Corona Palimpsest: Present Tensions of the Book

"In the name of ‘progress’ our official culture is striving to force the new media to do the work of the old."
— Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*

The contrasts in this work embody anxious currents in the climate of thought: is the book as a medium to be reduced to a set of iconic referents as the price of evolution of new technology? Or will there be some place of reconciliation in which the distinct functions of each medium find the activities they best serve? Binarisms proliferate in the structural distinctions installed here beginning with a profound tension between the monitor and the frame, between the jewel-like focus of the tiny screen broadcasting its poetic print messages in video time and the static field of the book around it in which images are suspended, warm and rich, afloat and adrift in the glow of an antique medium. Reading is a contradiction of the monitor's intention—which combines the two functions of broadcast and surveillance.

There are two monitors in this piece and two large book-like objects—very book-like objects: codex books of uniform pages, bound in finite sequence, with head and tail pieces, leather spines, and the rich iconic resonance of a long material history. But insofar as these objects serve merely to invoke book functions they are as much a sign of the book's demise and negation as they are a living example of its continuity into contemporary time. The monitors that they serve to frame have laid claim to all of the dynamic functions in the work: it is the monitors which look, which move, which change, which "speak" in the silent scrolling of a text while the books are suspended, now reduced to serving as a memory which encloses the technological exponent of communication.

Standing to read the small monitor placed in an open book we are watched by recorded eyes which stare out in uncanny perception from the blank pages of the other book—itself unnaturally suspended, fixed in the air, in a position of a surveillance camera whose functions it mimics in reverse. These are eyes which cannot see, which cannot return.

_Nota Ligorano and Marshall Reese, The Corona Palimpsest, 1995. (Details of installation.) Photo by Mark Daniels._
our actions through the monitor to some centrally located screen and yet, unlike the blank eye of security which reveals nothing to the subject it surveys, this monitor continually reminds the watching viewer of the gaze, the glance, the regime of visual discipline whose interests the camera so often serves.

The suspended book is blank, its pages mute and empty. This is a tome which resonates with the image of the codex as an established form, a historical form, a conventional form whose uses and abuses have survived the tests of fire, flood, annihilation and resurrection. No longer functional, this hanging book recalls its past as an outworn mode, a history which has exhausted the capacity of the pages to retain the memory traces of a process which continually replaced, displaced, one record by the next. Have they been emptied of their history, these pages? Their texts voided and removed as in the perfect censor's successful effort to take away not only a text but all traces of its effacement? Are these white sheets the sign of a once replete field of language and information? Are they blank signs, pale phantoms of an exhausted history? Book as icon, image of a book, unrepentantly preserving its finitude and sequence, its fixed order of pages gone blank as a disk wiped clean. The palimpsestic process never left so clean a slate as this empty space of the threatening page, the blank, the nothing, the void which has terrified many poets out of any relation to their own voice, calling out as pure flesh for the inscribed eros of the word while sustaining the taboo against marking the clean slate of the spirit with the mere banality of human thought. They return a frightening absence to the inquiring eye which wants to know, to know, to be informed of something, anything, if only to be reassured of some coordinate in the empty space. In spite of its age and experience, in spite of the distressed exterior, the rubbed and faded, burnt and scarred, and experienced covers, the book reveals only this mute refusal of information, returning the glance of some disembodied Other eye as an unsatisfactory answer to the anxious query of the reader.

By contrast, the supine book is filled with images, its pages warm with the glow of paint and pictures gleaned from the saturated sources of mass media in all its various print and photographic forms. Faces familiar from current events share space with the pictographic forms of stencilled outlines, figures whose shapes are immediately recognizable as types, as instances of the general categories of a shared visual literacy.

Indeterminate as to final meaning, these images nonetheless serve as an encyclopedic field against which the monitor's text reads out repeatedly, circulating its own loop of language in self-reflexive commentary. The monitor co-opts the functions of the book, taking the old role as its own, broadcasting the silent image of language with words which continually pose questions about the relations between thought and expression, between language and its capacity, inadequacy, limit, and potential.

These are poetic texts, words whose functionality is of another order than that put forth in the daily marketplace of commercial slogans so familiarly perceived in the televised version of the real. By their poetics, these words negate the instantaneity of product identity, replacing the field of received information with line after line of suggestive text. Thought moves outward from the small screen into the frame of the book, or wants to—but the cold chrome edge of the monitor sequesters the video image, keeping a material limit on the referential field of language. Do they struggle, these lines, with the philosophical dilemmas of Mallarmé and Jabe's whose precedent they echo, to extend the spiritual limit of the book to embrace the world? Erase the limiting boundaries between language and its representation? Between the bordered edges of a finite order and the chaotic extension of the ever changing real? Between the confines of any formed articulation and the infinite perfection of thought? There is an irreconcilable gap between the soft, supple invitation of the printed pages, multivalent with images in atmospheric sites, offering their subtle pleasures and the rapid, relentless, rewriting of the electronic screen. The stasis of print with its generosity toward the individual pace of the reader, with its forgiveness of revery and return of the prodigal eye, is in violent struggle with the attention demanded by the screen, moment to moment, line to line, in order to grasp the text in its forward temporal logic.

The books don't function in their current form. Limited, suspended, static, they serve as icons, images of what books are known to be—but they are no longer accessible as dense repositories of human thought, reflection, and revery. Nor is the familiar function of the book duplicated by the monitors—watching and displaying, they refuse interaction while the pages of a book are available to be flipped back and forth at the whim and random interest of a reader. The spatialized field of language offered by the moving video is no more dimensional than the
constructed field of thought produced in the associative process of reading. But the conflicts between the intimacy of print and the problematics of technological productions of knowledge and history are played out here in all their many contradictions—conceptual, visual, linguistic, and tactile. What is offered is not so much a choice between an old medium and a new one as a problematic recognition that there is no choosing either one as if it replaced the operations of the other. If the tropes of book form shape the metaphors of the new technology then the conceptual construct which emerges in the hybrid process will return its transformative template to the earlier form—and both will be changed in the process.

The current tension of the book reflects the present tense of electronic media continuing to come into being. This is not a contrast between the space of the real and the space of the virtual, but between two modes of imaginative life of thought, language, and the eye, each competing to determine the relations of history, language, and idea. As the page was once written so the monitor redraws itself. The new temporal logic of history still remains to be seen. Here the transcript is watched and watching its viewers who struggle to preserve some illusion of participation in the process. Where will the marginalia appear, the annotations of the reader, if the history which writes itself in the future is always on the inside of a glass surface which resists inscription? Whose idea will have been a moment on the screen and whose impressed on the receptive pages of a more tangible memory when both are proved to be material traces of the elusive, immaterial seeming, process of thought?

This piece was written to accompany the exhibition of The Corona Palimpsest when it was first shown at Cristinerose Gallery in New York City, 1995.

Critical Metalanguage for the Artist’s Book

It seemed to me that my task for this symposium was to think about what a book could be in critical terms. So I put my mind to work and unfortunately it turned out to be fairly prosaic. I came up with all kinds of categories of structure—things like openings, gutters, dimensions, layout. Then I thought, I think I need to make this more interesting. It’s got to be critical, conceptual, ideological.

But then I responded with an instinctive protest—No! No! No! What I really want to think about is secrecy, intimacy, privacy—all those things that led me to the Book in the first place. And so, this dialogue emerged between a personal, private voice and a critical, theoretical voice.

I began to be interested in books as a child because I wanted to write all of the time, and so wore a notebook around my neck, with a pen attached, in order to inscribe the world as response—and that was sometime before age ten, I know. I remember because of the shape of my body, and the way the book hung down. I was still prepubescent, exempt from self-consciousness about the dangling items.

But let’s go back to this problem of critical terms: what is the nature of openings? What is the relation of pages to each other across the gutter, the dialogic interplay of face to face, a kind of conversation, confrontation if one wishes, or companionship in space, the parallel condition, feeling ordered by the sequence, but not needing to be.

And then, switching back to my private passions: The writing was to be hidden. I made it very, very small, as if it were an interior trace, not readable or available to any other eye but made for the sake of the belief in the act.

And the critical voice answered: What structures are specific to the book, then? There is, after all, that statement—a book is a “sequence of spaces”—suggested by Ulises Carrión. But then there are also gutters, gutters of which I was barely aware until Brad Freeman showed me Clifton Meador’s work and the ways it insisted on the creeping intrusion, subliminal play, of elements seeping into the pages from the dark space inside the spine. Only a binding which doesn’t open itself flat.
doesn't make itself available, and isn't honest and forthright, can support such mysterious gutters, such areas of fertile activity, breeding its furtive forms in the dark enclosure.

Then the private voice: A book has to be closed tightly to preserve its power. The potency of spells, formulae, is maintained by their inaccessibility. We know, we know, Pandora's box was a book of knowledge hastily opened and long lost.

Critical: Now the dimensions of the book's form also cause a certain tension, stretching the eye to the longest horizon of a line, a page, a paragraph condensed or slung out long and low. Or it may be harmonious, this tension of dimensions, in keeping with some guarantee of relations—a golden mean, a perfect trine, a strictly ruled and regulated space of margins, text, and tribulations. There can be the weight or pages sinking to the floor with all their pretense or their difficulties—height to width, side to side, arm to arm; a veritable exercise of visual acrobics.

The personal voice: I read her like a book. Ah yes, the metaphors of bookness—open, available, clear and accessible. Organized, self-evident, presented as a map of readability as if a character would or could ever be so bold, so to the point, and on the surface. Still, the metaphor insists upon the possibility.

And critical again: Sometimes it seems like layout and format are wrestling companions interlocking until one is jellied, held, and pronounced upon. There is the machismo of type and language getting a grip on the Mack truck of the image, or going it alone, into a different line of tropes—the ruly and the irregular, the ungovernable and the meek, the lines which lay down with the lion and those which stroll all over the landscape with the lamb. There are elements of disorderly conduct or organizational expertise, offering up the substance of the work according to their own terms of decorum—or endearment.

Personal: They threw the book at him. And so they should have, except for what that meant to the ancient binding and the fragile pages—still, the whole exhaustive inventory of the Law, what a formidable weight, one sees a disproportion between the size of the projectile and the size of the intended target so that one or the other is demeaned, humiliated, and subjugated.

Critical: Sequence, in fact, is the great structural instrument of the book—its method, its madness, its order, its progression—writhing into a serpentine trail of mixed messages and interlocking narratives, the browsing method of the tabloid, the reliable order of the alphabetic sequence, the dependable linearity of normative prose, the irrepressible experience of images forging their connections through the fact of following, one after another, in the fixed determination of a regulated encounter. We lift off, from the flat platform of the program, into the flight of an interactive fancy—coming and going from the finitude of pages in the places and along our own unpredictable encounter. Their order against our whim, their fixity against our interference, their sense against our disregard for it.

Personal: The book of the world, the word, the book of nature, the book of knowledge, the book of light and the books which had to be obeyed by the librarian before they could be taken out. I chose mine for the thinness of paper, the smallness of type, and number of pages. I wanted commitment from a book, a sense that if we got involved, it would last. A long time.

Critical: Movement and timing, the flicker of papers, colors, textures, elements. Janet Zweig's extremely receptive book, turning the radar dish around and around in itself, as if that remote interior could be the site for sore messages or prying eyes. Suppleness and stiffness, the resistance and cooperation of materials. The sensual theater of the illazed books, lifting their thin veils one after another before the heavy curtain of the stiff interior. Now all of that is available as simulations—paper textures printed on coated stock in imitation of the handmade, hard to handle, fetishized original.

Personal: They'll make a book from that movie, just you wait! The absurdity of the text version coming after the mass media release, becoming necessary only to be owned and provide the private experience of the public spectacle.

Critical: From the structural to the conceptual—a leap from the observation of form as specific to the medium to the associative play of form as idea: the metaphysics of the book, its full range of roles from initiation and knowledge to perfidy and deceit. The tiny diary revealing all, the elephant folio displaying its riches and wares, the fine, fine, insights of the well-wrought manual, explaining itself without difficulty to the real material of some other world. Reference and reverence, physics and dynamics, blindness and the raw face of insight staring back from the pages and into the backlit screen of the mind. The trials and
tribulations of sanctity, betrayal, violation, and the mutilated record all bound into the affective legacy of the Book not merely as Object—as far as I am concerned, any book with its pages glued shut is not engaged in a dialogue—but Book as Topic as Subject as Prospect and Charge.

In the end, the voices synthesize their response: And finally, not least, the endlessly mutating status of the book as a commodity which identifies itself with confusion these days—the portable companion, the fetishized original, the almost-a-portfolio, the tale of the literal, the visual, the virtual—all vying for a place in the marketplace of salable, tradable, identifiable items for consumption, sale, and resale. The book is value, the blue book, in itself and for others, the guest book, the social register, the family album, the scrapbook, the black book whose social and cultural functions weaving in and out its functional and ideational identity. What is the book to be, now, in the interspace of hyperelectronic nodes? A nexus of events? A momentary intersection of concerns? An immaterial form of non-record of what might have been ideas or events? Or a new form of the Mallarméan mutation, that final, realized Book which is the full equivalent of both the world and the self, the total spiritual symbol of knowledge as complete, replete, and yet, satisfyingly bounded into itself. A whole. Or is it instead to be an endless fragmentation, in which we all, each, have our part to play in writing, scribbling, projecting, painting ourselves as a place in the constellation of a synaesthetic newspaper.

The book remains. That, I think, has been the cause of my attachment to it. The fact of its independent life, its capacity to go out from the shop, the house, the office, and live on its own. As Todd Walker says, the joy of it all is that you can find it again, years later, on a shelf, and its still works—without batteries, lights, or electricity, it makes itself available again, as a new experience, a new encounter.


The Myth of the Democratic Multiple

"Usually inexpensive in price, modest in format, and ambitious in scope, the artist's book is also a fragile vehicle for a weighty load of hopes and ideals: it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience."¹ With these words, Lucy Lippard defined the ambitions linked to the enterprise of artists' books—which she characterized as a product of 1960s counter-culture idealism. At the end of that same piece, written in 1976, Lippard said, "One day I'd like to see artists' books ensconced in supermarkets, drugstores, and airports, and, not incidentally, to see artists able to profit economically from broad communication rather than from lack of it."²

The idea of the democratic multiple was one of the founding myths of artists' books in their incarnation as mass-produced works. Artists' books were to counter the traditions of fine press, limited edition *livres d'artistes*, escape the institutional context of galleries, fly in the face of print and photographic protocol, and circumvent the established order of the fine art system. Few artists' books conformed to the letter of this particular orthodoxy and in the late 1990s artists' books are far more hybrid and varied in form, borrowing eclectically from every conceivable lineage of printing and publishing history. The rubric now covers the full spectrum from expensively-produced limited editions to inexpensive multiples. But partisans of the democratic multiple continue to invoke its image as the one true identity for artists' books. Such advocates rarely address, head-on, the many questions which have plagued producers of these books over the years as they have struggled to cope with the realities of translating the theoretical ideal into practice. The history of artists' book publishing is strewn with the failures of this project in aesthetic, political, and economic terms while being haunted by a rhetoric asserting that only the democratic multiple can save artists' books from the charge of elitism.

There were several tenets which combined in the original conception of the democratic multiple. The first of these was aesthetic: the book was an ordinary object. Its mass-produced format conformed to the then prevailing minimalist idea of a fabricated, industrial product
which offered an alternative to the fine art traditions of the hand-crafted object. As a dominant feature of 1960s aesthetics, this ideal of anti-artisanal production asserted an anti-professionalism as well. A book which appeared to be standard in all respects—the paradigm of the genre usually cited is Ed Ruscha’s 1963 *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*—supported the possibility that anyone might be a producer as well as a consumer. Supposedly banal imagery and low-level design were key elements of this aesthetic sensibility, a kind of sham flat-footedness which belied its own privileged status of production. That such effects were calculated, highly determined, aesthetic choices intended to create the image of the anti-professional work, was a point lost in the rhetoric of the moment.

Aside from the aesthetics of its production, the democratic multiple bore the weight of a political charge: it was meant to circulate freely outside the gallery system, beyond the elite limits of an in-crowd artgoing audience and patrons. The assumption that books could circulate in such a way derives in part from their physical autonomy, their capacity to be disseminated into the world as independent objects (unlike paintings or sculptures which generally circulate with more difficulty and more attention to their provenance, location, and attribution). While that idea worked fine in the abstract, in reality it depended upon creating a system of distribution and upon finding an interested audience for these works which were at least as esoteric in many cases as the most obscure fine art objects. To this day there are plenty of viewers who respond to artists’ books with puzzlement, dismay, confusion, and/or outright hostility. The fallacy of the supermarket distribution network envisioned by Lippard was not merely that there wasn’t a structure in place to facilitate it, but that even if there had been, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* or Suzanne Lacy’s *Rape Is . . .* (1976) would never have leaped to the eye and hand of the casual shopper with the same easy rapidity as the *National Enquirer*. If the bewildering disorientation, which the very ordinariness of the artist’s book induces by virtue of subverting the familiar form with an unfamiliar content, is part of these works’ definition of success, then the accompanying reality is that many viewers simply didn’t get the jokes or the effects. Like most late 20th century artwork, the artist’s book assumes a sophisticated artworld viewer initiated into the play with conventions and their subversion which characterizes much of the work of the advanced guard.

But perhaps the fallacy least evident in the production of books in “affordable” multiples, the supposedly “democratic” form of the book, is the economic one. The question of affordability has two aspects—affordable for the producer and for the consumer. Though the democratic multiple was designed to sell cheaply ($5 to $20), in largish unnumbered editions (500 to 5000 copies), it was expensive to produce. The pe: unit cost might be affordably low, but the up front capital expenditure was significant ($1000 to $10,000 or more). By contrast, a limited edition book or one of a kind work has a relatively low up-front capital expenditure. For artists with access to an offset press and possessing pre-press production skills, these costs could be reduced to the price of film, plates, ink, chemicals, paper, and binding materials. But the idea that even these costs are negligible would be quickly dispelled by a glance at receipts and accounts. For the cost of producing a single offset artist’s book, one can fit out a basic letterpress shop (or build canvases for a year, or buy a high-end computer with full graphics capability, a scanner, large monitor, and color printer). The problem of finding an audience and of producing sellable works remains to be solved, but in the production of the mythic democratic multiple, the issue of affordability is seriously shifted in favor of the audience. In the production of limited edition or one of a kind works it is shifted towards the artist. In both cases, the cost of the artist’s labor is not factored into these equations, but the devaluation of the creative activity in offset printing is a regular feature of the assessment of value. In the contrast of offset and letterpress editions a “the machine does it” attitude seems to prevail with respect to the former while a hand-made aesthetic attaches to the latter. This is a holdover from the use of offset in the 1960s when the artist’s-book-as-industrial-product downplayed the aesthetic qualities of standard, commercial modes of reproduction.3

Still, there is good reason why the political agenda which motivated the democratic multiple remains a persistent element of ongoing rhetoric within the field of artists’ books. A notion of empowerment aligns with acquiring the skills and means of print production. A.J. Liebling’s famous quote, “The freedom of the press belongs to whoever owns one,” continues to resonate even in an era of electronic communication—or maybe especially. The legitimacy which print confers on the individual word is certainly confirmed in the era of desktop publishing and the authority which the book format imposes on its contents.
is very real in general, public perception. Books continue to have the
power to introduce non-standard thought into the arena of public dis-
course through the Trojan horse of an ordinary appearance. Books pro-
vide a vehicle for affirmation, information, and enlightenment across a
wide spectrum of points of view and belief systems. And this will be true
as long as the book remains imbued with its present authority as a cul-
tural icon.

There are historical precedents for using the book for subversive
and liberatory activities, particularly among the artists of the early 20th
century Russian avant-garde such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Natalia
Gonchareva, and Vasily Kamenisky. In the 1910s in particular, artists
made works by any and every available means in editions which were
stenciled, lithographed, letterpress printed, handmade, or reproduced
on primitive mimeo-type equipment. In editions from ten to five hun-
dred copies, these works were distributed by hand, among friends and
companions, or sold very cheaply in order to get them into the world.4
Like the leafletting activities and independent magazine productions of
Italian Futurists or German Dada artists, these attempts to use publish-
ing to spread radical art ideas met with mixed success but satisfied the
desire to break through the perceived (and real) limitations of the estab-
lished audience of fine art patrons and viewers. Ironically, these
ephemeral works now sell for high price tags, their author-publishers
long gone, and their political impact muted by the fact that the context
in which they might communicate this original meaning has vanished.
They now function as fetishized art objects, rare and valuable, the very
opposite of their originally intended identity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, putting artists’ books into printed and
bound form and getting them into circulation proved to be widely dif-
cerent activities. If the project of the democratic multiple is to a signifi-
cant extent a failed one, it is in part because the means of distribution
were so slow and fragmentary that publisher-artists could not recoup
their original expenditures—or did so only after a very long period of
time. The books didn’t get out. When they did, they sold in small num-
bers, were paid for at a slow rate with a high percentage of sale price
going to commission. While subsidizing one’s production is a normal
expectation on the part of most artists, the boxes of unsold stock under
the bed or in the basement were a continual reminder that what had
gone unsold was likely to remain unread, unwanted, and ineffectual in
its place in the world. The exception to this was the work of those well-
known artists who embraced the form. The products of blue-chip artists
were not always the most interesting works in the field and were fre-
cently hybrid forms doubling as catalogues for an exhibition, publish-
er- or dealer-driven, rather than artist-initiated works. But these found
an audience the way artists’ prints did—as the inexpensive side-line to
the mainstream markets. The real failure was that the audience for
artists’ books simply failed to materialize. Where were these masses
who supposedly hungered for innovative, original, works of portable art
in the form of inexpensive multiples? They were probably out buying
posters of Impressionist paintings and culture industry celebrities.

In spite of this rather dour assessment of the fate of the democratic
multiple, it is important to note that there were and are a number of
presses and individuals committed to the idea. There are also a signifi-
cant number of artists who have modified or transformed their practice
over time to reflect their own changed attitudes with respect to the ear-
lier utopian expectation of what the artist’s book might be. There are
presses which continue to support the democratic multiple as a princi-
ple and a reality: Simon Cutts (in recent years, with Erica Van Horn) has
maintained Coracle Press (Norfolk, London, and Ireland) with an
unwavering commitment to the affordable multiple since its inception
in the mid 1970s. Likewise, Teller Stokes, frequently in collaboration
with Helen Douglas, has run WeProductions (Yarrow, Scotland) with
the idea that their books are offset editions whose prices make them
competitive with trade cloth and paperbacks. Other artists abandoned
the production of such works after a long spell of highly original and
creative publishing, such as Conrad Gleber who, with Jim Snitzer, oper-
ated Chicago Books for over ten years (mainly in the 1970s). The rising
and falling fortunes of Printed Matter Bookstore at DIA, in New York
City, whose founding was a product of the original 1970s idealism, can
be mapped as a history of the checks and difficulties which have met the
mythic concept of the democratic multiple in its many incarnations over
the years. The struggle has frequently been frustrating. As an institution
with a unique identity in the field, Printed Matter Bookstore has been
called upon to serve any number of roles—bookstore, distributor,
archive, reading room, community center, and gallery space—while
struggling to meet rent, wages, overhead, and payment schedules.5
Their situation has to be read as symptomatic of the fate of the larger
vision of artists' books as affordable multiples since their commitment from the beginning has been to the dissemination of these works.

Many artists who produced affordable editions for years now either supplement their inexpensive editions with high end works in limited numbers, make one of a kind works which sell in a fine art market, or seek a workable compromise between sustained individual investment of time and money and some kind of return. The idea that artists who don't make money are somehow more pure and noble than those who aspire to gain just recompense for their efforts was already dispelled in Lippard's insightful statement. Artists like Phil Zimmermann, Todd Walker, and Susan King—to name only a few—continue to wrestle with the conflicts and paradoxes of offset production, and their own earlier commitment to the affordable multiple. This is not an issue of selling out—since there is no market to sell out of or into, but of coming to terms with the realities of production costs and audience. Artworld champions of the offset multiple, John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, and Ed Ruscha, have made their own compromises with their original positions and produced limited edition works with fine art publishers. What has become glaringly clear, in the 30-some years since the democratic multiple was announced, is that not only is it almost impossible to make money as a producer of inexpensive artists' books, but also that it's difficult even to break even. And, to add insult to injury, it has tended to be the high end products which command critical attention because they come into the world announcing their "importance" in their production values (expensive paper, binding, large formats, "hand" printing). But it is still true that many of the most creative, innovative, interesting and exciting work done in this field is in works at the lower-end of production values.

For better and for worse, in the 1990s, artists' books have come of age. There are several dozen artists' presses in the United States, Europe, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand committed to artists' books as their major or sole mode of expression. And there exist quite a number of artists for whom the complexity, density, and specificity of the book form are essential features of their artistic vision (Gary Richman, Susan Baker, Clifton Meador, Joan Lyons to name just a handful of representative American artists). The complete body of their works deserves critical recognition and attention. This is slow to come, but the need for an informed critical debate has begun to motivate the artists' book community to produce a rigorous intellectual assessment of such production. There are various newsletters published in association with centers for artists' books (Amersand and AbracadaBra, produced in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, respectively). A few journals with broader artworld constituencies, such as Art Monthly in London, have regularly published the work of critic and historian of artists' books (notably Cathy Courtney). On Paper, formerly Print Collector's Newsletter frequently features artist's book reviews by Nancy Princenthal. And most recently, Brad Freeman launched the Journal of Artists' Books (1994 to the present) to foster critical debate in the field.

The downside of this infusion of critical energy is the end of the naive era of books as unmediated and spontaneous expressions. The anyone-can-do-it mood has been replaced with a new professionalism (and that earlier "anyone" has to be qualified—since when the "anyone" was a blue-chip artist the response to their work was very different when the artist was an individual working in a garage somewhere). The field of artists' books has expanded through programs in colleges and various local centers of activity fostering the production of works which are often unconscious hybrids of various traditions of fine art print protocol, limited edition portfolios, high end publishing, livre d'artistes, and self-publishing. There is formulaic and weak work among these productions, and also much precious, crafty stuff, but there's also solidly interesting work by artists finding their identity within the field—and in this regard, artists' books are now no different from any other artform. And, like any other viable art form, the artist's book continues to reincarnate itself through various mutations and transformations in response to the needs and visions of each generation and each practitioner. The mistake would be to hold out some standard of judgment as universal or as carrying a morally superior position. Too often, the myth of the democratic multiple has been used in this way without looking the too evident paradoxes in the face.

In a recent conversation, Cathy Courtney recounted to me an anecdotal experience she had had reading the latest artist's book from the London-based BookWorks, The Diary of a Steak, while on a train. The book has a photographic image of a hunk of raw meat on its cover with a small sticker where the price tag would appear on a supermarket steak. But the tag says, "hear my erotic music." A man seated across the aisle from her seemed clearly perturbed by the image, and Courtney
said she was reminded once again of the power of an artist's book to function subversively in the most ordinary of surroundings simply by its transformation of the standard form and format. Or as Brad Freeman has said, "Over its lifetime, the book has the capacity to insinuate itself into unforseen locales." And it is in this insinuating capacity that the book continues to serve the original vision of the democratic multiple—as a work which one encounters with no introduction and no warning and which suddenly, oddly, uniquely transforms the viewer's expectations by its unexpected innovative originality. To privilege the democratic multiple at this point in time is a questionable enterprise freighted with the burden of another generation's notion of moral superiority and unrealistic expectations. The few artists who do persevere in that direction deserve respect and, in certain cases, serious critical appraisal. But many have also looked this project squarely in the face, made their effort or assessment, and seen fit to rethink its premises. In artists' books, as in any creative endeavor, there are no rules. Make the books you want to make, the books you believe in. Those are the only books worth producing. The failure of the democratic multiple is not a failure of production, but of reception—another of the many moments in which the efforts of alternative discourse have been eclipsed by the economically advantaged mainstream. Artists' books have failed to find a place as a democratic artform, at least up until now. But in the future—?

2. Ibid. p.45.
5. There are a handful of other bookstores and dealers specializing in artists' books, but Printed Matter's symbolic identity and longevity define its particular role.
6. No doubt elsewhere as well, but if there is a significant output of artists' books in Africa, South America, or Asia, it has not managed to find much distribution or visibility.
7. Which only points out how "mythic" the idea of the democratic multiple was, and how linked to an artworld aesthetic styled as a political gesture: compare the careers and critical reception of the work of Joe Ruther and Ed Ruscha, of Telfer

Stokes and Gilbert and George of Gary Richman and Richard Prince. In each case, the first artist in the pair worked in the form of independently produced multiples with affordable price tags (under $30); each is a compellingly original artist; each languishes in relative obscurity by contrast to the art star counterpart whose "democratic" multiple productions are frequently underwritten by well-funded publishers, galleries, or institutions.

This piece appeared in ArtPapers. October, 1997, in a special feature on artists' books.
Offset: The Work of Mechanical Art in the Age of Electronic (Re)production

Offset printing was designed for commercial purposes to facilitate the high-speed, high-volume production of multiples through photomechanical processes. The multiples in this exhibition are artists' productions. They are statements and expressions—original prints and books—which offer an alternative to the mainstream of mass media's hegemonic control over texts and images. In the form of prints, offset extends an industrial process into the territory of fine art printing calling into question the terms of finite production, especially the limited edition so central to that tradition. Offset books, meanwhile, offer the potential for the intimate, complex, and mobile structure of the book form to proliferate and move itself into a wide open cultural field. Books, even more than prints, have a life of their own. They are autonomous, self-sufficient, independent publications—with all that that implies in terms of editorial, artistic, communicative activity. Artists' books are in some ways the quintessential late twentieth century artext: interdisciplinary, unruly, loosed from the constraints of traditional media/genre definitions, and formal considerations into a free form play with images, ideas, texts and structures. They arose as an outgrowth of the conceptualization, democratization and popularization which characterized the artistic sensibility of the 1960s. In the last thirty years artists' books have come of age, and in spite of the many problems and paradoxes of production, distribution, and reception, they remain a vital mainstay of alternative expression. Offset is the preferred mode of production for this contemporary form—apparently cheap, readily accessible, and extremely accommodating to various sources and styles of information and aesthetics. Seen as a servicable mode of production, a facile means of rapidly reproducing images and words, offset has been slow to be appreciated in its own right—not merely for its reproductive capabilities, but for its specific qualities as an artistic medium.

Offset's Identity
Offset printing is situated at the intersection of individual creative expression and industrial production. The theoretical premises on which the identity of offset as a creative medium can be legitimated have yet to be fully articulated. In addition, practical considerations, such as the difficulty of learning the process, have kept the number of offset artists low. However, with the widespread availability of the electronic darkroom on personal computers the pre-press aspects of offset production are becoming part of the common currency of information processing. But the essential characteristics of offset as a printing process remain unchanged: the photomechanical transfer of visual information from film to a planographic aluminum plate to a soft blanket and then to paper on a high speed press. The most recent technology extends the electronic reach—for Heidelberg's newest press the plates are made from disks right on the press. But offset printing itself is still very much a mechanical art; its technology is based in nineteenth century process and machinery, in the mechanization of older craft practices which were slow, labor intensive, and dependent on skilled handwork. Offset is the high end output for electronic media, the most efficient, accurate, and versatile mode of rendering the digital, rasterized, processed data of the electronic environment into material form as print.

Offset is not an outmoded technology, like stone lithography or handset letterpress, acquiring status by virtue of its obsolescence. Offset art, instead, is comparable to video: it is an artistic use of a viable industrial mode. Not surprisingly, video has also been slow to obtain recognition—or, even more importantly—identity as an art form. As a creative medium in an age of electronic (re)production, offset can only be understood in relation to its continuing functionality as an industrial process. As a mechanical mode of production, offset can only be assessed aesthetically in relation to the eroding status of modernist claims about the autonomy of fine art. And the prosaic familiarity of offset printed sheets can only be theorized in terms of their specific cultural identity if the invisible aspects of skilled labor and production processes on which it depends are taken into account—and the ordinary character of offset defamiliarized. The purpose of this essay is to at least suggest some of the parameters within which such an assessment might be framed.

History and Technology
As stated above, the history of offset begins with its development as an industrial form of reproduction in the late nineteenth and early twenti-
The techniques of halftone photography were combined with the mechanics of high speed printing to create a versatile medium—one which was capable of reproducing literally any image through photographic means. The history of offset as a creative medium is more recent. There are pioneer printers in this field: Eugene Feldman, Joe Ruther, Todd Walker. Their work stretches over more than forty years, a substantial period measured in human terms, a brief period in terms of the history of art. Several waves of younger artists have learned from these figures, or developed into offset artists through their own direct exposure to the printing process in studios, schools, or commercial environments, many of whom (though by no means all) are represented in this exhibition. Offset has only slowly found its place in the curricula of a few art schools, where it still suffers both an industrial stigma and also, suffers from the difficulties involved in coming to terms with such a complex process.

Designed to perfect the rapid reproduction of images and texts through a combination of photographic and lithographic printing processes, offset generally hides its complexity under the appearance of efficiency. In fact, offset is a process which requires elaborate and highly skilled work in every aspect of its production. In the pre-press stage, hours in the darkroom, at the drawing board, or in the design studio all contribute to the eventual making of a piece of film. Whether recording hand processes—drawing, mark-making, fingerprints—or using photographic methods—Electronic or traditional—offset plates have to have their own photosensitive surfaces exposed and developed before they can be used in printing. At the stripping and platemaking stages, negatives, mylar, positive plates, stencils, opaquing fluid, elaborate burning and registration—any number of manipulations—provide tools for composing the visual image ultimately fixed in the photographic emulsion. Once made, the plate provides the means for transferring ink to the soft blanket and onto the paper. In printing, a plate is continually dampened to keep the oil base ink off the non-image area, and the variables of water, pressure, speed and inking require continual vigilance. When used as an artform and creative medium, offset sometimes calls attention to and disturbs the transparency of the reproductive process. It is possible to transform offset from a reproductive to a productive medium through interference at any point in the process. And yet, the very photomechanical character of offset is such that it will always, inevitably, conceal the labor involved in its operation.

Auratic Originals vs. Democratic (?) Multiples

The beginning of the modern period in visual art corresponds with the development of mass production modes in industry. The technology for such mass production of images (including offset) made it necessary for fine art to distinguish itself from other forms of image production. Modern fine art had two identifiable characteristics: it was autonomous, separate and distinct as a commodity form (an object among others and an image “free” from reference) and it was comprised of unique, original works—or at the very least, those in highly limited editions.

The modern concept of an autonomous fine art depended on the idea that art was somehow distinct from mass culture in its imagery, style, and method of production—and that it was capable of serving functions which could be served by no other cultural activity. As theorized by twentieth century critics, especially Clement Greenberg, the function of art was to preserve the values of individual expression in the face of the powerful instruments of information, control, and seduction of both totalitarian and capitalist ideologies. Art production was defined as a practice of individual expression that found its social and aesthetic identity in the institutions of museums, galleries, and critical discussion. The myth of the aural original allowed status to accrue to the tradable commodity of the oil painting, while the use of certain print media was perceived to be too intimately intertwined with commercial, advertising, and industrial aims and methods to retain its aesthetic autonomy. Simply stated: lithographic prints too closely resembled the products of industry to pass as fine art. Needless to say, the more that machinery and less that hand work was involved in its making, the lower a work was on the hierarchical spectrum defined by “art” at one extreme and “mass media images” at the other. The mass produced images of high speed media have only been permitted to enter the fine art realm through imitation, iconic reference, or in parodic, limited ways which quickly recuperate them as fine art (Cubist collage, Dada assemblage, Pop art, Fluxus, recent appropriation work). Offset, after all, is real industrial production—not just a simulation. The grounds on which it could be distinguished from commercial production cannot be sustained on material terms, and thus, either have to be made on aesthetic terms (iconography of personal expression, laying bare of the mechanical devices, or the artificial limiting of editions) or social terms (through
permitting offset to aspire to the condition of fine art through museum shows, gallery sales, critical review). Offset challenges the very premises of modern fine art (already severely eroded by postmodern rhetoric, if not practices) by its serious connection to industrial production, countering the premises and claims of the auratic original.

Ironically, offset is equally unable to sustain the mythic terms of the democratic multiple. One of offset's unique capabilities (the basis of its success as an industrial process) is the relation between production cost and unit cost. The high volume capacity of the printing machine is what makes the end-product affordable—if the equation is used conventionally. But offset equipment is extremely expensive. Joe Rutherford's salvage techniques may have permitted him to keep a few old clunkers running, but even that was at a cost beyond the average computer or letterpress shop. (If not always true in monetary terms, this is the case in terms of the mechanical skill and patience to keep the old presses running.) Price tags for high end machines creep into the six-figure bracket pretty fast—they are complicated machines with thousands of moving parts functioning at extremely tight tolerances. Offset artists, typically, make small editions which are nonetheless high volume by art standards. Where a stone lithographer might push an edition to fifty or a hundred copies in the editioning process (and consider it excessive if the run were to include more than three or four colors) in offset printing that many sheets go by in two or three minutes during the "set-up" time on the press. For the artist, the greatest investment of time and effort is in the set-up, in the pre-press, darkroom, platesetting, stripping, and working the plate up on the press to print cleanly, densely and correctly. The costs in all of these pre-press processes are as high for ten (good) copies as they are for ten thousand or more. The only change in cost factor comes with costs of paper. An affordable, democratic, accessible form of production? Not exactly... and yet, its artistic identity is bound up with both making claims to be so (the case with Fluxus, Conceptual art, where an artists' books sensibility became associated with cheap quick print services, and the smeary, greyed-out, fuzz-focus image) and also, with the desire not to be condemned to this category (where offset art is considered too unlimited to claim a place in the market of the fine art print).

Production vs. Reproduction
Paradoxes paradoxe. The term reproduction is also fraught with contradictions. Offset is often a means of reproducing an image from another medium (art masterpiece postcards)—but the concept of reproduction is always qualified. Transformation and mutation are effects of reproduction—the original is not only not present in its reproduced form, but is seriously altered by the photographic and printing processes—ink on paper is not, for example, oil paint, continuous tone photo, or water color on absorbent surface—it is a simulation of the same which references those visual codes by which it can be recognized that the original was such or such. But this concept of reproduction has little relevance to the offset artist/printer who is using the medium as a creative tool, since in most cases, these artists are intent on exploring the potential of the multifaceted process to make images which have no other original, do not exist outside of their production through the offset process.

To maximize the reproductive potential of the offset medium, then, one plays down, represses, the interventionary urges. To use offset as a means of producing images which have no pre-existence, no other corporeal life, the full range of manipulative operations are exploited. The simulation of sameness becomes a moot point in offset works which mutate in various stages of the printing process—except where editioned pieces follow printmaking protocol in spite of their use of mechanical means. Consistency, standardization, sameness—these are all readily achieved on an offset press, but there are offset artists for whom the mutability of process on press is part of the attraction of the medium. For others the darkroom remains the site of most interventions and manipulations, while for some the computer is the mutating instrument of choice.

The Electronic Myth
The electronic aspect of prepress production outstrips the capacities of the film imagesetting output devices to service high end printing at this point. The visualization of complex layering, printing effects and even the achievement of separations for film output can all be achieved on a computer monitor screen. But contrary to the hype of ad copy, getting from disk to printing plate is hardly a smooth and flawless process. Images which work in an electronic environment may be antithetical to the print processes—those which don't take into account the way the press works (the sequence of runs, the necessity for registration in the negatives, the peculiarities of stripping) are doomed to failure or labori-
ous rework. Designers and artists unfamiliar with the “old” skills—such as reading halftones or evaluating film for flaws—are vulnerable to the pitfalls of default settings or machine-made decisions which override the traditional checks and balances which occurred when each step of production was in the hands of a trained professional. Now the technicians of design, pasteup, stripping, darkroom, are all combined into computer programs which do not always recognize the necessary nuances essential to each stage of production. Even in the hands of print-smart professional artists, the computer has its limitations—some film outputting devices cannot handle the byte-inflated files necessary for image production—and those designed for very high end production are out of the price (even for services) range of many personal computer users. The rasterized image still struggles as it becomes material form, suffering as in some medieval morality tale from the torments of the flesh. Printing is both a mechanical process and a human process—the machine doesn’t run itself, but has to be carefully watched, continually fine-tuned, coaxed, even humored and coerced. When electronic media give up their nostalgic need for life in material, then the mechanical processes of offset printing will lose their industrial function and perform some new metaphysical practices of smooth running in an aesthetic dream.

Invisible Labor
For the moment, offset remains a mechanical process dependent on highly skilled and time-consuming labor. The seamless product tends to render the workedness of the production invisible. Labor, after all, does not disappear in a so-called post-industrial society, but it is rendered invisible, made to seem a natural function of the appearance of a product, rather than being a thing in itself. While it would be facile simply to equate art with work (however rarified) since it is clearly a much more complex activity than that, there is a sense in which visual art gains its autocratic status by the way it represents specialized work as a category. One of the issues in the reassessment of offset has to be this calling to attention of the worked character of the product—not by counting runs, or ink layers, or by listing the hours of production—but by articulating the aspect of productivity which is constituted as labor, insisting on the value of production as it is, not by forcing it into some perverse imitation of fine art (limited editions or autocratic originals). For offset to qualify as high art (according to modern or traditional criteria),

does it have to conceal its having been made by machine? To force the offset artist into deconstructive imagery or printing techniques simply to call attention to production is artificial, though it is interesting that many of these artists do this. Todd Walker’s simulations of industry style color separation (done in the darkroom, offset, and by collotype) serve as a good example here—calling attention to the medium in classic modernist terms, deconstructing it in classic postmodern method. The laying bare of devices so central to the modernist critique of capitalist production, advocated by Viktor Shklovsky in literature, Bertold Brecht in theater, Lev Kuleshov in cinema, and Marcel Duchamp in Conceptual art, finds expression in this offset work—but the use of mainstream industrial materials and production processes more aptly participates in the postmodern sensibility, one which profoundly challenges the autonomous status of art, at least in rhetorical terms.

Access
Ownership of the tools of production is always an issue in terms of control. The home printshop of the offset artist begging the costoffs of industry generally depends on low end equipment, while the better stocked printing studios of institutions—Visual Studies Workshop Press, Nexus Press, or the Borowsky Center—edge toward state of the art industrial equipment—but at the highest high end that streaks way out of reach, with six color million dollar presses capable of printing process colors plus metallic ink, varnish, or spot color additions in a single run. Dreams of access are merely that, and artists can only aspire to a simulation of the capabilities of such equipment through more labor and more expense. The irony, again, is that it is the most banal, most prolific forms of printed material which achieve that glitz level of production—precisely because they serve the most common functions. The more rarified and esoteric the conception, the lower the likely spot on the production scale. In this sense the artworld, even the offset artists book world, is governed by many of the same rules as the secular world—it isn’t necessarily the most interesting work which gets production support, but rather, the work which is just enough familiar (i.e. like what’s already been done) to pass as original (i.e. a variation of the known quantity). The truly original is almost always marginalized, certainly at first. But offset is a powerful tool in the artists’ struggle to make effective, alternative, communication. Even with the very real obstacles of insufficient distribution, the artists represented here have established
a viable network for circulating their work.

Offset Books
Most of the artists in this exhibition are involved in the complex creative process of making books. When offset and books combine, the result is that the non-traditional artists medium combines with the non-traditional artistic form. Since trade books are always made through offset means, the expectation, again, is that an offset book should sell as a trade book—cheaply. That access to equipment, means of production, and production costs are all factors which only level off in unit cost with high volume production is again quickly forgotten—the viewer/buyer/reader forgets that it is the second word of the term “offset artist’s book” which is the emphatic one. One isn’t buying, trading, or reading a book one is buying art, and art which, because it is in the form of the book, can be carried, held in the hand, snuggled up to, misplaced, found again after years, still in working condition. This is not nostalgic romanticism, but hard physical fact: books have their own lives as objects.

The iconography of works in this exhibition is as varied as the field of contemporary art: there are images of direct observation which mediate the appearance of experience with as little manipulation as possible, and those which stretch the processes of montage within the camera, darkroom, computer, and press as far as possible. Some of these images belong to the classic high period of male fantasmatic imaging, others to the by now equally classic feminist response. Some betray their owners through vivid autobiographical trace, others are formalized to the point where they only bear marks of individuation as style. Some are richly layered, dense with ink and overprinting, others closer to a realist convention of the illusion of the real. In short, there are no limits to style or content, and offset is an adaptable medium, capable of nearly noiseless transmission or high volume interference in its visual communicative operation.

Trying to see the history of the present requires a certain defamiliarization. Offset printing is the taken for granted stock in trade of daily print media, and yet the processes of its production are as unknown, unfamiliar, and unrecognized as those of microchip manufacturing, television broadcasting, or ultrasonic imaging. In short, offset requires professional skills and industrial equipment. In the trade one works for years to progress from apprentice to journeyperson to master. The distinctions which render offset productions creative productions rather than commercial ones are the same as those of any other artistic process—individual vision, subjective expression, and creative use of the medium. Since the terms on which work gains status as art are dependent largely on the perceived identity of the pieces, their producers, and their place in the culture, the status of offset work seems to have finally edged towards mature recognition as an artform. Because of the difficulties involved in its production, the complexity of the process, the skill required for running a press, it will probably remain the province of a limited number of artist practitioners. But this work seems ready for critical recognition and appreciation—whether it is offset art in the form of prints, or artists’ books. The development of electronic media, oddly enough, has become the fulcrum point for critical reflection upon the value of and character of mechanical work—the very act of dematerializing information has made the act of rendering it back into form that much more self-conscious a process. The history of any technology is always under change—in relation to this moment in time offset has become newly defined. Offset no longer has an identity only as a means of industrial, mechanical reproduction, but is clearly capable of sustaining an identity as artistic production as well.

Iliazd and the Book as a Form of Art

The work of Iliia Zdanovich (known as Iliazd) offers a good case study for a discussion of the status of the book as a legitimate art form in the twentieth century. Other avant-garde Russian artists experimented with handmade books during the period in which Iliazd printed his Futurist typographic work. There have been other talented and original editors of fine books. More recently, far more innovative and experimental artists have been working with the book as a form. But Iliazd is one of the few for whom the book was the only medium, a truly appropriate medium for combining the full sum of his interests and abilities. Moreover, Iliazd's total oeuvre displays a consciously constructed cycle, brought to closure in his final productions: two books designed to link the late work with the first efforts he had made in the domain of writing. This final gesture demonstrated the extent to which Iliazd's artistic energy found its expression in the book, making full use of its capacity to function as an art form.

Before launching into a discussion of Iliazd's work, it is necessary to question whether the book in general functions as an art form in terms of book arts as a cultural and aesthetic practice. After all, the question would not even need to be raised if it were not for the fact that the book has occupied a rather dubious, or at least undefined, position. For the book to be considered an art form, it must be distinguished from other products of superior craftsmanship and artisanal expertise. Though book production has a long-established tradition of fine print behind it, the notion of books as a modern art form belongs, with few arguable exceptions (notably William Blake and perhaps William Morris), to the twentieth century. And while exhibitions of artists' books have begun to proliferate in the last couple of decades, the terms on which such work can be critically evaluated, as well as the status of such work within the history and theory of contemporary art, remain vague.

As a cultural practice, the production of books as art objects—books whose value accrues to them through means which are additional to the literary value of the text, or even, the "art" value of the images—creates a certain paradox. On one hand, the artist's book represents the democratization of the fine art commodity. More fine books can be printed, made available, and consumed than unique objects such as oil paintings. On the other hand, the book is a troublesome form to distribute through the usual channels by which special or unique objects receive mass attention: exhibition and reproduction.

The problem of exhibiting these works seem to be insurmountable. In exhibition cases books lose their tactile, experiential quality, their pages can't be turned, their papers felt, their bindings weighed; the sequence of events which comprise the designed experience from cover to interior is reduced to a single, stiff, staged display. Also, unlike painting, sculpture, or other static art, the feeling of a book cannot be readily conveyed in the reproduction of a single image. One page, cover, or spine provides only a meager representation of the original. Consequently, book arts resist the normal means by which art objects receive mass exposure.

This could be construed negatively as elitist. More positively, these books allow an intimate experience of high aesthetic quality. And this intimate experience is also a low-priced luxury commodity, valuable in a culture predicated on mass production and consumption. But however this practice is construed, the fact is that both production and consumption are limited, therefore the means for developing an audience and critical discussion are also limited.

As aesthetic practice, the production of books raises the question of how the book might be defined as an art form in a way which differentiates it from being simply an artfully crafted object. Iliazd's books, for example, have all the traditional markings generally associated with fine books: beautiful papers, large formats, expensive engravings, plates, and lithographs, exquisite printing from handset type whose placement has been carefully manipulated letter by letter, and, finally, parchment bindings so stiff the reader struggles to free the delicate interior object from its protective cover. Iliazd's books convey something of the exotic in their form, less tame than the works designed by, for example, Stanley Morison. But their real deviation from traditional form comes in the selection of elements—images, text, materials—and the process by which they each evolve into a book which is uniquely expressive of Iliazd's aesthetic vision.

The combination of elements in the book raises curious questions about authorship. For instance, if Iliazd is the artist responsible for the
bulk of the production decisions which brought the livres de peintre into being. Then what role is ascribed to the artists whose work figures so prominently in those books? How is Picasso, for instance, not the primary artist in Skinnybones, The Wandering Friar, Pirosmanti, and other works in which his collaboration is so conspicuous? Obviously, the notion of artist and author needs some adjustment presented with something as complex as a book, which resembles a film or television production more than a painting or sculpture insofar as it represents a collective effort, not just an individual one.

Finally, the plight of the book must be recognized as due in part to its interdisciplinary status. Largely ignored by art historians who consider it insufficiently pictorial, and also by literary critics who consider the surplus features of the book decorative and irrelevant, it has suffered from a lack of appropriate vocabulary within which to be legitimated. In this regard, features which are specific to avant-garde book work, such as typographic experimentation with linguistic meaning, have been particularly unfortunate victims of this lack of critical regard. The need for a discriminating discourse which will provide insight into the means by which the book functions as a particular form of art is evident. Within the limited bounds of this discussion, the works of Iliazd can at least serve to demonstrate the extent to which such discourse is justified at the level of an individual practice, and as evidence that the book participates in the general atmosphere of an historical period, reflecting its concerns and functioning on equal status with more traditional forms in investigating ongoing aesthetic issues.

Examination of Iliazd’s work demonstrates that the book may serve the purpose of articulating a particular aesthetic vision in a way unique to it as a medium. Specifically, it allows for the production of a “text” which is not circumscribed by the limits of a literary work, but which includes all of the various features of the book: its materials, its imagery, its literary substance, and, most importantly, its function as the manifestation of a vision which could not take another form and still function as a fully self-reflexive, self-conscious art.

In the course of his life, Iliazd created over two dozen books. All of these were printed in small editions (mostly between fifty and seventy copies). All were printed from handset type meticulously justified by Iliazd’s own hand or under his direct supervision. And all were made of fine materials, Japanese or Chinese papers, and parchment folded and assembled by Iliazd. They are grouped in two periods of activity: an early, Futurist phase of experimental, avant-garde work produced from 1917-1923, and a later period from 1940 onward in which he produced nearly twenty livres de peintre.

The Futurist period began in 1917, when Iliazd returned to his native town of Tiflis in Georgia and decided to apprentice himself to a printer there. Iliazd had spent the five previous years in Moscow and St. Petersburg, studying for a law degree and actively engaging himself in the wide variety of activities which passed under the general rubric of Futurism. In Russia of the period 1910-1917, Futurism was the term applied to almost any kind of avant-garde activity, and there were “Futurists” of almost every possible aesthetic orientation. Iliazd, through the social offices of his older brother Kyril, had gravitated toward a group of painters, including Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, and had struck up friendships with the poets Igor Terentyev and Alexi Kruchenyk, among others. Iliazd had become an impassioned Futurist “overnight,” he claimed, at the moment when a family friend returned to Tiflis in 1911 carrying a copy of the manifestos of the Italian F. T. Marinetti. Whatever Iliazd had in common with his Russian contemporaries, he shared with the Italian poet a radical interest in exploring typographic innovations. Unlike Marinetti, (and, indeed, this fact distinguishes Iliazd from most of his contemporaries), Iliazd learned his typography in a print shop, not merely from observations of the printed page. As a consequence, Iliazd made use of a technically based understanding of the printed word to a greater extent than almost any of his avant-garde peers.

From the outset, Iliazd’s concerns were with the representation of language, with the ways in which the visual aspects of the presentation could be used to enhance the linguistic value of the texts. While in his mature work Iliazd would address other issues, such as the relations of text to image, the structure of the book as a whole, his interest in typographic representation would persist. In the early work, this typographic investigation takes place.

While a certain degree of idiosyncratic originality characterizes Iliazd’s work throughout his life, the early phase also demonstrates the way in which book arts participate in aesthetic issues which were under investigation in both literary and visual arts at the time. In particular, Iliazd’s investigation of typography poses the same kind of self-reflexive
investigation of its specificity as a medium that modernist writers and artists were posing within their own media: investigating the qualities of paintings as marks on a surface, of writing as an investigation of the structure and function of language. That typography participated in this metacritical process can be vividly demonstrated by an examination of the work produced by Iliazd between 1917 and 1923.

Iliazd established a small Futurist group called 41 Degrees in Tiflis, Georgia, in 1917. Under this imprint, he published works by his fellow poets (especially Terentyev and Kruchenky, who had accompanied him to Tiflis) and organized cabaret-type performances and lectures. He also wrote a cycle of five plays, in the invented, so called “transmental” language zaoum. The typographic treatment grew increasingly complex as Iliazd produced this sequence of books. A greater and greater variety of sizes and kinds of typeface invaded the pages, and Iliazd even combined elements in the typecase to manufacture letters larger than any he could find. The last play, Ledentu, produced in Paris after Iliazd’s arrival there in 1922, is a masterwork of typographic design and technical achievement. Iliazd was not the only Russian writer to experiment with zaoum, though, by its very nature, zaoum works are highly individual, and each version of the invented language is distinctly personal. Both Velimir Khlebnikov and Kruchenky, for instance, developed forms of zaoum which were much closer to the original Russian language on which they were based, reserving the forms of morphemes, making neologisms out of roots, prefixes, and suffixes, rather than attacking language at its phenomic base, as Iliazd did.

Iliazd’s five early plays are exceedingly arcane works. First of all, the language in which they are written, zaoum, was a highly idiosyncratic invention. The search for a language which would transcend the conventions of ordinary language, which would communicate directly through the power of sound, was a curious outgrowth of a late Symbolist synesthetic sensibility combined with a rigorous linguistic investigation of the structure of Russian itself. Iliazd understood and manipulated the phonemes (the smallest units of meaningful, distinguishable sound) with consummate skill at an historical point when linguistic studies had also begun to organize the structure of language systematically in phonemic terms. His intuitive investigation brought him to develop a sound-poetry which hovered just on the edge of sense. In the plays, for instance, characters are often defined by the set of phonemes available for their speech; a sexy character may use many labial sounds while the lines of the Holy Ghost in Ledentu, the last of the plays, are constructed entirely of consonants, with no vowels or breath in them at all.

While the articulation of this zaoum experiment was already an accomplishment, its manifestation in typographic form represents one of the most fully realized avant-garde experiments of the period. In the first play Jance, King of the Albanians, in which Iliazd depicts himself as a little flea, the typographic effects do not go much beyond the grouping of words on the page or the occasional emphatic increase in type weight or size. In the next three plays, Donkey for Hire, Easter Island, and As if Zga, the page is used increasingly as the basis for scoring the relations among elements of speech (Fig. 1). The words of different characters are aligned in a manner which apes the features of a musical score. Gradually, bold face characters and different sizes and kinds of typeface are introduced both to emphasize the “character” of the different voices and to function as indicators of an intended oral reading. But in the printed form of the final play, Ledentu, the page appears as a fully elaborated score. Each character’s speech, in addition to being phonemically distinguished, is typographically distinct. The timing of the delivery of these speeches is designed with the precision of an
orchestral piece—and indeed, "orchestra" was the term which Iliazd applied to this approach (Fig. 2).

The metalinguistic information which Iliazd manages to inscribe in these typographic treatments is enormous. While assigning any absolute value to the graphic features of a particular typeface or size would be specious, their relative qualities are foregrounded by the juxtapositions on the page and relation to the page structure itself. For instance, when the main character in Ledaetu lets out a full-page scream in the form of a single, large vowel sound, its impact is clearly indicated by its relation to the smaller lines of speech next to it on the sheet. Partially motivated by that synesthetic sensibility which the Futurists had inherited from the Symbolists, the plays foreshadow the linguistic rigor which would characterize Russian formalist linguistics. The plays also represent a thorough understanding of the technical possibilities which lead type offers as a medium. Iliazd respects these constraints and manages to find great potential within their boundaries, turning the rigid distinctions between sizes, faces, and weights into a fluid medium.

The work of the plays indicates the extent to which Iliazd understood one of the most problematic of all linguistic concerns: the distinction between spoken and written forms of language. While in spoken language the smallest meaningful unit is a single sound, its visual representation frequently requires more than one letter. Elements of meaning may be inserted into a visual text in ways which are the visual equivalent of the verbal pun, allowing plural readings and interpretations which cannot be sustained in verbal form. Iliazd's willingness to manipulate this discrepancy permitted him to deal with the typographic representation on the basis of its own smallest unit, the single piece of type. Often this meant the single letter, but sometimes it meant decorative elements which Iliazd combined to make letter forms much larger than any available to him in the typecase. This is a form of invention which proceeds directly from a material involvement with the medium, one suggested by the process of handling metal, holding it in one's hands and before one's eyes, being inspired by the possibilities it suggests.

It seems that Iliazd had planned his five plays as a full cycle, but it is not clear that he realized in advance the extremes to which he would push his typographic investigation. In fact, as a series, these books seem rather to demonstrate the extent to which his knowledge of type increased his sense of its possibilities as he gained experience and confidence as a compositior. The final pyrotechnics of Ledaetu require no small degree of skill; the justification problems of mixing literally dozens...
of sizes of type on a single page would overwhelm a novice, even one with Iliadz’s mathematical predisposition toward understanding the solid geometry of the printer’s craft. The typographic evolution in this cycle of works can be taken as evidence that Iliadz saw typography, the printed word, as a medium capable of metalinguistic and metacritical expression.

While this cycle of plays focused on Iliadz’s work as author as well as typographer/printer, his mature work would feature texts by other authors, friends, and unknown and obscure writers, as well as visual images from the hands of artist friends who ranked among the foremost practitioners of modern art—Picasso, Max Ernst, Raoul Hausmann, among others. In many ways this later work, produced mainly between 1950 and 1974, demonstrates the extent to which Iliadz’s vision required the medium of the book in order to be fully served. For if the earlier books (not to deprecate their value, but to circumscribe it) were merely the demonstration of his interest in a particular capacity of the typographic medium to represent his own linguistic experiments, the later work drew on the full range of interests and abilities of a man whose diverse interests and capacities as scholar, artist, and humanist were all being brought to bear on his creative activity. The brashness, the bravado, the virtuoso flamboyance of the early books is replaced by a profound elegance of form, but even more, by a profound understanding of the uses of formal conventions as a means of structuring works which went beyond self-reflexivity or self-conscious manipulations.

A complex and diverse work, Poetry of Unknown Words announced this cycle of mature book production in 1950 (Fig. 3). Produced in response to the founders of the Lettrist movement, who in 1948–1949 claimed to have invented sound and visual poetry, it was a compendium of works by the poets and artists whose experiments thirty years earlier were being flagrantly ignored by the new group. This book forms the transition between the experimental typography of Iliadz’s zaum dramas, and the more conventional design and typographic characters of the books which follow. The typeface used in Poetry of Unknown Words is a bold sans serif: squat, sturdy, formal, in a small size which calls attention to the distribution of words on the page rather than to the letter by letter features of the text. Poetry of Unknown Words recapitulates the full range of possibilities which Iliadz had discovered for the presentation of texts. Each of the sheets which comprise the work features a poem and print by a different author and artist. Each page format, while respecting a quadrant structure imposed by the folding process, has a unique visual quality to it. They represent the originators and early experimenters of sound, visual, and concrete poetry (including Arp, Schwitters, Hausmann, Khlebnikov, Ball) in a way which clearly proclaims at once their historical place and the end of an era in which those innovations formed a vital artistic practice. From this point on, Iliadz would respond less to the ongoing dialog of his times—the art movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s—and would forge his work from his personal vision as a mature artist whose aesthetic principles were already formed.

Beginning with the 1950 production of Skinnybones, Iliadz would use a more delicate Gill sans serif exclusively. He considered it a neutral face, capable of registering nuances in composition, placement, and
arrangement. The consistent use of this typographic face was only one of the formal choices which materially link the nearly twenty books Iliazd produced in those years. Other choices—the use of heavy parchment folded around the books as their outside cover, the employment of oriental paper with its capacity to function as a filmy, supple support for the very delicate imprint of the Gill, the use of heavily textured endpaper thick with fibers and colored in earth tone pastels—would become the signature of Iliazd. But these are the kinds of choices which would also be made by an astute and aesthetically inclined editor, and the mere material beauty of Iliazd’s books as art object does not suffice as an argument for the book as an art form. He did not push the objectness of the books toward a sculptural definition, or explore the assembly of elements which compose the book as a discourse in a theoretical sense (as for example Tom Phillips or Lucas Samaras might). But he did demonstrate the ways in which the book could be used as a complex art form, sustaining relations among a text, images, material support, and artisanal craftsmanship as a single interrelated system.

Skinnybones is also one of the first books which Iliazd produced in collaboration with Picasso. *Pismo (The Letter)*, which Iliazd completed in 1948, marks the actual beginning of this cooperation. A companion since the days of Les Bals Russes in which Iliazd played an active part following his arrival in Paris, Picasso remained an intimate and loyal friend to Iliazd throughout his life. They produced nine books together, and Iliazd, as engineer of these projects, had the advantage of Picasso’s fame to make use of in their sale. By the same token, it was Iliazd’s persistence and discipline which bought the works to fruition. The relationship had peculiar balances in it. Picasso functioned for Iliazd as a kind of inverted shadow figure, as the image of the artist which he was not. Through his association with Picasso, Iliazd could also project that image as his own, lay claim to the status of major figure through the collaboration with Picasso as a peer.

The book is the one medium in which both text and image function as substantive entities while allowing the artisanal interest in material form to reach an equal level of sophistication. Iliazd arrived at the ensemble of elements which comprise his publications through scholarly research as well as creative intuition. Iliazd’s books appeared at the rate of nearly one per year after 1950, but they should be understood as the result of a long gestation process. For example, *Maximiliana* (1964), the collaboration with Max Ernst based on the texts of nineteenth-century astronomer Guillaume Tempel, was originally conceived almost twenty years before it was finished. (Fig. 4). During that same time period, Iliazd researched the life of Tempel, synthesized a text from the astronomer’s journals, proposed various formats and possibilities to Ernst, and developed, finally, a richly evolved product integrating many levels of image, text, and material form.

If the theme of invented language and typographic experiment dominated the early cycle of books, the themes of the unknown and under-recognized author and artist are conspicuous features of the mature work. With a few significant exceptions, notably two of the last books of his career, Iliazd was not the author of the works he printed after 1950. He became fascinated, for instance, with Adrian de Monluc, a seventeenth century subversive whose writings were so controversial politically that he became a fugitive from the vendettas of Cardinal Richelieu. This kind of marginal, radical position, typical of the role of the artist, also drew him to a biographical as well as literary interest in the astronomer Guillaume Tempel, whose struggles to pursue his scientific endeavors pushed him into material difficulties and extremes with which Iliazd must have been sympathetic. His fascination with the work of Roch Grey, a woman writer and friend whose work had received very
little attention within mainstream or even avant-garde literary circles, was also fueled by his consideration of her marginal position.

By the 1950s and 60s, IIiazd clearly felt that his lot was to be a similar one, that his early Futurist work would "fall into obscurity" as had that of Monluc, Tempel, Roch Grey, and others. Rather than publish his own texts, he preferred to "bring to light" (his words) the texts of others. He was fully aware that in the process he was to some extent inventing those authors and, simultaneously, engaging in the process of constituting his own persona as an artist. Through them he was reinvented, his claims for their legitimacy, their value, were in a sense a claim for his own. It was also the invention of an elaborate, multifaceted art identity through the proliferation of these many roles. Monluc, Tempel, Boissiere, Clavijo were not fictional characters, but they were constructed personae, made as much through IIiazd's recovery of their work as in any original publications.

By contrast, a number of artists and writers with whom IIiazd chose to collaborate were men who had been almost lifelong companions. IIiazd had met Ernst, Picasso, Eluard, and Hausmann soon after his arrival in Paris in 1922. These were his contemporaries, his peers. Their formation as artists had taken place in the same generation, the same historical moment, as his. The course of some of their careers had elevated them to the status of superstars, lifted them beyond the necessities of attending to the daily struggle of survival in a way which distinguished them from IIiazd. He nevertheless clearly identified himself with this group of contemporaries, claiming them as peers whose aesthetic projects and interests aligned with his own. The relations IIiazd had with these collaborators were not those of an editor contracting with an artist for work, they were the relations of peers and friends engaged in the pursuit of a vision which could only be achieved through that collaboration. Concealing his own persona, hiding his artistic vision behind his imprint 41 Degrees and the names of his collaborators, IIiazd's identity was subsumed in the works and revealed in the production of the books as projects whose form he conceived as a whole. Image: might be by Picasso, the text by someone else, but, the book as a whole material and conceptual object was entirely IIiazd.

The evidence for this argument can be found in the fact that each of these books is a clear expression of some feature of IIiazd's own private interests. The works of Adrian de Monluc deal with the strategies of language vis-à-vis established social order. They are satires of social manners, full of puns and vulgar expression. A work by Boissiere, Treatise on Ballet (1953), manifested IIiazd's enthusiasm for dance, a passion he had had since his youth when he was renowned for dancing ten or twelve hours at a stretch. He had even composed a zaoum ballet in the late 1940s, a project which was never realized as a production. The story of The Wandering Friar (1959) was the culmination of years of research into voyages of discovery along the west coast of Africa, an interest fostered by his marriage in 1943 to a Nigerian princess. IIiazd studied the linguistic evolution of place names, traced the description of the coastal forms through various evolutions in successive mappings, and studied the original accounts to reconstruct day by day, point by point, these early journeys. One after another, the books IIiazd produced display his interests: dance, voyages, astronomy, Africa, Byzantine studies, and so on.

A prevailing theme throughout the books—a compelling interest in the forms of language and its representation—gives them consistency as a total oeuvre begun in the Futurist phase. Each one of the books stakes out a position vis-à-vis typography; each one employs typography not only distinctively, but also according to distinct conceptual principles. IIiazd developed terminology for these principles: variable spacing, square arrangements, and others based on his exploration of the formal qualities of type within its conventional, almost classical constraints. He never broke letters, cut lines and overlapped them, or violated in any other way the tradition in which each piece of type occupies a single point on the page within an essentially vertical and horizontal arrangement of the lines of metal in the chase (the metal frame which holds the type in place during printing, and which must be perfectly "composed" and "locked up" in order for printing—traditional printing—to occur). But within those limits IIiazd tried every possible variation, with results which bespeak the accuracy and intuitive rhythmic sensibility of his eye.

IIiazd lived to be eighty-one. He was working on books up until the last days of his life and perhaps would have gone on to more projects had he continued to live. Perhaps. The nature of the last books argues against this, for they form a self-consciously constructed closure on the cycle which not only formed his mature production but also echoed the work of his youth. Two books manifest this culmination, Boustrophodon
Both were authored by Iliazd: it was clear that he wanted to write his own ending to the story of his work and life, and both were intensely personal statements.

_Boustrophedon_ is composed of a series of short poems, each written in homage to or in commemoration of a particular person who had figured significantly and symbolically in his life (Fig. 5). They included his third wife Hélène, his brother Kyril, the painter Michel Ledentu who had died in the First World War, and the painter, Pirosmani, among others. The poems were laid out on the pages in short lines, not justified, but suspended in relation to each other with the delicate balance of a mobile structure. Each line, by its slight displacement from the margin, functions to hold the others in suspension. The texts, in Iliazd’s habitual Gill majuscule, make their simple statements as well-spaced lines of large size type. Below each line, the letters of the words from which it is composed are inverted, spelled out in reverse, beginning to end, with different word breaks introduced into the sequence. This subtext reads like a series of sounds, without evident sense, a demonstration of a kind of _zaum_ which resides in any statement. It is as if Iliazd were at one and the same time demonstrating the futility and poetry of attempting to capture his own life in language. The book is without illustrations, but the visual impact of the text strongly evidences Iliazd’s understanding of the letter as a letter, the word as a word, the page as a page, and the book as a whole, personal synthesis of expressive potential.

In _Pirosmani_, Iliazd returned to the first text he had ever published, an essay on the naive Georgian painter, Nikos Pirosmanachvili, whom Iliazd had discovered in 1913 (Fig. 6). While this was not in a literal, chronological sense the last book Iliazd finished, it was intended to be. (_Courtesan Grotesque_, finished in 1974, had been in the works long before, but its completion had been delayed because of technical problems.) Iliazd had asked Picasso to make the plates for _Pirosmani_, since he wanted to finish the cycle of large books as he had begun, in collaboration with Picasso (who had done the plates for the book _Pisma_ in 1948). Picasso produced a single image for the book, in it the image of the painter as an old man, brush in hand, standing in front of his canvas. It is at once the image of Iliazd with his balding head and rotund form, of Picasso the painter involved intimately with his practice, and of Pirosmani who had already been an old man when Iliazd in late adolescence, discovered him and idealized him as the very embodiment of the image of the artist, as the iconoclastic genius pursuing his own vision. The image offers all of these readings. Iliazd allowed that resonance to function, fully aware, no doubt that he had become the very image he had found so compelling in his youth. Drawing to the end of his energies, Iliazd had evidently wished this book to perform a double closure: as the end of the cycle of large books, and as the close of the full cycle of his life's work. There was a mirroring effect between the beginning and the end,
a deliberate, marked recognition of self-consciousness which had dictated the construction of the oeuvre as a whole.

Iliadz was an artist. The books are adequate testimonial to that fact; they argue strongly that no other medium would have allowed Iliadz to represent the varied features of his intellect and personality with the same repletionness. Likewise, his love of the form demonstrates its richness, its capacity for almost infinite variety even within the rigorous limitations which he imposed upon it. His early zavisum works, with their self-reflexive investigation of typography as a medium, engaged the book form with issues central to early twentieth century arts and literature. His later works, of which only a handful have been referred to here, allowed the book form to function as the singular vehicle of a complexity structured creative expression, one which reflected a concern not only for the beauty of the book object, but also for its capacity to articulate the interests of a rich, intellectual, and creative life. Any single work of Iliadz’s can function autonomously, providing the viewer with a sensual experience which stimulates the eye and hand as well as the intellect as one struggles with the stiff parchment to catch a glimpse of the silky thin papers within, to pore over the intricate text, to understand the logic of the layout and design. But taken as a whole, his oeuvre shows the conceptual relations among the individual pieces, and their capacity to reveal the multiple facets of a single, aesthetic vision.

The book should be recognized as an art form. The full complexity of the discourse of the book, with its textual, visual, and tactile components all need to be considered. The “text” of such books cannot be conceived of as delimited by linguistic content, literary substance; nor can the book be defined within the strict orthodoxy which evaluates the beauty and value of its parts such as typography, binding, and paper. Instead, the full interrelation of these elements in the production of a single textual system, a single articulate discourse, must be taken into account. Only then will the critical appreciation of the book as an art form be equal to the kind of creative project realized in the work of Iliadz.


VI. The Future of Writing