

## Artists and Their Books / Books and Their Artists

by Marcia Reed and Glenn Phillips

The Getty Research Institute, 2018 · 200 pages · ISBN 978-1606065730

Reviewed by Peter O'Brien

**THIS FULL-COLOR, HARDBACK**, capacious catalog complements a 2018 Getty exhibition of the same name. The artist books chosen are each given inviting and roomy two-page spreads, and are introduced by colorful, sometimes delightful, commentary.

Of course the perpetual and sometimes tiring questions—what is an artist book?; is there a one-size-fits-all definition of artist books?—are the unseen scaffolding of any such collection.

Is Michael Cherney's (American, born 1969) *Twilight Cranes* an artist book or is it art: a grainy, photographic forty-foot scroll that invokes those well-trodden historic emblems, cranes, and yet also manages to invigorate what we think of when we imagine unfurling a traditional Chinese scroll? I don't know, and I don't really care for an answer.

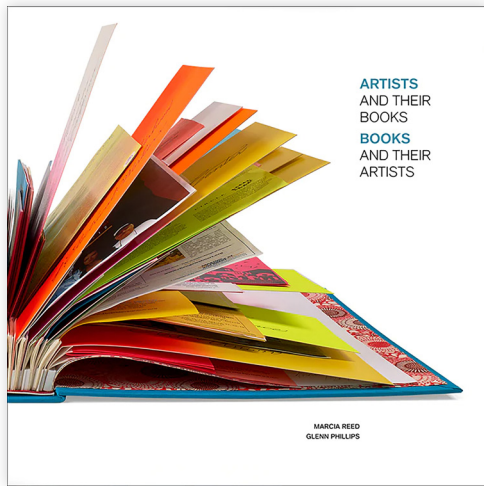
Is *DOC/UNDOC* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Mexican, born 1955) and Felicia Rice (American, born 1954) an artist book or is it a sculpture: a glitzy, trinkety, multi-textured extravaganza of an art box that invokes and tries to out-splash Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise*? I'm not sure, but I'd say it's more the latter.

Are the two contributions by Beth Thielen (American, born 1953) artist books or are they collections of limited-edition prints, popping with apocalyptic, struggling, disrupting images of homelessness and prison life flung upon dark and swirling nightmare-scapes? I don't care, because the answer limits the work's strength.

And is the enigmatic, audience-activated piece by Keith A. Smith (American, born 1938) an artist book or a performance? *Book 91* has no words to read and no images to look at. It is built to be moved through, to rely on the movements of the body, as our arms and hands slowly turn the hole-punched, string-connected pages. To even ask the question belittles the essential physicality that this work requires.

Marcia Reed opens the catalog with the essay "The Book in General: Some New Definitions," in which she argues that artist books can be seen as "ranking among the most significant recent developments" in both "creating art" and "designing books." She invokes Albrecht Dürer's 1525 diagram-rich treatise on obtaining accurate proportions in the making of images, and the *Mira calligraphiae monumenta* from 1561–96, which intertwines the writing of Georg Bocsday with the lively visual creatures and botanical subjects supplied thirty years later by Joris Hoefnagel.

These references immediately had me thinking of other word- and art-suffused entities, including a collection of interpretations of the Apocalypse gathered in Spain by the monk Beatus of Liébana (c. 740–800) and now housed at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. (And so lovingly documented in Christopher de Hamel's *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World*.) The elaborate and intricate acrostic that opens the manuscript, the colorful pages bursting with overlapping curlicue words, and the images of naked and muscular Adam and Eve, animals, angels, soldiers, maps,



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trees, and page borders entwined with interwoven lines are all breathtakingly spectacular and curious. It's a book and it's by an artist, or various artists. Therefore . . .

Glenn Phillips also adds an introductory essay, "Rediscovering the Radius of the Discourses, or David Antin's 'Politics of the Artist's Book.'" Phillips encourages us to think of artist books in the "vastly larger field of publishing in general," which encapsulates everything from inexpensive paperbacks to medieval illuminated manuscripts. He uses the term "portable artwork" as one way of addressing these elaborately constructed, decorated, transmitting texts otherwise known as artist books. Phillips knows well that not all such items are portable (for example, the massive construction from 1967, *The Big Book*, by Alison Knowles [American, born 1933], which is described, illustrated, and commented upon in the essay).

The catalog includes a wide selection of work, from well-known artists such as Dieter Roth (Swiss, 1930–98), Ed Ruscha (American, born 1937), and Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007), to names that were new to me, including some of those mentioned in preceding paragraphs. Some names, including Mirella Bentivoglio (Italian, 1922–2017), who participated eight times in exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, can become neglected if we don't continually bring them out of the insistent shadows that passing time issues. Her work included here, *Litolattine*, consists of eight flattened Coca-Cola cans bound together inside rough, blackened, hinged covers made of steel. A crushed bottle cap is affixed to the cover as a sort of precious but disposable seal. Defined by contemporary consumerism and consumption, the piece has a timeless heft, and not only because it invokes the Futurists and a fascination with modern technologies.

The catalog's descriptions for each contribution are just long enough to whet my appetite for more. Describing *Your House* by Olafur Eliasson (Danish, born 1967), Marcia Reed writes:

*Your House* offers a meditative passage through a major paper monument. Perhaps it might be nice to live there in some alternative spatial dimension.

And here is Reed commenting on *Diderot Project* by Ken Botnick (American, born 1954):

This work reminds us that the word *project* can also mean *propel*: it is as if the DNA of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* has been blasted forward, like disassembled projectiles hurtling across the space of the pages.

These sorts of commentaries provide the same flavor of disruption and intrigue imparted by the works they describe.

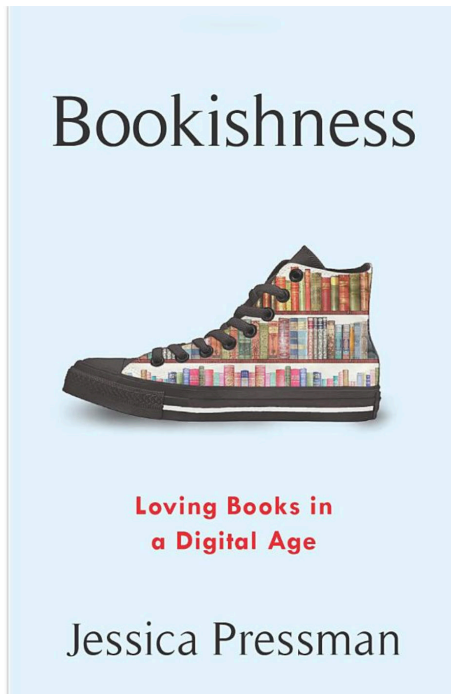
*Artists and Their Books / Books and Their Artists* is intended for a variety of audiences. It functions as a general introduction to the topic, as well as an overview anthology for a more academic crowd. Each plate is well documented and the index is complete. It does lack a bibliography, but that is an acceptable, and not unusual, absence for a catalog like this. The publication's most important gesture is that it blurs whatever lines may be conjured or constructed to separate books from "art" and art from "books." It left me wanting more (say twice the number of its 200 pages), and it presented me with an assortment of ingenious puzzles, questions, and mysteries to enjoy and muse upon. And isn't that what we love about books, art, and books as art? ■

## Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age

by Jessica Pressman

Columbia University Press, 2020 · 216 pages · ISBN 978-0231195133

Reviewed by Peter O'Brien



**THIS BOOK HAS ENOUGH** bookish meandering to be both insightful and frustrating. To begin with, I'm not really sure what Jessica Pressman, a professor of English at San Diego State University, means by the words "loving," "books," and "digital" in her subtitle.

She is, at least, clear about what "bookishness" means to her. She calls it a "twenty-first century phenomenon" which involves "creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical." That word "fetish" is woven throughout this book, from the first page to the last. Now I'm as fetishistic as the next person, but I couldn't dissociate the word "atavistic" (my word) from her invocation of "fetishistic." Although Pressman does take a brief look at a few pathways of the digital, her observations border on the confectionary, as in: If people put all their books on a Kindle, then how can we judge and form snap opinions of them?; and are "shelfies" (self-portraits with bookshelves) really just about posturing and yet more judging? Pressman doesn't really explore the digital in any significant way, and this book borders on the nostalgic, on longing; or, to use a word beloved by Pressman, this book is a 216-page "memorial."

Meant for an educated and inquisitive general audience, *Bookishness* explores a wide range of aesthetic and linguistic efforts, including wallpaper, sticky notes, and cell-phone covers, as well as more arcane and intellectual efforts, including a detailed discussion of *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer (a reconstruction, reconfiguring, and reimagining of *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz) and of *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* by Leanne Shapton (a bittersweet auction catalog / graphic novel that connects relationships with consumption and loss).

I found some of Pressman's commentary pointed and compelling. Talking about her personal library, she says she feels "that realness deep in my bones, underneath the point of criticism." She talks about how "the thingness of books" allows "a display of a person's learning, aspirations, and attachments—and so books are also a source of anxiety. . . . As a professional reader, books can be nasty things. They tease, taunt, and fester."

At other points, I found her observations facile:

Bookishness turns our attention to the materiality of books so that we can appreciate the book as a thing whose thingness and thereness matter. . . . Bookishness illuminates the book to be a thing whose materiality matters in newfound ways.

Toward the end of the book, Pressman writes that bookishness "turns the book into an art of the present that archives and memorializes the past." I was surprised that she does not reference the future, which is, I think, what most books either do or attempt to do. I found myself wandering toward Laurence Sterne (surely his *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, from the mid-1700s, is one of the most bookish books ever written),

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James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake* redefines the whole idea of the book, while being simultaneously steeped in how books are imagined and constructed), and Margaret Atwood (specifically her new fire-resistant, censorship-proof, single-book edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*). Each of these authors confronts the bookishness of their books (through words, stories, and in the case of the first two, graphic elements), and they each also capture the past, present, and future within their writerly travels.

I am always intrigued when writers and thinkers create a distinction between the analog and the digital. These days I read as much on a screen as I do on paper, and my 25-year-old daughter does the same. We both effortlessly move back and forth between these two technologies. (I reread *Moby Dick* on a small screen just because, and she is always surrounded by both paper-books and screen-books.) I believe that the digital mimics and invokes the way our brains and minds work much more than we are sometimes comfortable admitting.

It's accurate to say that our brains are simultaneously digital and analog. We depend upon individual synapses to spark, or spike, or turn on and off, which is the foundation of a digital appreciation of the world around us. And this specific on-off action has the potential to instantaneously occur, give or take, a quadrillion times in the average brain—here it's fair to compare this to an analog way of connecting with the multitudinous chimerical associations that the world presents us. We are both analog and digital, constantly sorting our way through the tangible and the intangible, the real and the artificial, the one and the many.

And if our contemporaneous (past, present, and future) technologies sometimes lead us toward sex, gossip, the frivolous, and the manipulative, well, those are perennial fascinations—Juvenal, Horace, and Martial, as well as George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Margaret Atwood, would agree.

*Bookishness* helped focus my attentions and sympathies on these and related wanderings. Brains and books, the analog and the digital, flourish because of forgeries, artifice, and imaginings. Unlike some others, I do not see us swallowed up by AI, NFTs, and URLs. I still like eating, sleeping, copulating. I go for walks, smell coffee, scratch my butt, floss my teeth, hug my daughter. Books, in whatever form they come to me, will continue to inform and delight. Without digital culture, I'd never really be able to fully explore medieval marginalia and the *Book of Kells*. I think my understanding of “bookishness” is different, and not quite so pining as Pressman's. ■