November, 1998

Bringing us together / Getting us out

Peter D Verheyen, *Syracuse University*

Book Arts Links   Online Exhibitions   Reference   About

HOME

ABOUT the LIST

- To Subscribe send: subscribe Book_Arts-L "Your full real name"

  Leave out the "" . All subscription requests must include the full real name or they will not be approved by the moderator.

- Daily Digest: set Book_Arts-L mail digest

- To Unsubscribe: unsubscribe Book_Arts-L

- ALL commands must be sent to: listserv@listserv.syr.edu

- To post a message send to: Book_Arts-L@listserv.syr.edu

- Full FAQ

- Book_Arts-L Archive

Google Search
- ⦿ The Book Arts Web
- ○ Search the Web

Bringing us together / Getting us out

**Presented by Peter D. Verheyen at
A Symposium sponsored by the Silver Buckle Press, Madison, WI**

The past five years have seen an explosion in the use of the Internet by book artists both as a tool for communication and as a means of publicizing their work. Not quite as rapidly, but steadily nevertheless some formerly traditional book artists have left the confines and limitations of hot type on damp paper to explore the creation of "books" which can only exist in digital form. In this presentation, I will explore how both book artists and the book arts represent themselves using digital media and what I see as some of the implications for the ways in which they have traditionally communicated, learned, and worked. This will be based in large part on my experiences as a binder/conservator, listowner of Book_Arts-L, and webmaster of the Book Arts Web.

Until June of 1994, the only communications mechanism for book artists other than traditional media was the ConsDist list founded by Walter Henry in 1991. While this was geared first and foremost to conservators, most in the library field, it did see a number of queries by book artists (binders) who were looking for technical information. It was, however, a start, and this medium of email was still in its infancy, certainly outside of academic circles. Having worked in and been a part of the book arts communities in Chicago and New England, I moved to centrally isolated Ithaca, NY, where I was rare books conservator at Cornell. Compared to my past haunts, CNY was a very barren and remote place to practice the book arts, especially since I had enjoyed regular interaction with other book artists to exchange ideas and learn from each other. Attempts were made to form a loose regional group with a newsletter, but this never succeeded in building the active critical mass required for success. Being in an academic setting email, became much more a part of my life and I began to explore listservs and gopher, the precursor to the web. At about this same time in early '93 Typo-L was founded, a list which continues to serve the typographic community. For much of its first year, however, that list was unusually quiet, with numerous "is anyone else out there" messages. I also happened to be unaware of its existence.

When I founded Book_Arts-L in June of 1994 it was announced on ConsDist and Exlibris, a list for rare book librarians, and I waited to see what would happen. Walter Henry, who knew about the list, offered to host its archives on his server CoOL in a gopher, web accessible format. I knew about some of the technicalities, but was clueless about what I was getting myself into to. Needless to say, I said yes. The subscriber list grew slowly, but steadily, as did participation, and by the end of that first year there were about 400 subscribers with as many postings. Initially, I found myself "hand-holding" people as they attempted to subscribe and learn to use listserv and email. To some extent this continues to happen, though much more infrequently. Mac users had the greatest number of difficulties as they were not used to issuing command-line commands, followed

quickly by the AOL subscribers. With time that has improved dramatically. Managing 1200+ can be a chore, but also a great deal of fun as one gets to know people all over the world, all tied together by a common interest.

Not content to simply discuss technical matters, within weeks we were debating the essence of the book, a topic which would reoccur periodically and explode in the Spring of this year. An informal recent survey has found that there are now at least 5 listservs for book-art-related topics (Typo-L, Letpress, Paper-L, Callig, and Book_Arts-L) with a total subscriber base of at least 2500 world wide, not including those on multiple lists. The archives of these lists are available via the Web. While there is quite a bit of dead-wood in these archives such as the "me too" replies to something or other, these archives have nevertheless become a great repository of collective experience and knowledge about such arcane topics as reconditioning a press, finding a particular supplier, using materials, and how to practice the craft. Quality of postings varies greatly, determined by the expertise of the poster, but that serves an educational function as well. We all learn best from our own or other's experiences.

As indicated by their names, these listservs all serve a distinct constituency and are quite active. With many subscribed to multiple lists, it is not uncommon for the same theme to appear at the same time on numerous lists or for topic to begin on one list, be cross-posted and picked up by another, with each list putting it's own distinct stamp on the discussion. On Book_Arts-L, a discussion began with an "innocently simple" question looking for a definition of "artist's book," which printed out is 89 pages. These discussions travelled a very circuitous route, becoming "what is art," the difference between "art and craft," "craft," training, technical competence... A similar discussion recently occurred on the calligraphy list beginning with a question using teaching materials and judging the quality of work vs consumer expectations. Most threads, however, are not as involved and revolve around relatively simple queries and announcements. The challenge is in predicting which will grow into something bigger. Most subscribers are genuinely helpful or want to be, but as in society as a whole we have all types, so personalities and their expectations can get tricky. Feelings and expression there-of can become a trap for those new to the net and not familiar with communication habits. "Netiquette" postings help, but not always. Generally everyone is civil, though sometimes it becomes too mushy and effusive (with thanks) for my taste. When things get out of hand, which is rare, but does happen, the listowner may have to remind subscribers that it is not a democracy or even anarchy, but a benign dictatorship. Usually an offline message works, but on occasion people have had to be silenced or removed. It is very difficult to keep someone who really wants to be on a list off, but generally they have cooled off or the topic has changed so everything works out.

When CoOL became a website, I was able to create a "page" for the list archive. A that point I also asked about establishing a site for the Guild of Book Workers, of which I was Exhibitions Chair and Newsletter production editor at the time. With Walter's consent, I began to learn HTML, lifting code from pages I liked and exploring this new medium for what else it had to offer relating to the book arts. Always a pioneer, Richard Minsky established one of the first sites dedicated to the book as art. Even though it was designed to show (yes, this was now

possible), promote, and sell, his work, Richard also took the time to explain his work and the philosophy behind it.

Upon my arrival at Syracuse, less than a year after starting the list, I established my own presence on the Web (The Book Arts Web), which included along with the usual self promotion a list of 10 links. These would continue to grow exponentially year after year as did postings to the list. Currently there are at least 300+ related websites. These themselves can be loosely broken down into the following categories: organizational (GBW, CBBAG...); Academic programs; independent centers; individuals; small presses; businesses; meta- sites. Numerous exhibits, organized by libraries, organizations, and programs have also been mounted on the web. On my site, I chose to segregate these to make it easier for someone just wanting to see illustrative examples. Online book arts exhibitions are generally mounted by a library, usually by special collections (University of Iowa - Tiny Tomes), by a book arts organization such as GBW or CBBAG, or by an art/design school or program such as the exhibition of Czech publishers bindings at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA. Themes for these exhibitions range from historical bindings/editions such as the Aldine books at Brigham Young University, to fore-edge paintings, artists books, and occasionally prints, though these are usually shown in a more historical context.

Exhibitions can serve a variety of purposes such as promoting holdings or new acquisitions, or they are used to promote an event, such as the 25th anniversary of the Silver Buckle Press. Unfortunately, while the exhibitions tend to show high caliber work, the effort to publicize them is often not impressive. One announcement on a listserv is common, but that's usually where it ends, with the exhibits living online for some time and then perhaps disappearing. In the case of GBW and CBBAG, the online exhibits are meant to serve as a vehicle for generating interest in the organization and actually selling the print catalog. *Paper Bound*, the first online exhibition by a book arts organization (GBW), was followed this year by CBBAG's *Art of the Book '97* and last month by the Guild's *Abecedarium*. While showcasing a particular group's work, these sites also serve as vehicles for catalog sales. As an example, 1/5th (100+) of *Paper Bound's* catalogs were sold via the online exhibit **before** the exhibition opened or the catalog appeared in print. While some may feel that having an exhibit online can hurt sales, I feel the opposite is true because it can whet (or dampen) the public's appetite, making one desire the more permanent print edition. The great unknown in this medium is longevity, so there should be at least a minimal version in print, such as a checklist.

Sites appear and disappear without notice, occasionally to be missed. As the book goes digital this will become an increasing problem as libraries and collectors will need to ensure that the work will be able to live on beyond the current medium. The artists who conceive these works will also have to be aware of this and work towards ensuring that their work will exist in the future. Failure to do so will make the brittle book problem appear laughable. At least those books can still be read, even if crumbling in the process.

Many book-arts-related organizations worldwide have established a presence for themselves on the Web, some more extensive (CBBAG & GBW) than others. Typically, these sites will include membership information, a collection of links,

newsletters (or excerpts) and, more recently, online versions of exhibition catalogs. Besides promoting the groups, this combination of content helps make the site a resource and source of information, which while often not as current or spontaneous as postings on listservs, is often more carefully thought out and reliable. GBW and CBBAG are the most Web active of the groups and present the most content. In addition to two online exhibition catalogs, the Guild also has its "Study Opportunities List" online as well as the full text of its Newsletters going back to 1994. Others such as the Society of Bookbinders or the Victorian Bookbinder's Guild, have a minimal presence with some excerpts from their Newsletters and some visuals. Contact information is always present.

The academic MFA in bookarts program sites are led by the University of Alabama, University of Idaho, and University of Iowa, with other programs existing more at a departmental level such as those at the University of Delaware and Loyola College in Baltimore. While often being smaller, these departmental sites nevertheless provide a strong showcase for student and faculty work and are often of a less purely informational or promotional nature. These sites also tend to push the definition of the book further, even into the realm of the digital, by using and experimenting with the computer and other media. The driver of this process is generally an individual faculty members within the department. The larger "program" sites tend to provide less original creative content and more background about the programs themselves. The University of Idaho, one of the first on the Web, was different in that it actively sought to build up a virtual gallery both onsite and through offsite links. That site, however, has become stagnat because the creator has left. Other program sites function as part of a library or special collections such as the Silver Buckle Press site here at the University of Wisconsin. Additionally there are sites representing the interest and activities of organizations and groups promoting interest in scholarly historical or artistic facets of the book arts.

The independent centers such as Center for Book Arts, Women's Studio Workshop, San Francisco Center for the Book, Pyramid Atlantic have for the most part limited their presence to the promotion of workshops, exhibits, and other programs. While not expansive in their visual offerings, these are perhaps of the greatest importance because of their promotion of **educational** opportunities accessible to anyone, an essential role if the book arts are to grow and gain popular acceptance.

The largest group on the web is composed of the individual/bindery pages. This is also where the greatest variety is to be found, especially among the individuals. Book artists maintaining their own pages use these to varying degrees. For some, it is a direct marketing tool designed to help them gain exposure and ultimately sell their work. For others, especially those that don't derive their sole income from their bookwork, their pages serve as a digital vanity press. Types of content typically include: "my books," items for sale (artists books, blank journals, handmade cards...), "about me," "classes I teach," bibliographies, tutorials, and other resources. Some, such as Norman Sasowsky (as part of the art department site), at the University of Delaware even publish some of their artist's books online. Of the pages in this group, some are created as part of a MLS /MFA degree in which the author(s), in this case Emily Dawson and her colleagues at the UMD, discuss "*some of the possibilities for affecting the perception of text, and present an*

overview of graphic text representation in western culture, look at nonlinearity in literature and the book arts, and share some thoughts about the future of text and the book in the new electronic age." Related are articles such as "Through Light and the Alphabet," an interview with Joanna Drucker which was published online by *Postmodern Culture.* Richard Minsky and Edward Hutchins also attempt to define "the book" in their way on their pages. These "intellectually challenging" pages are however the exception rather than the rule. While not figuratively illustrating bookwork, these types of pages are instrumental in helping us think about and define the genre.

The trade / hand-bindery pages represent a small but growing segment on the Web and are for the most part purely informational, with contact information, descriptions of work, and perhaps pricing. Some, but not many illustrate treatments or examples of work. The remaining book arts such as calligraphy, letterpress / printmaking, papermaking and decorated papers are fairly even in their numbers, with the last two being the smallest group. Not surprisingly digital type "foundries" are very well represented. A small number of fine presses are also represented, among them Nexus, Granary, Big Bridge (publishes work of Andrew Hoyem, Peter Koch among others), and some in the UK.

How successful are these sites in promoting book artists and related businesses? The results vary widely. A "catalog of artists books" was compiled which features the work of numerous practicing book artists (all list subscribers). The work on this list varies widely and was limited to artists books / edition binding, excluding more mundane journals. This catalog has been visited 2000+ times since being initially compiled in April of this year. Recently a subscriber asked if anyone had any success with sales. The results were rather disappointing. Several reported some interest, but no sales. Pat Baldwin, a book artist in AZ reported some sales, but said she also does her own mailings and all refer back to her page, so attribution would be difficult. Others reported that they had almost no nibbles of any kind from their pages. Disappointing results, but not completely unexpected, especially when one considers that for the most part we end up promoting ourselves to our peers. The results by businesses were not much better, but most commented that not having a page up was worse than having one with few hits. One likened it to advertising in the Yellow Pages. If one is familiar with the field and some of the names, it is possible to find the information one is looking for. The difficulty becomes weeding through the number of "hits," especially since the archives of all the lists are indexed by the search engines as well.

Regardless of it how it is used, listserv or web, the Internet has enabled any with a computer to broadcast his/her presence on a heretofore unimaginable scale at a very low cost. Whereas, in the past, only a relatively small "elite" number of artists would have been able to gain publicity on a wide scale through published exhibition or gallery catalogs and lists of these, today all that is needed is an Internet account with Web space, something most service providers now offer. This has been seized upon, especially by the relatively new adherents to the book arts, in some sense creating a distorted picture of the book arts as a whole, one more basic and one-dimensional than really exists. Along with images of book work, there are also an increasing number of tutorials which describe the basic forms of concertina, single section, Japanese, or some other "funky-foldy"

structure. The more traditional/complex structures are, with few exceptions, simply not present. When one looks at the current crop of binding manuals, the structures being taught and produced in book oriented classes or workshops, and even major national exhibitions one sees the same picture. Why is this?

With increasingly few exceptions "traditional" book structures, such as those used in fine bindings, are not being taught anymore and in some cases being dismissed as irrelevant or "old fashioned." This same pattern is also reflected in listserv discussions. The most enthusiastic and active participants are those beginners who are looking for inspiration and guidance, or just some form of confirmation that they are on the right path. Most answers seem to come from that same group, with the more experienced, professional, binders and book artists only jumping in when things become frightening. As listowner, I know who is subscribed. There are far more experienced/established artists, binders, conservators among those subscribed than one would ever guess. Most chose to be "lurkers" for whatever reason. I believe that this is typical of most lists. Occasionally these "experts" will also lament the nature of the list discussions, usually offline, though there have been the occasion slip-ups with the "reply key" resulting in (usually) short flame wars. On the whole however, the arts/crafts related lists are very civil, which is not to say we don't get passionate on occasion. Of the lists in existence, the letterpress and printmaking lists are the most focused. A possible reason for this could be the much higher initial investment in equipment and training needed which tends to weed out the more casual "crafter" wanting to learn about books.

Why do book artists become involved in this mode of communication anyway? One, if not the greatest, reason is that it helps bring people with like interests together, no matter how remote and isolated they may be in real life. Email and listservs have been described by Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord as "the great social equalizer, a place where students or aspiring artists can rub elbows and build networks, even long-term relationships with others like themselves but also with the more established elements including instructors, gallery reps, and potential collectors in a virtual community which would take years to develop on one's own using traditional means." As we all work on our own projects, in our own corners of the world, (and this medium really does bring the world together), we are able to gather information from a range of sources which would be impossible to assemble elsewhere. At times these come in with dizzying speed and verge on becoming real time discussions, presenting new and different viewpoints and making us pause to think and reexamine our work. These are the digital medium's strengths.

With all this instant gratification we must keep in mind that the computer and Internet are but tools to help us communicate, a means to an end, but they shouldn't be the end themselves. We discuss the book arts as if they were something very remote and something from the distant past. The computer has enable us to do ourselves what used to be a highly skilled trade or craft such as typesetting, typographic design, and illustration. We can print multiple colors in a single pass, layout complete pages with a multitude of fonts, insert illustrations, and manipulate all with amazing ease. We have achieved the ability to become complete micro-publishers, whether in print or on-screen. At the same time, while the technology is a great enabler, we seem to be

losing something in the process, our grasp of the fundamentals and theory behind the process and how things fit together. We have also come to expect quick and easy answers to our problems which makes some believe that one can learn a craft online or in a weekend workshop. This reminds me of an incident when I was working in Chicago with William Minter and we were looking for an "apprentice." Someone walked into the shop and said they wanted to dedicate themselves to the bookarts. We were looking for a two year commitment which astounded this person. Their response, "I would think this is something one can easily learn in a month or so…" Oh well.

Finally, as our online lives have become a series of hyperlinks and emails, the "book" is losing its "bookness" and heading into the realm of the purely digital by taking advantage of the creative possibilities made possible by hypertext and the web. Recent examples include Janet Maher's *Alphabet* and Jennifer Vignone's *Keelhaul*. Now the reader can shape a story which could have any multitude of endings all influenced by how the reader interacts with the text.We have dramatically changed our "reading mode," and not just with "artist's books." The print media have published numerous reports about how the book is going purely digital and the most recent issue of *Biblio* writing about John Warnock (CEO, Adobe) and his bibliophilic habits, also mentions his involvement with Octavo, a subsidiary, which is working on digitizing and publishing at a very low cost many of the classic texts of the ages in PDF format. No longer are we bound to the author's/artist's structure for the text. This week in Salon Magazine there was also an article on the issuance of *Griffen and Sabine* as interactive CD-ROM. When Book_Arts-L began, Gary Frost (from Craig Jensen's email), in one of the list's first messages, remarked that *the book arts should not be subjected to electronic discussion. Perhaps it is the only field that should not traffic in disembodied text (or ugly printouts).* While I believe that his view point was / is somewhat extreme, I also believe there is some validity to it, even though I am perhaps one of the greatest offenders. It is clear that we cannot stop this transformation (or progression) of the book, nor is it neccesarily desireable that we do so. We, as book artists, should not avoid using this medium though. What I fear, however, is that we are at risk of losing touch with our roots in the book arts as we become seduced by the power of these new technologies. Let us use them to communicate with oneanother, to exchange ideas and techniques, as a tool to assist with design, to make others aware of our art and craft and to raise the publics expectations by showing our work at the highest levels of art and craft. These are this technologies greatest strength.

Thank you.

Presented by Peter D. Verheyen ©
20 November, 1998