Ask ARLIS 2

Insourcing: Buying Artist Books Directly from the Artist

April 2, 2001

Art Libraries Society of North America 29th Annual Conference, Los Angeles, CA

Moderator: Judith A. Hoffberg, Umbrella Associates

Recorder: Bonnie Reed, Texas Tech University Libraries

Speakers:

Terry Braunstein, A Tale From the Fire, 1995 winner of the Library Fellows Award of the National Museum of Women in the Arts

Gloria Helfgott, Traveling Light on a Short Journey (1996); In the Shape of Things (1998); Howl: a Memorial to Allen Gisberg (1998)


Katherine Ng, Spirit Vessel (1997); A Hypothetical Analysis of the Twinkle in Stars (1994); Fortune Ate Me (1992)

Sue Ann Robinson, Quercus Psalter, 1994 winner of the Library Fellows Award of the National Museum of Women in the Arts; Quercus Meander (1993)

Beth Thielen, Why The Revolving Door (1994); Sentences - Words Spoken in Prison to an Artist (1990)

Judith A. Hoffberg, Umbrella Associates, served as moderator of this Ask ARLIS session. The five panelists are well-known book artists who have worked in the Los Angeles area. They are Susan E. King, Sue Ann Robinson, Gloria Helfgott, Terry Braunstein, and Katherine Ng.

Judith A. Hoffberg organized this Ask session to discuss the different methods that book artists use to distribute their work. In addition she addressed the issue of the difficulty in assigning an appropriate place for artist books, i.e., library or museum. Artist books are both books and works of art. They should be seen in their entirety, but instead end up in museums and library special collections where they cannot be handled.

The first panelist was Susan E. King, who moved to Los Angeles in 1975. As an artist and writer, she participated in the Feminist Studio Workshop and later became the studio director of the Women's Graphic Center at the Women's Building. She received the Library Fellows Award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts. This award program has supported the creation and production of King's book, Redressing the Sixties: What Artists Work, Lessons A La Mode, which will be published in April 2001 in a limited edition of 125 copies. King noted that the book artist is involved in all aspects of production, including the writing, printing, binding, and distribution of each book. She discussed the rising cost of production from $3,000 ten years ago to $10,000-$15,000 today. King has tried a number of methods to promote her works. She sent announcements through post cards. She has participated in open studios in Los Angeles and is considering a trip to the East Coast to sell her books. Her premise is to try everything to see what works. She offers her books through the artist book store, Califia Books. King currently lives in Kentucky.

Sue Ann Robinson, of Long Beach, has attended the California Artist Conference and considers it to be one of the best ways to introduce artist books. Like King, Robinson worked at the Women's Building in Los Angeles. She received the Library Fellows Award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts for the production of her book, A Quercus Psalter. From her experience, one good method of acquainting people with her work is to take some books with her and show them wherever she goes. She thinks that it is best to make the personal connection. Robinson has received wonderful commissions, including one from the Long Beach Symphony to produce an artist book for the patrons of the Symphony.

Gloria Helfgott is a book artist, painter, and curator of exhibitions on artist books. Helfgott is also an educator, offering classes on the art book craft. She currently offers classes at the Palisades Book Workshop. In selling her books, she would prefer to deal directly with the librarian. Her artist books are limited editions. She pointed out that there are few galleries that deal with artist books, making accessibility of these art works very limited.

Terry Braunstein, of Long Beach, works in various artist media. She began making artists books in 1972. During the first decade, she made one-of-a-kind books. She then created books in editions. Braunstein received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist's
Fellowship. She did not advertise the artist book that was produced from this grant and still has copies of the edition. She received the Library Fellows Award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts for the production of her book, *A Tale from the Fire*. As with the other artists, Braunstein acknowledged the importance of the NMWA's Library Fellow Award program. She discussed the problems involved in accessing these books through library catalogs. Many artist books have wonderful textual and physical content that need to be reflected through specific subject and content access points created by librarians. Braunstein also discussed artist books in exhibitions. Placing these books behind glass prohibits the teacher and their student from seeing the works in entirety, which would wet their appetite to see more examples of artist books.

Katherine Ng became interested in making books while in grade school, when she created an autograph book. Her first book was *Banana Yellow*. She participated in the Science and Artists Books, an exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution Libraries and the Washington Project for the Arts in Washington D.C. At this show she exhibited her *A Hypothetical Analysis of the Twinkle in Stars*. Ng stated that she would prefer to work directly with librarians and asked for suggestions on how to approach them.

Discussion:

A discussion followed the artists' presentations. One librarian stated that her artist books were locked away. She wondered how to make them accessible, considering the importance of interaction between the patron and the book. Another librarian mentioned giving many presentations of the artist book collection where the audience handled the books and white gloves were not used. Managers of collections must appreciate the intimate connection between the book and the viewer.

A number of issues related to purchasing artist books were addressed. One problem for librarians is in purchasing artist books with access to only brief descriptions in a catalogue. Also artists assume that librarians have limited budgets. One museum library offered a fundraiser to set up an artist book endowment. Book artists should come to ARLIS/NA and other conferences, allowing librarians to see their work. The artists will gain name recognition, and librarians will enjoy renewing contacts with them. However, it may not be feasible financially for artists to attend many conferences.

Issues related to preservation of artist books were also addressed. Books artists try to use archival quality materials. However, sometimes the materials used require preservation. When artist books are damaged, many artists would prefer to repair the book themselves. Contact the artist before making the repairs.

Members of the audience mentioned a few projects that are currently underway, including a list of artist book collections and a web site. The large audience thoroughly enjoyed this Ask ARLIS session. The wonderful and exciting artist books created by the panelists were placed on display during the session. At the conclusion, the artists informally discussed their works with individual audience members.