

The JAB Anthology: Selections from the Journal of Artists' Books, 1994–2020

Edited by Johanna Drucker and Brad Freeman

University of Iowa Press, 2023 • 278 pages • 978-1-6093-8915-4

Reviewed by Molly E. Dotson

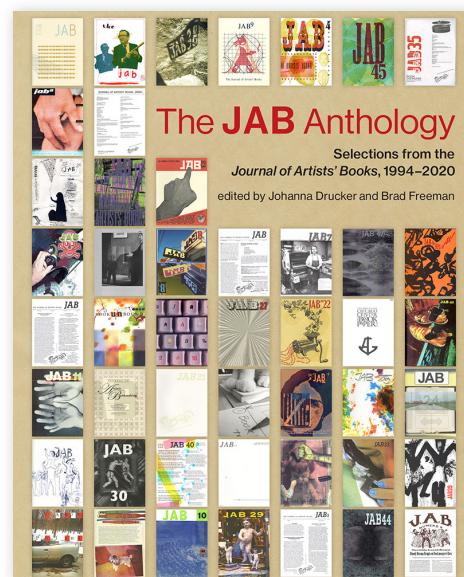
THE JAB ANTHOLOGY: SELECTIONS FROM THE Journal of Artists' Books, 1994–2020 is one of the newest titles in the book series, Impressions: Studies in the Art, Culture, and Future of Books, published by the University of Iowa Press.

Coeditor Johanna Drucker is a member of the Advisory Board for this book series, which is a collaborative project between the UI Press and the UI Center for the Book. Intended audiences for *The JAB Anthology* range from students and scholars to artist book enthusiasts (Freeman and Drucker, preface to *The JAB Anthology*, p. ix). This repackaging ensures not only broader audiences and wider circulation for this subset of JAB content, but also an increased awareness of the significance of the JAB project itself. *JAB: The Journal of Artists' Books* was founded and produced by Brad Freeman from 1994 until 2020, and it continues to be an invaluable record of scholarly and artistic activity in the field of artist books. *The JAB Anthology* provides a sense of the breadth and depth of critical engagement with artist books to be found between JAB's covers.

The JAB Anthology features a total of twenty-five JAB articles by twenty-five different authors (including its two coeditors). Contributors include artists, scholars, critics, collectors, and many who are combinations thereof. For example, Levi Sherman, Book Reviews Editor for *Openings: Studies in Book Art*, is among the authors included in *The JAB Anthology*. Coeditors Johanna Drucker and Brad Freeman carefully selected, organized, and presented this set of JAB exemplars with a focus on the post-2003 era (nos. 21–48), since earlier issues were previously accessible on “Artists' Books Online: An Online Repository of Facsimiles, Metadata, and Criticism” via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. Seven pieces (28%) in *The JAB Anthology* are reprints from nos. 1–20, whereas the remaining eighteen articles (72%) were published in nos. 21–48. The JAB website offers extensive documentation about all JAB issues.

Twenty-five may seem like a very small subset from the numerous articles comprising the forty-eight issues published during the journal's impressive quarter-century life span, but the coeditors' undertaking is a tremendous service to the field, as it can be difficult to survey the state of artist books scholarship otherwise. By way of illustration, as of November 2024, only four titles from the more than 10 million printed volumes held by the Princeton University Library (PUL) have been indexed with the Library of Congress Subject Heading for “Artists' books—History and criticism.” “Artists' books—History” is slightly better with forty-six search results, but “Artists' books” is the only subject heading applied in PUL's catalog to either the e-book or the printed version of *The JAB Anthology*. Fortunately, the titles and authors from the entire *JAB Anthology* table of contents are listed in a 505 MARC field that appears in the printed book's catalog record, which significantly improves keyword searchability.

Broadly speaking, *The JAB Anthology* selections fall into one of four main categories: 1) historiographic analyses of artist books criticism; 2) approaches to reading artist books; 3) modes of production, distribution, and/or reception of artist books; or 4) profiles of individual artists and/or institutions. In truth, many pieces blur these thematic boundaries,



Molly E. Dotson is the Graphic Arts Librarian at Princeton University. Previously, she held positions as the Assistant Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Yale Center for British Art and the Assistant Director for Special Collections at the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library at Yale University.

and the anthology comprises a mix of personal essays, interviews, and more traditional academic writing. The different authors also approach the subject of artist books from

a wide variety of perspectives, including feminist, phenomenological, and sociocultural, to name but a few. As noted in the preface, *The JAB Anthology's* roster represents five countries across four continents (Freeman and Drucker, preface to *The JAB Anthology*, p. ix). Yet Drucker later acknowledges the gaps in the journal's record in "On Reflection and in Retrospect," noting that artists and writers beyond North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia are still largely absent from *JAB's* pages (Drucker, "On Reflection and in Retrospect," p. 291).

The JAB Anthology breaks from the rest of the Impressions series in both its conceptual and physical formats. Rather than a single-author monograph, *The JAB Anthology* is a coedited volume of previously published works. It includes scholarly apparatuses such as an index and author biographies. Larger in size than its Impressions predecessors (measuring approximately nine by seven and three-quarters by three-quarters inches, almost a wide royal octavo), *The JAB Anthology* seems more akin to either a workbook or textbook. It has a utility about it. As a perfect-bound paperback, it lies flat comfortably and lends itself to study with its warm-toned, newsprint-like, acid-free paper and its clean typesetting and generous margins, which seem to invite annotations.

In a way, *The JAB Anthology* returns to and embodies the material modesty Drucker ascribes to *JAB's* first issue, which was a twelve-page, one-color, staple-bound pamphlet (Drucker, "On Reflection and in Retrospect," p. 257). Gone are the inserts and artist book supplements, the adventurous typesetting, and other unconventional design elements (e.g., the dual-language split pages seen in *JAB* 28) that make *JAB* such a joy to encounter and study. Indeed, *The JAB Anthology* discusses *JAB* as an artistic production in its own right, and it incentivizes readers to access original issues for their aesthetic as well as research value.

While *The JAB Anthology's* illustrations are black and white, the colorful and quite disparate tiles that make up its smartly designed cover are the thumbnail images from all forty-seven covers of the full *JAB* run. Featuring different artist-designed covers quickly became *JAB's* signature style, and *The JAB Anthology's* gridded

cover is visual evidence of the journal's success as a showcase for artists. Notably, the cover images are not arranged chronologically. Rather, their arrangement puts different designs, different artists, and different eras in dialogue with one another.

This (dis-)array foreshadows the not-strictly-chronological sequencing of the articles contained within. Dates and issue numbers appear alongside titles and authors in the table of contents, whereas only titles and authors appear within the body matter. The coeditors' thoughtful sequencing encourages the turning of pages; different kinds of narratives can be read as rhythms, and constellations emerge. Of course, according to Freeman, "the meaning within a book is revealed through space and time as the pages are turned" (Freeman, "Artists' Books / Book-Like Objects," p. 3). And this quote appears in the anthology's very first essay, giving a prominent position to his deliberately expansive definition of books, artist books, and "book-like objects."

The JAB Anthology functions as part documentation, part commemoration. Yet it remains future-oriented, much like the *JAB* project itself. The anthology concludes with a prognostication and a provocation, respectively, in the closing essays by the coeditors, which originally appeared in the final double issue, no. 47/48. Freeman asserts that "artists will keep making books" (Freeman, "Farewell," p. 256). And Drucker dares to ask: "Who among the current and next generation will have the courage, expertise, dedication, and stamina to continue such an undertaking?" (Drucker, "On Reflection and in Retrospect," p. 263). Perhaps someone among the readership of *Openings: Studies in Book Art* will answer the call. ■