Now that Internet publishing has become so easy and affordable, more artists are also utilising this to produce and market their work to a global audience; bringing a new 21st Century democracy to creating and distributing artists' books.

The longer answer starts with the example of the British artist John Bently, who has been publishing since the early 80s. He says, "I began life as a poet who found himself at art school, the two media eventually informing and blending until 'the book' became my primary medium."

I began the *Liver and Lights* series of books back in 1983 with my two colleagues from art school, Stephen Jaques and James Blundun. We had collaborated on two previous books (and a film) when we were still students in the late seventies, inspired by many things, die *Blaue Rieter* almanac, William Blake and the punk DIY ethos. Bound in old curtains from our slum flat in Herne Bay, these rough and ready constructions were the prototypes of the early *Liver & Lights* publications, which were themselves a sort of manifesto containing our earnestly heartfelt opinions.
(Quote from www.liverandlights.co.uk)

Bently has produced over 40 *Liver & Lights* titles in the series to date, each book being different in size, scale and shape from the last. Bently also works to engage the public in making art, and from these collaborations has published artists' books including *Concerning the Poetry of Lost Things, Harrow; A Book of Fife Heroes*, and *A Handful of Memories, Dundee*.

His editions of hand printed poetry, text, audio and image works range from *Yellow Moon in Brockwell Park* to *The Billyman, Van Gig Zine* and *Stale Biscuits*, and often include CDs of music from his performances with other artists and musicians. These wonderfully inventive, raw books are often celebrations of things that we might easily overlook, and include tributes to ordinary people, places, even his trusty camper van, with samplings of sounds from its interior made into music for his books.

And, maybe artists make books because they enjoy it – Otto and Katherina Manolessou are two artists who regularly make collaborative books, which are hand screenprinted in small editions, and as well as being beautifully produced, you can tell by looking through them, that the artists really enjoyed making them (www.ottobooks.co.uk). The artist Andi McGarry also has a passion for making books, which he hand produces, making his own marbled papers, and then hand draws in Indian ink, or paints his images and texts. These are unique books even in editions as no two are the same.

And sometimes, making books is about having fun... Colin Lloyd recently got round the problem of not being able to interact with his books when they are displayed in cabinets by making a small performance for each one, and Magnus Irvin has been producing the *Daily Twit* for many years without a sensible word in sight.

Or maybe artists make books because they want to share their experiences... Lucy May Schofield's books offer an insight into the highs and lows of any love affair, from *Yearning* which reproduces a set of handwritten letters and images from the throes of new love, to *Loveless*, a book, which is bound as an uneven and difficult to handle concertina, as it follows the downfall of a relationship to the end of love.

Schofield describes her work as "Inspired by an unrelenting desire to make coupled with a passion for the written word, I make books to house stories, which would otherwise go untold... I take the viewer on a journey through an honest, often intimate recollection, a memory or a feeling. These books are born out of a passion to communicate..."
(quote from <http://lucymayschofield.co.uk>)

Artists also make books to make us take notice of the written and spoken word. The artist Colin Sackett has been consistently producing books since the early 80s, publishing his own artworks and texts, as well as designing books for artist/writer-run presses such as Coracle, and Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn. His books are insightful, beautifully produced, meticulous

studies, concerning reading, the English language, and his observations of the English countryside (www.colinsackett.co.uk).

Christian Brett is an artist/typographer, who founded Bracketpress, “which is almost exclusively driven by typography and a heavy emphasis upon content, in particular political, social and philosophical themes.” He wrote *cxnsxrshxp by xmxssxxn xnd thx xcxnmxcs xf trxth* (a 10,500 word essay) in 2003, as a response to the events of 9/11 and the 2nd Gulf War. The amount of concentration required to decipher each word to complete the sentences makes, the impact of his message stronger:

Dxrng thx Sxcnd Gxlf Wxr thx mxdxx nxt nly hxd tx cxntxnd wxth cxnsxrshxp, mxch xf xt xlf-xmpxsxd, bxt xlsx wxth ‘nfxrmtxxn wxrfxr’—whxch whxn xffxctvx, kxxps thx pxblx cxnfxrmd xnd sx thrxfxrx xll-xqxxppxd tx pxrfxrm thxxr dxmxcrtxc dxtxxs wxth rxgxr tx thxxr xlctxd gxvrxnmxnt. Xnd xn xts xnsxtxncx xn *prxtctxng* xts cxtzxns frxm thx pxn xnd hxxrx xf wxr by thx wxll xf cxnsxrshxp xt hxs bxlt, wxr xs xllwxd tx prvxxl xs x lxxtmxwxy tx cxndxct wxrld xffxrs. (www.bracketpress.co.uk)

Artists making their own books follow the whole process through from conception to finished piece, printing, assembling and binding them. This is important, not only in maintaining control of the whole process, but allowing them to consider the reasoning process of how the book will work and how the message gets across to the viewer. For example: Karen Bleitz’s *The Mechanical Word*, a series of five mechanical poetry books, each hand printed and containing moving parts which turn in rhythm with the reading of the text (<http://karenbleitz.com>).

Neil Bousfield, one of our Master’s students who graduated in 2007, spent one year (sponsored by the Society of Wood Engravers) hand-printing his limited-edition book, *The Cycle* which describes a journey through the lives of four characters in one dysfunctional family. The images depict this narrative through the eyes of each family member, following the choices they make for the paths of their own lives. The finished book (in an edition of 12) consists of 216 pages of 212 hand-cut engravings, and letterpress text pages.

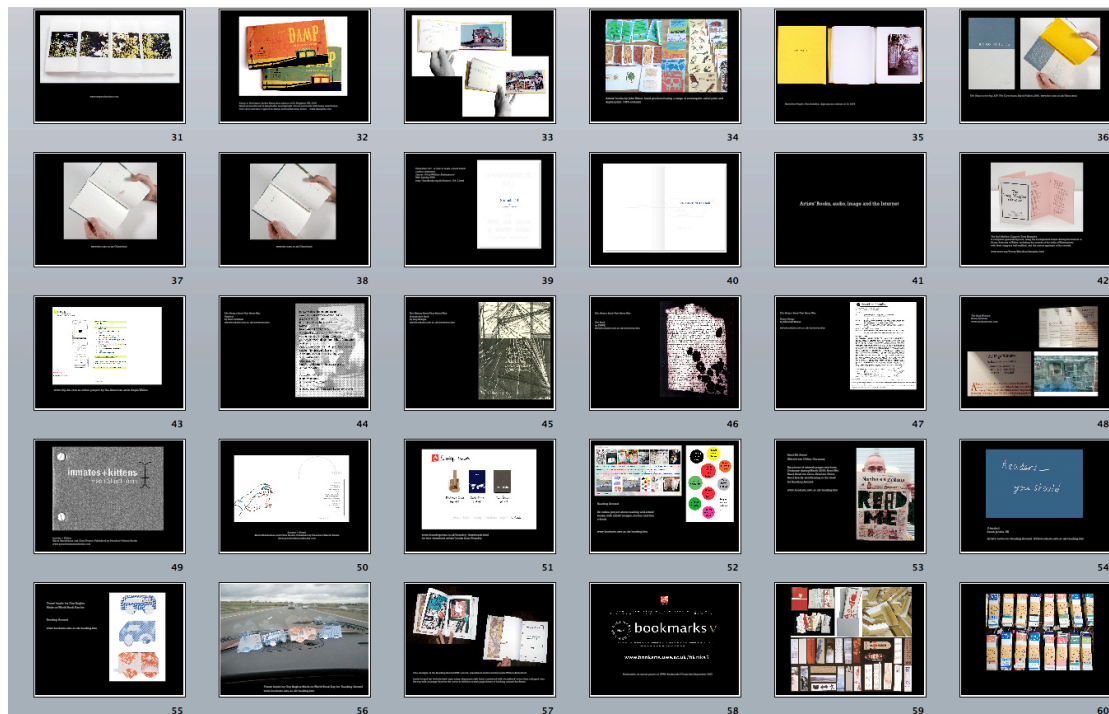
Another example of working creatively with letterpress is Harrington&Squires - a small private press founded in 2002 by designer/typographers Chrissie Charlton and Vicky Fullick. They specialise in small format, hand printed, limited editions – their aim is to “bring letterpress printing and hand-made graphics into contemporary use”.

Aide Memoire was printed using letterpress and inkjet print, as a series covering subjects from Girl groups in the 60s to characters in *The Archers*. (www.harringtonandsquires.co.uk)

The Last, by Philippa Wood (2008) is letterpress, typewriter and collograph printed to order in an edition of 10. The book is a typographic record of responses to a series of questions asked by the artist, it is beautifully made, juxtaposing texts and fonts to form quirky and aesthetic statements (www.the-case.co.uk/TheLast.html).

Of course, now that digital print is part of mainstream practice, many artists have adapted this process to use in their books. Helen Douglas’ *Swan Songs with damselflies*, was printed in an edition of 30 in 2006. The book is a contemplative exploration of a loch and its inhabitants, unfolding its 86 pages to over 11 metres. Douglas has worked with the book format since the early 70s, publishing in collaboration with Telfer Stokes under the Weproductions imprint from 1974-2004, where she lives on the Scottish Borders.

Her production of her own books has moved seamlessly from litho to digital, and recent experiments with digital print have resulted in the freedom to produce larger format works in her studio, such as *Swan Songs*, in an uninterrupted narrative.



Jackie Batey produces limited edition, hand made books and multiples. *Damp in Ditchwater* (2006) was inkjet printed as a book of detachable heavyweight colour postcards with tissue interleaves, tipped-in stamps and handwritten salute. Batey not only digitally produces her own books to a very high specification, she also shares her working drawings and production processes for each of her books on her website, which provides excellent example of documenting the process from concept to completed artwork (www.dampflat.com).

In Brighton, the long-established artist John Dilnot has used a variety of processes as they have developed since the early 80s. *Fifteen English Homes*, inkjet printed in an edition of 500 in 1995, used imagery found in advertising and food packaging as its source material. Dilnot's works parody the way that the natural landscape is appropriated by the consumer industry, by re-using these images to depict a view of 'Englishness' (<http://johndilnot.com>).

Artists also make books, which reference existing books, artists' books or otherwise:

Tom Sowden uses digital output for his photographic books. *Homeless People* is one of his tribute series (to Ed Ruscha) containing images of abandoned shopping trolleys in various city locations: Bristol, Bath and London, UK.

The Ghost in the Fog: XXV The Corrections by Barrie Tullett is, as he says: "the ghost of a book. It documents corrections made by the editors, translators and contributors to *How to Address the Fog: XXV Finnish Poems 1978-2002*. Published in 2005, the original went through five sets of amendments. This book reveals only the corrected text, marginal notes and proof-readers' marks, forming a different kind of poetry - one of an accidental, concrete kind. It is a book of absences."

Fahrenheit 451 (or how to make a book bomb) by Matt Lumby, takes William Shakespeare's sonnet 154, and turns it into 451, by giving almost invisible instructions of how to destroy it by creating a bomb. This turns the fires of love into the destructive flames referenced in Ray Bradbury's tale of book-burning (http://hardbody.org.uk/Sonnet_154_3.html).

Artists' books, audio, image and the Internet:

Tony Kemplen works with sound and text, often publishing his works for free download online (www.etext.org/Poetry/Meridian/kemplen.html and www.kemplen.co.uk)

The Half-Muffled Clappers was created from background noises made during the procession of Princess Diana's funeral through London. The recording was then played through a computer voice recognition programme to create verse. Many of his text pieces are created using the IBM Voicetype speech recognition programme, which he explains:

Will attempt to make words out of any sound... The computer "guesses" which word may be being spoken but it is not taken in isolation, there is a database of words which may occur in close proximity, together with the probabilities of this happening. The result then, is not quite a series of random words, but of guesses taking into account the chances of certain words coming together. This of course is a culturally specific database, and so seemingly meaningful phrases occur quite frequently.

In *The Half-Muffled Clappers*, phrases such as "Amazon vested illusion, fashioned fulsome person" are thrown up by the computer, programmed to search for coherent juxtapositions of words, using a lexicon reflecting society's language use at the end of the 20th century. The software inadvertently critiques the society that spawned it.

(Quote from www.etext.org/Poetry/Meridian/kemplen.html where you can also read and hear this and other text works by Kemplen)

The American artist Angie Waller's work includes books, video, research and installation. She uses the Internet as a means of marketing her books and making work which reaches a wide audience; many of her projects include free video pieces which can be accessed on her website. Clip-fm is just one of her text-based works, which allows visitors to the site to create and send messages as pictograms, to others on their mobile phones, and is great fun to visit (<http://couchprojects.com> and www.clip-fm.com).

In 2003, we ran a small, Internet-based, artists' book project on our website, *The History Book That Never Was*, where we invited 27 artists who work in the book format, to create a single page for a free download gallery of works which could be assembled into a book.

The events described had to be fictitious, but could be based on any aspect of history (large or small) that the artist cared to invent or re-present from an alternative perspective.

The artists' contributions ranged from descriptions of mythical gardens to the discovery of lost publications by famous historical characters, some took a personal view of their own history whilst others considered the political state of current world affairs. When the pages are studied, the reader is left with a new perspective on a given subject (whether historically correct or not) which indicates the way in which we as viewers, can re-examine opinions that we have previously taken for granted as the 'true story'.

Imagining a story is also the subject of Emily Artinian's *The High Window*. For this, she filmed a New York street scene, and wrote a short fictional text based on the footage. 25 people were given the text and asked to give their own versions of the scene - but without viewing the film. The film of *The High Window* shows the original footage with a selection of the readers' comments. Each person's own piece has been transcribed in a collection of pamphlets within the piece. When put together, all the components of the piece show us how we can fill in or create parts of something we see to suit our own version of events.

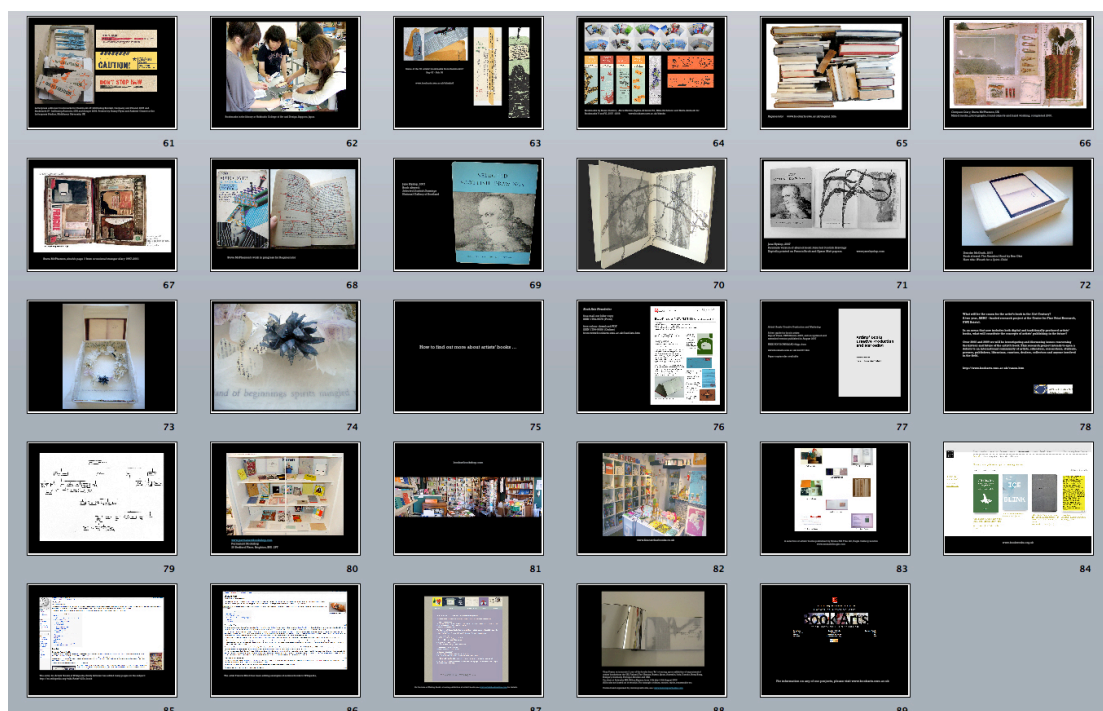
Inmates and Kittens by Marni Shindelman (published by Preacher's Biscuit Books) is a record of her Google searches over 117 days in 2006. The book is a portrait of the artist through her initial search phrases and the relating results, coupled with a flip animation of a kitten by Chris Pearce, which compares virtual language with physical touch, by an artist trying to understand what interaction means. If you visit the *Inmates and Kittens* page at Preachers Biscuit Books, you can download and read a related essay by Tate Shaw (www.preachersbiscuitbooks.com/marni.html).

Foundry often publish free artists books online – if you visit www.foundrypress.co.uk/foundry_downloads.html you can currently download three titles including *Picasso's Guitar*, a plan from 1912, which allows anyone to make their own version of Picasso's work, instructions for which the artist was originally going to publish himself.

One of our recent projects is a free online gallery of artists' pages, movies and a free download e-book for self-assembly. *Reading Around* celebrates the National Year of Reading and World Book Day this year, and includes free works by artists about reading. 60 artists joined the project by emailing a pulp-fiction page sized artwork. 55 copies of each of the 60 artworks were laser-jet printed from the artwork files as they were received, and the resulting 3,300 pages were made up into library and bookstore packs which were sent out to slip into random books at 55 galleries, bookstores and libraries in the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Singapore, Spain, Mexico, USA and Australia.

Artist's movie contributions to the project include: *Il faudrait* by Sarah Jacobs, a meditation on a passage from *Le livre des ressemblances 2*, by Edmond Jabès which Sarah Jacobs first read in the translation by Rosmarie Waldrop. Sarah Jacobs is the author of *Awa[y]lfarer* and *Atrocious Books* (under the name of A Singer) see www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/eread08/36.htm to view the movie.

The e-book can be downloaded with instructions to make the pages into a simple sewn, glued or stapled book with cover, or to cut into single pages with a folded cover (from www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/reading.htm).



An example of one of our projects to get the public involved with artists' books is: *Book Marks: Infiltrating the Library System*, an ongoing annual series of international distribution of bookmarks made by book artists. 250 artists and writers have contributed over 25,000 bookmarks, for free distribution at 56 venues to date in Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Poland, Canada, Brazil, South Korea, Cyprus, Australia and the USA.

The *Bookmarks* project series aims to encourage appreciation of work in the format of the artist's book. Participating book artists each hand-produce an edition of 100 signed and numbered bookmarks to give away.

Contributions are collated into sets; one full set being sent to each of the contributing artists and the rest divided and sent in distribution boxes to participating galleries, bookstores and libraries around the world, for people to help themselves to. Each venue also receives an archive set of bookmarks.

Each bookmark is stamped with the *Bookmarks* project website, which directs the taker of the bookmark to the gallery section of the website. Visitors to the site can view the bookmarks online and contact the artists via the links from our site. *Bookmarks V* saw 58 artists contribute 6,100 bookmarks for distribution from last September to February 2008 (www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/bookmark.htm).

Bookmarks Six will launch this September in the UK, USA and Spain.

Our artists' books exchange project *Regenerator* involved 76 artists from the UK, Ireland, Australia, Germany, USA, Denmark, Norway and South Africa. Our library had a selection of books from hardback to paperback, novels, exhibition catalogues and manuals, mostly damaged, with missing covers or pages. Each artist selected a book from the discarded stock, and made an artwork with it, which was then returned for archiving and photographing before an exhibition and book swap (www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/regen1.htm).

One book didn't make the swap. It is with Steve McPherson, a photographer, installation and book artist. He takes up to three years to complete his visual books, using a variety of hand-worked media, and often spending up to three months on a single page of hand stitching, photographs, found objects, lettering and drawings. These two images are from his *Occasional Stranger Diary*, completed in 2001.

He working at present on Elias Canetti's *Auto Da Fe*, which will be kindly donated to our library collection by him, on completion (www.stevemcpherson.co.uk).

The Scottish artist Jane Hyslop worked with a catalogue: *Selected Scottish Drawings*, published by the National Gallery of Scotland.

Drawing is a crucial element in her own practice so this book was chosen to relate to drawings, made in pen and ink of wild plants, which she explains: "...interest me and symbolise nature's power and ability to reclaim and eventually obliterate what human activity creates. This seemed an appropriate theme to pursue as I reclaimed the pages and changed the images below as I drew... Here I am working mainly across text which describes drawings, and it is fascinating how one reads parts of the text as one draws. This influences the line and creates different relationships in another interesting way."

Hyslop also used the pages from her altered book to create a facsimile version "where the idea of regeneration is explored through the interplay of fresh drawings of plants collected in derelict sites over reproductions of master drawings." This was digitally printed onto book papers in an edition of 100. We purchased a copy of the facsimile book to put back into our library's collection, so one of the books did make it back onto the shelves.

Deirdre McGrath worked with a ruined paperback of *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, to create *Wreath for a Spirit-Child*. She turned the book into a creative piece as a memorial story of the spirit child, who exists between two worlds of joy and grief. The box echoes the drawers full of items her own mother had saved from her childhood years: "a prayer book and various fragile papery flowers, which had lain wrapped up for over 30 years.

I chose to dismember the book and recreate it as a *wreath for a Spirit-child* – fragile, fantastical blooms, the wreath a symbol of both grief and celebration, of eternity and continuation after death. As well as using the original book's pages, chosen passages of text were scanned and reprinted on different papers. The wreath is placed in a tissue lined box as if tucked away like a

half-forgotten memory.”

(The Regenerator altered books project and all works can be viewed at www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/regen1.htm)

How to find out more about artists' books ...

We send out a free Book Arts Newsletter every 4-6 weeks, which you can sign up to receive in the mail, or download in colour online (from www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/banlists.htm).

We have also published a free guide for book artists with advice on pricing their work and how and where to sell books (www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/surv07.htm).

We are also currently working on a two year project looking at the possibilities of the artist's book, in relation to how the format has developed from traditional to electronic print.

You can join the online survey and participate in an online forum (launching this summer) which will allow artists to upload experimental works for viewing and discussion.

See <http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/canon.htm> for more information.

A small selection of places to see artists' books in the UK:

Permanent Bookshop and Permanent Gallery, 20 Bedford Place, Brighton BN1 2PT
www.permanentgallery.com

Arnolfini Bookshop, 16 Narrow Quay, Bristol BS1 4QA
www.arnolfini.org.uk/about/bookshop.php

Bertram Rota Ltd, 31 Long Acre (First Floor), Covent Garden, London, WC2E 9LT
www.bertramrota.co.uk

Bookartbookshop, 17 Pitfield Street, Hoxton, London, N1 6HB www.bookartbookshop.com

EMH Arts / Eagle Gallery, 159 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3AL
www.emmahilleagle.com

Firecatcher Books, The Last Drop Village, Bromley Cross, Bolton BL7 9PZ
www.firecatcherbooks.co.uk

Here Shop & Gallery, 108 Stokes Croft, Bristol
<http://sparror.cubecinema.com/here/mainmenu.html>

OWL & LION, 15 Grassmarket, Edinburgh EH1 2HS
<http://owlandliongallery.com>

Tate Modern Bookshop, Bankside, London SE1 9TG
www.tate.org.uk/shop/books.htm

Walther Koenig Books, 80 Charing Cross Road, London
www.koenigbooks.co.uk

Also see online sites such as www.bookworks.org.uk

Wikipedia work

Emily Artinian and Francis Elliott are two artists who are working hard to update and edit pages to create a thorough base of information and critical commentaries on the subject. The addresses below are links to some of the extensive work they have been doing.

Main entry for Artists' Books at Wikipedia, Emily Artinian is constantly editing and writing pages on the subject:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists_books

The artist Francis Elliott has been adding examples of seminal books to Wikipedia, some of his pages can be seen at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists_books - The link to the Artist's Book entry on Wikipedia, which relates to Francis Elliott's talk.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yves:_Peintures

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linee>

http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/bio_content_us.html

for a nice example of a book rendered on the web (click on yves: peintures)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Council/Proposals

for a list of wiki project proposals

Some current artists' books exhibitions:

For the Love of Making Books: a touring exhibition of artists' books, is on show in England and Wales over the summer, see www.artistsbooksonline.com for venues.

'Re' a touring, open exhibition of experimental artists' books from the UK, Finland, The Ukraine, Russia, Spain, Australia, Italy, Canada, Hong Kong, Hungary, Germany, Portugal, Sweden and USA. On show at Artworks MK, Milton Keynes, from 14th July–14th August 2008. All books are based on 're' words. For example: release, remote, reject, reassemble etc. Curated and organised by weloveyourbooks, see: www.weloveyourbooks.com

Artist's Books an exhibition at Owl and Lion, Edinburgh, until 16th July.

A showcase of artists' books including bespoke pieces of work, and small editions of works for sale (<http://owlandliongallery.com>).

Publish it yourself! POD – Print on Demand website information:

The following links are a selection of print-on-demand websites that we, have used, know of or have been recommended. Some are more user-friendly than others and it is generally agreed that Lulu and Lightning Source are better for text based work, whereas the others are good for photographic imagery.

<http://www.blurb.com/>

<http://www.photobox.co.uk/>

<http://www.mypublisher.com/>

<https://www.lightningsource.com/>

<http://www.lulu.com/uk/>

<http://www.apple.com/uk/ilife/iphoto/prints.html> - You can also produce books through iPhoto on a Mac. This link has some more information.

<http://nomediakings.org/category/doityourself/> - This site has many tips on DIY publishing and distribution from Jim Munroe. Follow the links for articles on publishing, distribution and promotion.

Other useful links:

<http://www.philobiblon.com/> - The site for artists' books information, plus links to numerous book arts websites.

<http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/artbkmks.htm> - There are more useful links for book art related websites on our links page.

<http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/banlists.htm> for our free Book Arts Newsletter

www.vam.ac.uk/collections/prints_books/features/artists_books/book_artists/index.html

for interviews with book artists.

Further involvement/commentary:

<http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/canon.htm> - The home page for our latest AHRC project. Over the next two years we will be investigating and discussing issues concerning the history and future of the artist's book. The online forum will launch soon, please email Sarah.Bodman@uwe.ac.uk to join.

<http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/asurvey08.htm> - The web address to download the forms to take part in the survey that accompanies this project. Please visit and take part in the survey.

<http://www.philobiblon.com> to join the artists' books discussion list Book Arts L.

<http://artistbooks.ning.com> a new artists' books discussion site, created by Robert Heather.

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