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## **B IS FOR BOOK – A IS FOR ARTIST'S BOOK**

### **From Book Art to the Art of Artist's Books**

My interest, not as a literary or visual art critic but more in the role of an art philosopher, involves the direction of the art I provisionally call artist's book art, as well as the works representing it, artist's books; I also outline its roots in more established book art.

In brief: the artist's book is a hybrid, an entity of many ingredients, with its main roots and fastenings anchored in two directions: first, of course, in literature and its bearer, the book, but secondly and even more strongly in visual arts and sculpture. It forms its own category, "artist's book art", which is – after a hundred years – still marginalized. Artist's book art differs from actual book art, which is concerned with appearance. Book art, as applied art, is a medium for communicating image and text, whereas the artist's book is an independent, mainly sculptural Gesamtkunstwerk. Unlike a sculpture, an artist's book can in theory – although not in practice, when placed in a glass cabinet – be opened and scanned, not only viewed from the outside. Its creators usually identify themselves, but not necessarily, as visual artists; their educational backgrounds are usually also in the visual arts.

### **The Object-like Nature of the Book**

I have carried boxes full of books when moving, and felt the weight and the volume in my muscles, but it was Jari and Mika Aalto-Setälä who made me conscious of the aesthetic concreteness of the book. Their basis for designing the album *Nuori taide* [Young Art] (1991) was physicality. The covers, sides and the pages – except for a few pages with pictures – were lemon yellow; thus, when lying flat, the book was like a gold bar, tablet or brick. The consistent colour was meant to emphasize homogeneity; the contents were normally readable essays and studies (one of which I wrote).

The introduction of *Pàp* Magazine, a now-defunct fashion and design magazine emphasized graphic form: "Pàp Magazine is a design object and an aesthetic experience". We can assume the model for this kind of magazine to be *The Interview*, founded by Andy Warhol in the 1960s and still published. Even when designed, the book or magazine is still a serial product: the copies of one issue are either totally identical or differ in their details. One item can be substituted for another. The works can be compared to a numbered edition of graphic prints, but the copies of an edition of a book are rarely numbered.

The basic book and magazine are nowadays rectangular – it is an aesthetic solution, but often one that awakens no interest, even though it leaves a challenging frame – even with its restrictions – for a talented person. Book design and book art are applied art, the artist's book free art. The artist's book makes the invisible visible; it questions the standard attributes and significant variation – it also alters the standard printed object by cutting and adding. Every deviation from the usual solutions adds to the interest value of the design, and we can then ask what the reasons for the change are and what added significance the non-standard form brings. The greater the deviation, the more the form, colour, material and other similar factors attract us; the solutions become more and more individual. Thus the artist's book becomes a unique, hand-made individual object. As a publication it belongs to the small press – if not the really small press; I encountered shelf labels like this in a book shop called Pages in Toronto in June 2006.

Of course all that is read is not in book or magazine form: sms messages, letters, posters, signs and even subtitles in movies are read – and often in even greater numbers than books. In the same way as there are artist's books, there are artist's letters (and thus artist's letter art) – for instance, Ulla Karttunen and Mika Aalto-Setälä's *Kadonnut rakkauskirje* [The Lost Love Letter], which was mailed to the participants of the 13th International Congress of Aesthetics in Lahti in 1995, and randomly placed between the pages of books in the Helsinki University Library as a surprise for library users. Other related matters are visual signs and symbols, which are interpreted semiotically – and even cinema, the language of architecture and design as well as nature itself and its signals.

Reading itself extends from understanding the text to other features – form, colour and the grain of the paper as well as typography. The diversity of the material and medium is typical of this. Instead of being in the text, the primary meanings are in what normally is considered the medium. The medium is – as Marshall McLuhan formulates in his slogan – the message, and it is especially aesthetic, too. The work becomes three-dimensional, sculpture-like. The technique is clear in children's books – which are not categorized as artist's books – where a three-dimensional image and an accompanying world pop up when the book is opened. Similarities can also be seen with the printed or hand-made greeting cards for adults as well, which may even play a tune, or include a floral scent. Sometimes they include natural materials: dried flowers, scraps of fabric, glass beads.

Of course a traditional book is also a tangible item and held in the hands. The paper has its grain, with a visible smoothness or roughness, weight or lightness, toughness or brittleness; it has a colour, scent, even taste, as well as a sound which is heard when leafing through it. The font type and size have been chosen, the illustrations selected. All this contributes to creating an aesthetic impression, and for many this becomes part of the reading experience. Furthermore, opening a new book – which in some rare cases today even starts with cutting open the pages with a paper knife – and, on the other hand, the frailty and stickiness of an old book, which has gone through many hands (not intentional attributes) are related to feeling. With use and age the book gets old and worn, and needs restoration, like old things. 'Heavy' is a term which means other things than weight; it describes aesthetic, ethical and intellectual qualities. But the same applies to 'light'. Cleanliness and dirtiness are also terms defining content. Even genre classification can be based on them, like 'pulp fiction', light pocket books, in both the literal and figurative sense.

Tangibility is emphasized by book-lovers inclined to nostalgia when comparing the printed book to a text read on a computer screen or a special reading device – without exception the printed book wins.

The text and pictures in a book can be converted into electronic format – and bit space is more and more often the place where a publication is conceived and born, and its first state of being. A text can be recorded on tape or CD and

published as an audiobook, but then the attributes of the book object, its graphic features, are lost (unless, for instance, the CD covers are included). Even though the sensory attributes of the book object are lost or at least change, the essential character of a novel, for instance, remains the same whether printed, spoken or viewed on a screen. The reader or listener put themselves and their soul into the fictional world and concentrate their thoughts on seeking the world of meanings the text creates.

In her essay "Eikä kirjallisuus ole kirjoja" [And literature is not books] in the collection *Kynä ja kone* (1996) [The Pen and the Machine], Leena Krohn has written that whatever literature is, it is not books, i.e. material objects (no more than strings of symbols on a screen or paper). Literature is works, imaginary worlds; Krohn talks about this in "Kirja sinänsä" [The book per se], in the same collection. Therefore the "true" book as an aesthetic object is detached from the way it is preserved, in extreme cases it only exists as memory inside someone's head, like the "book-people" in the book-burning dictatorship in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953, Finnish translation 1966): "Better to keep it in the old head, where no one can see it or suspect it. We are all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law. Byron, Tom Paine, Machiavelli or Christ, it's here." (Bradbury 1966, 178–179.) The old man known as War and Peace can recite War and Peace from memory, one is called Plato's Republic, the other Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. A beautiful book assumes a new significance: "Montag squinted from one face to another as they walked. 'Don't judge a book by its cover', someone said" (Bradbury 1966, 182). The idea of a living book is repeated in Jean-Christophe Rufin's futuristic fiction *Globalia* (2004, Finnish translation 2006).

The present-day passwords and credit card numbers – we are advised not to write them down – are the most reduced form of the book preserved in memory. Published texts differing only in graphic appearance achieve the same reduction when it comes to literature, but the situation changes if the book is illustrated and seen as a fusion of image and text. For instance, the editions of the *Kalevala* compiled by Elias Lönnrot himself – and the later modernizations and adaptations by different people – become different versions through the use of different illustrators. Translating, on the other hand, deals with literary features which are

conveyed, appear, disappear and change. Converting one art form to another occurs when we make a movie, a play or even a ballet out of a novel.

In its tangibility the artist's book challenges the immateriality of the book and literature. As something that contemplates their essence and nature – the individual work of art and the entire art form – the artist's book is a meta book and meta literature. Since it questions the conceptions and concepts connected to the book and literature, it could also be called an anti-book and anti-literature.

## **The Hybrid**

A compilation work of book art is a hybrid, in which the illustration, font type and size as well as the quality of the printing become actual parts of the work; thus it is a book art entity, which at its best creates a consistent overall impression. The external features do not remain extra-literary, but acquire significance, in lyric poetry this is usually the case.

The writer may have had the idea and realized it him/herself. An example of this is Aaro Hellaakoski: in his visual poems the typographic appearance imitates and emphasizes the meaning of the text. Lettrism is based on the merging of image and word; the collages of painting and literature borrow and combine ready made materials. Väinö Kirstinä, who experimented with visual poetry, wrote a "picture book" *O niin kuin omena [A Is for Apple]* (1997/1966–1967), which is primarily a children's speller that fascinates adults. The initial letter looks like the object or creature the word refers to ("B is for book with its pages wide open"). Visual onomatopoeia! Corresponding recent examples from outside Finland are two spellers which tie together art work and letter shapes: Roy Lichtenstein's *ABC* (1999) edited by Bob Adelman, and *The Museum ABC* (2002), published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. *The AlphaBet in Color* (2006), which is based on the synesteciae of Vladimir Nabokov – and just about every children's speller there is – associates the shapes of the letters with the appearance of animals and plants. A related phenomenon is the decorated initial.

Literature is worlds which are re-created in the process of reading. Striving for and achieving fictitious worlds is an example of interpretive reading. The reader

goes beyond concreteness, and the same border is also crossed by the person making a work of book art. For him/her, too, the book as a work of literature has its meaning and significance, conveyed by concreteness while at the same time transcending it; a sculpture as an aesthetic object is not merely matter, but, like the duck-rabbit, dual-natured, an image made possible by matter. The meaning is hidden beneath the surface, as in a scrambled stereogram, where an image appears with virtual depth. Stereograms can seldom be acclaimed for their profundity, though paradoxically they tend to be thin and dull in their meanings and messages.

From reading the text we slip into the kind of reading Paul Ziff refers to in his article "Anything Viewed": reading palms, tea leaves and entrails (Ziff 1994/1979, 146) – or whatever we want to use when we look for signs. Some read the future from cards – and the cards speak through their reader, the medium, if there is something to tell. People turn to nature for signs about the weather for the coming summer, the whole year or even for years to come. "March mists mean summer rains" they say. This is folk wisdom.

The writer distances him/herself from the concrete to the extent of shutting it out; the visual artist brings it back, or at least seems to. Every printed work has a graphic designer, named or anonymous; the work is in that sense a result of aesthetic consideration and construction. Many works consist of only text, many of text and images, a few solely of images, like the sumptuously printed (and heavy) Dictionary of Water (2001) by Roni Horn, a work defying genre classification.

In the context of writing and illustration, books are made as fiction or non-fiction books. An artist's book is an object created in that context by the artist, but it speaks most of all as an object of art, even though it can also contain information. Bookbinding as a craft has a long tradition, and its products are unique works of art – hence, the transition to the artist's book is imperceptible.

In addition to bookbinding, another feature leading to the artist's book is graphic design and page making. The Finnish Book Arts Committee presents annual awards for design; there are different categories in which books are awarded the status of Distinguished Books. One book is acclaimed as Book of the Year. The

categories include fiction, children's and young adult's books, textbooks, non-fiction, book series as well as jackets. For instance, the merits of the Book of the Year in 2005, *Himo, rakkaus ja raivo* [Driven by Love and Fury] (Aamulehti Kirjat) by Jörn Donner and Stefan Lindfors, were described by the committee as follows: "In accordance with the title of the book, the Best Designed Book of the Year could be described as a book to be desired, with a great deal of love for the tradition of experimental typography and a beautifully controlled dose of the fury of narrative illustration. The methods of modern photojournalism have been skilfully employed for book arts. *Himo, rakkaus ja raivo* is an innovative masterpiece of book art."

In a similar way newspapers and magazines are rewarded for good page layouts. These, too, are viewed as functional artistic creations, where a connection between form and content is required. It is this striving for balance between the form and the content that leads book art to be considered applied art instead of one of the fine arts, unlike the case of the artist's book (art). Criteria for book art include, for instance, clarity, readability and stylistic uniformity; among other things, typography and page making, illustrations and paper quality, reproduction and binding. The form should support rather than create content; the question is the extent to which a visually oriented jury can really take both sides of the binding into account equally.

The significance of the concrete is best seen in the books created for infants. These are plastic chewable toys or thick cardboard – the child can, however, leaf through the pages. The colour and shape in itself is enough, because the child is not at the reading age, hardly even able to look at the pictures. These books give a tremendous sense of material for their "reader" – viewer, smeller, chewer – the taste and smell of the plastic or cardboard, the soft toughness. Text is introduced as the age of the target audience increases. Such gradual change can, for instance, be seen in the dozens of books by Eric Hill which describe the activities of a puppy called Spot, like *Spot Looks at Colors* and *Spot Looks at Shapes*.

### **Book-like – or a Book Parasite?**

The roots of the artist's book are in visual art and sculpture as well as in literature; still, they are its closest context; so close that the independence of the art form

can be disputed, even though it already has its own special features. Experiments have been made and borders crossed by both writers and visual artists, but the concept of the artist's book was created and introduced by the visual artists. Visual artists have rejected their roles when crossing over into the fields of literature and design, just as writers have when they enter the visual artist's territory; we still have to wait for the arrival of these middle-ground specialists.

The artist's book is different from an illustrated book, different from a well-designed and beautifully printed work, and different from a publication of photographic art, although it is related to all of them. Criticism in the field, too, is seeking its own character, space and experts. As a hybrid the artist's book has reached a more independent status than the temporary combinations born and living in the border lands. In becoming more established and common it has created its own class, and given birth to its own specialized professional group. In this way, too, the field of art is changing not only through individual works, but through the art forms being created by them; the form does not as yet have a suitable name, because artist's book art is rather clumsy. Moreover, the creators of artist's books are becoming independent and specialized, and there is even some education in the field. The expansion of the field of art is also occurring on many other fronts. For example, take sound art, which goes beyond the category of music, and its creator, the sound artist, who not only uses the existing worlds of sound, but also creates new ones.

The essential feature which links the artist's book to books and literature is its rectangular shape combined with the fact that it can be handled – even though this kind of a book is often presented against its nature in a glass cabinet, not to be touched or viewed except through the glass! It is not at first hand a verbal work, but it is visual and tangible. Both the art museum as well as the library (for instance, the Helsinki Public Library) show artist's books in their exhibitions and add them to their collections. The authors do not call themselves writers, even though they make books. Nor do they call themselves literary artists, and they do hesitate to call themselves visual artists or sculptors. Are they artist's bookists?

These reservations lead us to conclude that the artist's book lives as a parasite, following the shapes of the book typical to a specific period as well as stimuli given to book design. But to what extent does the artist's book actively follow,

prepare and even anticipate the change in the book itself? What would the artist's book equivalent of an electronic book be like? Or an audio book or a book for blind people, written in Braille – it already looks and feels like an artist's book! Furthermore, the question has arisen about how to read and express the footnotes and typographic emphasis when making an audio book. "How Should a Book Sound? And What About Footnotes?", asks Andrew Adam Newman in his article of the same name in *The New York Times* (20.1.2006).

The skillful figures of Asian calligraphy remain only decorative shapes, thus without textual significance, in the eyes of a person who does not know the language. They are still visually appealing: a normal Chinese or Korean publication in itself, in the ready-made spirit, would fit our exhibitions of artist's books! What if the work is actually displayed in an art museum, and moreover, in Asia – are the formal circumstances exclusive? I have looked (in August 2005) at a calligraphic work which winds through and fills the walls of several rooms in the Beijing Museum of Modern Art, which to me was a text with symbols but without meaning. My guide revealed that it was a 2500 year-old military treatise, a living classic, which is nowadays read more as a training guide for management: *The Art of War*, by the Chinese general Sunzi (Sun Tsu, Sun Tzu) (finally translated into Finnish in 2005). I understood the analogy between the sign and the significance, even though I, not being skilled in the language, still did not know the code. (Later I read the translation.)

The most impressive artist's book exhibition I remember is the compact *Room for Wood Studies* (1999) by Ilona Rista at the Museum of Art and Design in Helsinki: there was a desk and bookshelves; on them were logs sawed open so that the thick pages reveal the writing, that is, the tracks left by bark beetles and other bugs living in the tree, and the fibers and growth rings can be seen in the healthy wood. The artist's homepages describe the idea which her artist's books are based on as follows: "The axe hits the log, which splits with a click. The virginal contents reveal the whole life of the tree. This sight inspired me to study the stories which can be found inside different pieces of driftwood or inside a newly felled trunk." – A biologist might make a reading different from that of an artist, to whom these tracks are chiefly graphic figures, writing or embroidery. Depending on the reader, the result is a story based on either natural science or fantasy – or just a graphic composition. The artist pointed out the analogy between the

shapes of nature and culture – although the first to notice this was the “tree scholar”, who in Finnish named the bark beetle, one of the numerous bug species, ‘kirjanpainaaja’, the printer of the book!

There are artist’s books in environmental art, too. One such work is Kirja [The Book] by Anja Lehtimäki, a monument to the writer Kalle Päätalo, which was unveiled in Taivalkoski in the summer of 2005. The work has been described as follows: “The monument, which spreads out over a large area, is as monumental in size as Päätalo’s books. The three-meter high steel Kirja stands open like a fan in the corner of the market place. Loose pages have blown away and stand on the grassy field on the other side of the market place” (Turun Sanomat 7.2.2006).

### **The Skin of the Landscape (Surface, Skin)**

The road from environmental artworks leads us to the conceptual-metaphorical books of the real world. Reino Kalliola reads the book of nature and bases his trilogy Suomen Luonnon Kirja [The Finnish Book of Nature] (1946, 1951, 1958) on it. The book of nature, if anything, has aesthetic features, it does not simply take the form of a book, nor does the natural state have an author in the sense that cultural environment does. What connects nature to the book is the interpretative reading of both – observing, scrutinizing and trying to understand – as well as their valuation and appreciation, admiration and wonder. There is only a short jump from reading the narratives of nature to cultural narratives. Jem Cohen raises the question “What is the city made of?” and answers: “Sometimes it seems as if the city is the sum of stories and memories, layers and layers, and that objects are like the city’s skin.” Book art operates on that skin, on the readable surface.

The logo of Tiedekirja, a book-store in Helsinki, is a human head with pages forming a crewcut. This is not a readable book, but a picture of learning: the book is a symbol of knowledge and wisdom – although the caricature of a scribe lacks a direct connection with the reality of life. Suomen Kirjainstituutti, the Finnish Book Institute, in Vammala has published a series of postcards drawn by Pekka Vuori which deal with books. In these cards thoughts sprout, the sprouts of language spring up, the critic weighs the importance of a book – and the book-

heads represent scholars here, too. They are pictures of non-existent artist's books, artist's cards, and on this basis three-dimensional, material works, "artist's card art", could be created. In a drawing *Domino Books* (1996) by Fanny Brennan there is a snake-like line of standing books which disappears into the horizon, and starts to fall in the foreground. A self portrait of Wäinö Aaltonen shows a face which is half-covered by a hand-written text written in first person form. Peter Greenaway's film *The Pillow Book* (1996) has a scene in which a manuscript waiting to be sent to the publisher is written on a man, who is then skinned.

Are the tracks in the plowed field or those of the sowing or threshing machine writing on the cultural landscape? Is the field the paper on which the farmer writes and draws? The road builder draws a line in the landscape; the electric lines wind through it, the airplane leaves its wake in the sky.

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## **Exhibitions and Seminars**

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Kirjavalitot 60 vuotta. Commemorative exhibition at the University of Helsinki Library in co-operation with the Finnish Book Art Committee, 16.3.–3.6.2006, and the related "Kirja esteettisenä elämyksenä" seminar, 5.4.2006.

RikArt – Artist's book collection and virtual gallery. Helsinki Public Library, Rikhardinkatu. (<http://rikart.lib.hel.fi>)