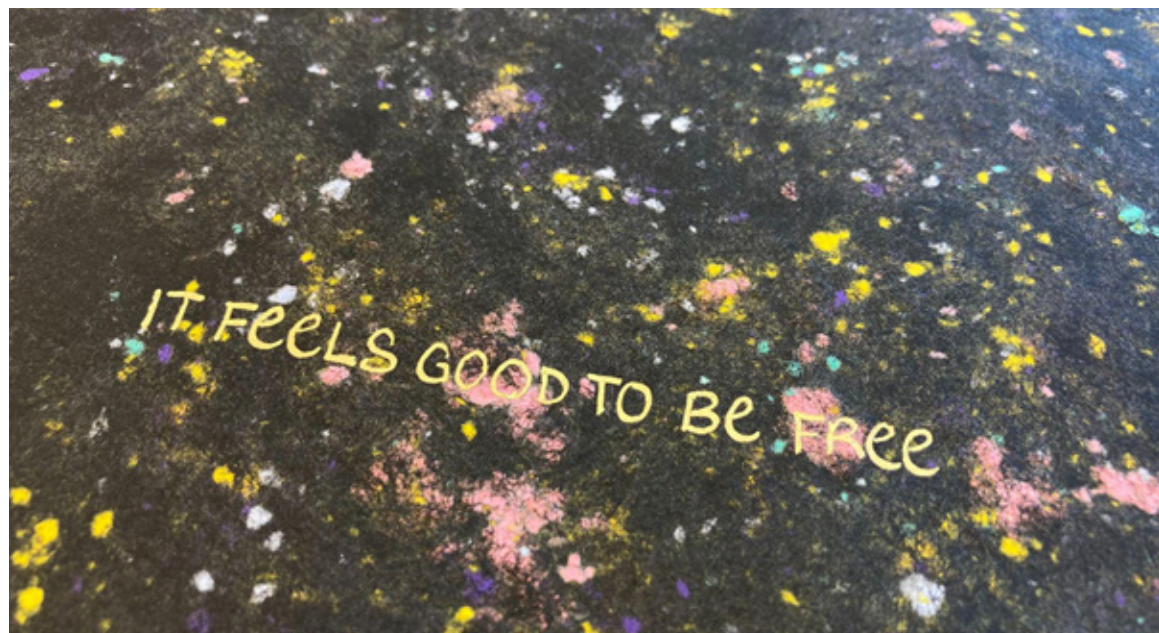


Detail from Keren
Alfred's Space Paper!



**FROM THE EDITOR: HISTORY
AND THEORY IN THE
EPISTEMIC BUBBLE**

by Peter J. Tanner

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Openings: STUDIES IN
BOOK ART

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the Association for
Book Art Education

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IT WAS VERY ENJOYABLE to be part of 2024 College Art Association proceedings in Chicago from February 14 to 17. Levi Sherman and I cochaired a panel titled “Critical Conversations and Incredible Book Works: An Examination of History, Canon, and Critical Analysis in the Field of Artist Books.” This was the first year that we had an official CBAA session as a College Art Association Affiliated Society.

The call for papers we issued received twenty-one proposals, representing a broad and diverse sample of current work in art history and other fields that focus on book art. Although we could not include everyone, our final session featured presentations by Tony White, SUNY Purchase; Karen Schiff, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Karen Viola, SUNY Empire State University; and Elissa Watters, University of Southern California. I hope I am not being immodest when I say that, despite some technical difficulties, the session was amazing.

The CAA session prompted me, again, to think about book art theory. The theoretical understanding of the artist book has been dominated by artist book creators; librarians who collect, archive, and classify works; and museums that collect and attempt to display them. Book art as a field and the artist book as an art form both appear to lack theoretical approaches that go beyond inquiries regarding definition and questions of praxis. While there are multiple ways to approach what this means and how to examine book art from a theoretical perspective, two ideas have preoccupied my thoughts of

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late, and not surprisingly they were prompted by the presentations from our CAA session.

The first idea¹ is that there has not been a broader and more theoretical investigation into book art and, more specifically, artist books, due to a lack of comprehension of the influential breadth and scope this art form has exercised over the last sixty years. This position encourages promoting and expanding discourse surrounding the history of this art form as a means of increasing its visibility and recognition. The imbricated and nonlinear nature of artist books has made their definition something difficult to pin down. However, this is perhaps one of the genre's greatest strengths because it leaves it open and malleable as an art form. This openness has unfortunately sometimes kept the focus on defining the artist book rather than creating a more comprehensive history of it. A greater understanding of its development is imperative because it prevents us from falling into the proverbial trap of repeating history.

An understanding of the multivalent history of book art requires constantly expanding evaluation of the history of the book, and the artist book in particular. This expansion must include an evolving comprehension of the field on a global level, moving away from its dominant focus on this art form and its interpretation from the global north.

The second idea² addresses questions of why the spread of interest in book art theory and critical approaches to the artist book appears to be sporadic at best. Book artists have more or less defined this aspect of the proselytization of the artist book. Most of the theoretical approaches and interpretations of the field have involved the perspectives of book artists as practitioners and how they see their work connecting to the world. What seems absent is an analysis of how artists' opinions and theoretical approaches are situated within larger historic and theoretical concerns.

In the history of book art there have been various approaches that have influenced the formation of analysis. These approaches can be synthesized in three possible methods. The first involves description or descriptive analysis, in either individual or anthology format. This type of work focuses upon the details of the books and their creation. This tendency is one that serves practitioners of all levels and scholars alike by presenting the work for consideration on a material and manufacturing level that is pragmatic and useful. Next, there is a form of analysis that may or may not include description, but that delves into the content as a means to a particular end, the changing of the world or perspectives about some aspect of the world and its political struggles. This heroic perspective resembles that of the modernist artists who thought their art would precipitate a world-changing revolution. This type of analysis locates and perceives in book works and book objects that same onus to change the world. There is a perception that their contents, when and if they are ever fully perceived, can motivate societal change. This is a very noble approach, but it is also one that assumes universal access to the messages of these works which, despite the myth of the democratic multiple, has not and will likely never come to pass. A third form of analysis is much more similar to an art historical approach, where a functional analysis is produced that answers the question, "¿Y que?" or "So what?" This approach attempts to determine what difference it makes that image and text are presented in a particular way. Like the heroic approach, it endeavors to declare the stakes of the work and its impact due to the context of its message.

All these approaches, however, are equally isolated in a field that spends most of its time at conferences where makers talk to other makers and attempt to sell their works. A repeated

call for theory in a vacuum, or in an isolated epistemic bubble,³ will have limited resonance or vibrancy beyond its network. This is due to its “inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission.” This “omission need not be malicious or even intentional, but [still] members of that community will not receive all the relevant evidence, nor be exposed to a balanced set of arguments.”⁴

This cannot help but raise a very important question: what can be done to end the discursive isolation within this epistemic bubble? Fortunately, such bubbles are fragile and can be popped “by exposing a member to relevant information or arguments that they have missed.”⁵

I propose that a lack of connection with individuals or networks that are not like-minded has produced a selective exposure to the ideas and concepts of our field. This has produced, unintentionally, an environment of selective epistemological exposure that has insulated and isolated the creation of both a cohesive history of book art and theories of book art.

History cannot be compiled by a small cadre of professionals alone. It takes time and a good deal of work by many individuals across multiple fields working together to construct a comprehensive history. That is not to say that early efforts are not important, nor have their findings and work been insignificant. Instead, they have been foundational. While the formation of such a foundation is still in its nascent period, the search and compilation should be disseminated and subsequently expanded.

Similarly, regardless of prior efforts, theory and analysis of book art should be expanded beyond practitioners. The work should be engaged with by historians, art historians, anthropologists, literary scholars, and others who can disseminate their interpretations in multiple fields. Papers focused upon the artist book should be published by these agents across and within all disciplines in order to expand the informational landscape, thereby increasing exposure and information about our field and attracting the attention of those who would or could generate new ideas that have as yet been unaddressed, expanding the discourse surrounding book art and attracting more critical attention to its importance and particular relevance.

Of course, this is just the beginning of yet another challenge: how to adapt book art analysis and other theoretical approaches to the artist book in order to make them relevant to other fields of inquiry. The fact of the matter is that book art and artist books are a global phenomenon. There are more ideas and theories about how and in what manner they should be employed than we realize. An expanded discourse also means an expanded understanding of the struggles addressed by book artists in Brazil, Australia, Cuba, France, Russia, China, etc. If not, it will continue to exist only within its current epistemic bubble, with inadequate coverage of our field’s history and inadequate theoretical response. If we do not alter this tactic and open up our epistemic bubble, we will end up continuing to call for a theory of book art and the artist book for another forty years with equally anemic results.

NOTES

1. This idea comes from Tony White and his presentation on our panel.
2. This second idea was prompted by Karen Schiff’s presentation.
3. C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61.
4. *Ibid.*, 145.
5. *Ibid.*