

# Artists' books: a postmodern perspective

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This article wishes to examine the phenomenon of artists' books from a postmodern perspective. As artists' books appear to be a specifically twentieth century art form which intersects a variety of creative fields, such as printing and text, book binding, visual images, architecture, sculpture and performance, even electronic media, it appears appropriate to consider this a peculiarly postmodern genre. The concept of the 'artists' book' will be briefly discussed according to specific examples, and the discussion will proceed to examine such books following to Fredrick Jameson's definition of postmodernism, as explained in his article 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'.

**Keywords:** artists' books, book arts, postmodernism

Hierdie artikel poog om die verskynsel van kunstenaarsboeke vanuit 'n postmodernistiese perspektief te ondersoek. Kunstenaarsboeke skyn om 'n spesifieke twintigste eeuse verskynsel te wees, wat oor verskeie kreatiewe areas soos die boekdrukkuns, die gebruik van teks, boekbindery, visuele beelde en self elektroniese media strek. Daarom blyk dit dat hierdie boeke 'n postmodernistiese verskynsel is en is so 'n benadering toepaslik om hierdie boeke te beskryf. Die begrip 'kunstenaarsboeke' word kortliks volgens spesifieke voorbeelde bespreek, en die argument sal verder ontleed word volgens Fredrick Jameson se definisie van postmodernisme, soos verduidelik in sy artikel 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'.

**Sleutelwoorde:** kunstenaarsboeke, boekkuns, postmodernisme

Much writing on artists' books over the past decade or so, has centred on attempts to define the terms 'artists' books' and 'book arts', and on debates about a suitable critical and theoretical foundation for such books. These writings, dominated by the work of Joanna Drucker,<sup>1</sup> have nevertheless left the definition of artists' books tenuous and largely inconclusive, and the definition varies from author to author, and practitioner to practitioner. In her definitive study on artists' books, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Drucker (2004: 1) acknowledges this difficulty in formulating a single definition as such a definition "continues to be highly elusive in spite of its general currency and the proliferation of work which goes by this name". As a self-contained genre, the phenomenon of artists' books emerged more fully during the 1970s and it has been growing steadily. As it is a relatively new genre of creative expression, questions have been posed about a suitable critical debate and an appropriate theoretical foundation for such books. Many of these queries focus on the definition of 'artists' books' and 'book arts'; their respective distinguishing characteristics; and their relationship to 'fine arts' and 'craft'.

The relationship of artists' books to the fine arts/craft debate provides ample scope for one to situate the phenomenon of artists' books firmly within the theoretical framework of much postmodern thinking. Drucker (2004: 2) confirms this stance:

[i]f all the elements or activities which contribute to artists' books as a field are described, what emerges is a space made by their intersection, one which is a zone of activity, rather than a category into which to place works by evaluating whether they meet or fail certain right criteria.

Furthermore, in the opening chapter of her book, Drucker (2004: 1) states that the artist's book

has become a developed artform in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many ways it could be argued that the artist's book is the quintessential 20<sup>th</sup>-century artform. Artists' books appear in every major movement in art and literature and have provided unique means of realizing works within all of the many avant-garde, experimental, and independent groups whose contributions have defined the shape of 20<sup>th</sup>-century artistic activity. At the same time, artists' books have developed as a separate field, with a history which is only partially related to that of mainstream art. This development is particularly marked after 1945, when the artist's book has its own practitioners, theorists, critics, innovators, and visionaries. ... What is unique about artists' books, however, is that with very few exceptions they really did not exist in their current form before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although not acknowledged by Drucker as containing scope for a postmodern interpretation, her viewpoints, in conjunction with the often expressed need for a theoretical foundation for artists' books, strongly suggest an interpretation of artists' books from a postmodern perspective. This article therefore argues that the artist's book, by being a peculiarly twentieth century phenomenon, can be located more appropriately within a postmodern discourse rather than in terms of a purely historical development as 'other' to mainstream avant-garde movements. The inconclusive attempts at definitions of artists' books further affirm the viewpoint that these books would be more meaningfully discussed as postmodern, as by their very nature, they cannot be forced into a single category. The process of defining the artist's book is simultaneously the process in which the postmodern character of the book is described. Such discourse opens up possibilities for appropriate theoretical underpinnings, more so than does a hegemonic modernist theory. The article will draw from Fredrick Jameson's definition of postmodernism as described in his essay 'Postmodernism and consumer society'. Reference will also be made to texts *inter alia* by Andreas Huyssen (1986) to emphasise the postmodern nature of the artist's book.

### What is an artist's book?

The field of artists' books is, as already indicated, a widely practised albeit recently established expressive creative phenomenon. It appears necessary, for the purpose of this article, to present a broad description of what is meant by 'artists' books' before proceeding to a discussion of them within a postmodern context. The diversity of artists' books being made, both locally and overseas, and inevitably also their postmodern disposition, are the factors which have rendered a single definition impossible. However, for the purpose of an introduction to this article, and to clarify aspects of the nature of the objects under discussion, artist's books can broadly be described as any book made or altered by an artist, either as a single, unique work or as an edition, in which the concept of the work cannot be visualised and materialised in any form other than in book format.<sup>2</sup> In an artist's book, content, image, binding, structure and chronology merge into an interrelated object, which is either a unique object (i.e. a 'one-off') or can be presented as an edition. A unique book, made by an artist or by a collaboration of artists, writers and binders, usually has works of art with or without text, assembled in such a way to resemble, or function as, a book. In *Night Crossing* (figure 1), a unique, altered book, Cheryl Penn combines writing, visual imagery and collage to tell a story about going to sleep and entering the world of dreams.



Figure 1  
Cheryl Penn *Night Crossing* (2008, unique artists' book, multimedia, 19 x 33 x 23 cm, collection of the artist).

An artist's book can also be produced as a printed edition which follows similar principles as in Piet Grobler's *Boerneef* poems (figure 2); or it can be an 'altered' book in which one or more artists alter a pre-existing commercially printed book; and in the age of electronic media and libraries, it can even take the form of an electronic book. Artists' books can also be collaborations, in which more than one artist work together to create a book, e.g. Cheryl Penn and Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen's *1984/1994* (figure 3). Books can also be duplicated, hence becoming multiples of the same item.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the category 'artists' books', in its widest sense, includes a variety of books which range from artist's sketchbooks to books conceived and bound specifically by artists. According to arguments presented by most scholars and writers, artists' books are not only books containing works of art, such as sketch books: the book, with everything it encompasses, **is** the original work of art.



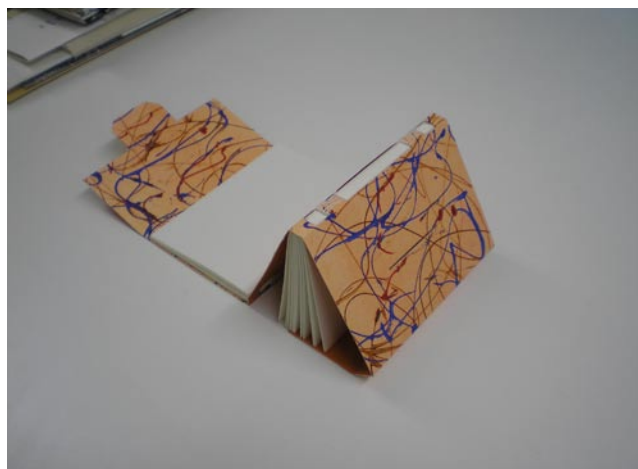
**Figure 2**  
**Piet Grobler *7 Boerneefgedigte***  
 (1997, screen printing, 15.5 x 20.5 x.7 cm, The Caversham Press).



**Figure 3**  
**Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen and Cheryl Penn *1984/1994***  
 (2009, multimedia, 25 x 34.5 x 1.5 cm, page from a collaborative book, collection of the author).

The term 'book arts', on the other hand, refers to the craft of making and binding a book using innovative materials, covers and binding structures while adhering to the basic criterion that the item function as a book. Book artists often make use of traditional binding structures, for example the *Diary* (figure 4) by Malcolm Christian, in which he has combined the traditional dos-a-dos format with a conservation binding technique to create a contemporary diary. Hedi

Kyle, in her *Pocket book* (figure 5), has invented a new structure by folding paper to create individual pockets. The cover of this book is folded as a continuation of the book and no adhesives are used. The distinction between artists' books and book arts is not always clear, and as will be seen, locating artists' books and book arts in a postmodern discourse will eliminate the need for rigid classification.



**Figure 4**  
**Malcolm Christian *Diary***  
(ca1995, 1.1cm x 15cm x 22 cm, art book, Collection: The Caversham Press).



**Figure 5**  
**Hedi Kyle *Pocket book***  
(2008, 13 x 8.5 x 1.5 cm, collection of the author).

### **Artists' books and the postmodern debate**

Viewing artists' books as a twentieth century phenomenon, Drucker creates the impression that artists' books should be, in some way or other, associated with mainstream modernism. While there may be historical connections between the various avant-garde movements and the books they created, e.g. Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*,<sup>4</sup> from the above description it is clear that the artists' book is not a work of art which necessarily conforms strictly to modernist criteria. Historically, artists have been making books for centuries; the most well-known of these are probably those made by William Blake. Artist's books have developed, not so much as a reaction against modernist cultural ideals, but as a growth and development alongside and within mainstream avant-garde movements, as discussed by Drucker (2004). In many cases, artists' books have been reactionary in the sense that text and visual imagery as well as book binding and printing practices have been used in new and innovative ways. Most of the avant-

garde movements of the twentieth century have had books made specifically under the auspices of that movement to elucidate the intentions of the movement as reacting against traditional assumptions and conventions. This implies that the essential oppositional nature of avant-garde practice found expression in book form – not in painting or sculpture. Jameson (1983: 111) defines the postmodern as “specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism”, leading to the belief that the artist’s book should, due to its marginalised position in relation to mainstream modernism, be placed historically within postmodern discourse. Many artists’ books, such as the book by Drucker entitled *Damaged Spring*, which she discusses in her article ‘Critical Issues/Exemplary works’ (2005), address, even dismantle, established conventions of bookbinding and printing. Drucker (2005: 7) explains that in this book she had set the text

slightly off the horizontal. The layout was meant to say ‘conventional book’ by conforming to the usual organization of the text block, margins, and page sequence. And the slight deviation from the norm of alignment is meant to register as a disturbance within that convention, not as a radical break from it.

The marginalised position of artists’ books is supported by its own historical development, and relates to the mainstream but is quite independent of it (Drucker 2004: 1-15). This history, according to Drucker (2004: 12), finds its turning point in the 1960s as “[t]hey fit the sensibility of the 1960s alternative scene ...”. Technology has also had its effect on the production and dissemination of artists’ books, to the point where artists books entered the fields of gallery catalogues, multiples, sculpture and installations (Drucker 2004: 12-14). The strong conceptual basis of many artists’ books, as opposed to the overriding non-representational and strong visual emphasis of much modernist art, confirm the stance of artists’ books as ‘alternative’.

Drucker’s discussion of artists’ books reflects, whether intentionally or not, and without using the word, an essentially postmodern perspective. She states that the artist’s book is a “zone of activity” rather than a category (Drucker 2004: 2) which occurs “at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields and ideas ...”. (Drucker 2004: 1). She further questions the notion of the artist’s book as an “original” work of art; the position and identity of the author; and a definition of the book (Drucker 2004: 2). Jameson (1983: 112) qualifies what he considers essential to the postmodern condition, as “the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture”. He also acknowledges that this rigid binary paradigm of high culture and “philistinism” or kitsch appears restrictive, as it does not include cultural expressions which are neither modernist, nor art, nor kitsch (Jameson 1983: 112). Furthermore, Jameson acknowledges that “many of the newer postmodernisms have ... incorporated them [cultural expressions which are not ‘low’ or popular], to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw” (Jameson 1983: 112). While Jameson is clearly aware of the different attitudes and stances<sup>5</sup> towards the origins of postmodernism, Huyssen (1986: viii) poses the postmodern as the bridging of the ‘Great Divide’: “What I am calling the Great Divide is the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture.” This simplistic distinction made between ‘high art’ and ‘mass culture’, as the arena in which a postmodernism can develop, will be expanded here into a paradigm in which a modernist, autonomous ‘high’ cultural expression’s alternative is not merely mass culture, but everything which high culture is not, or which is ‘other’ to modernism. It hence appears necessary, for argument’s sake, to consider the postmodern not only as the merging of ‘high’ and ‘mass’ or ‘low’ forms of cultural expression, but also as a manifestation of culture and its ‘others’. Such a paradigm includes forms of cultural expression which do not necessarily qualify as ‘mass’ or ‘low’, such as the centuries old traditions of fine bookbinding and printing. It would hence be useful to consider the high/low debate as functioning in an ‘expanded’ cultural continuum in which such a distinction appears arbitrary.

The 'alternative scene' which Drucker refers to above is also a broader arena or field of cultural production which is necessary if one is to include forms of expression which are neither high, low or popular, but 'other'. This expanded arena or field requires a theoretical basis, which could explain the nature of such production. The elusive theoretical foundation for artists' books is therefore possibly due to the proposed definitions of artists' books as being grounded in concepts of the work of art as autonomous, subscribing to modernist paradigms and viewing the artist's book not as operating in the field of cultural production but as marginalised to the modernist mainstream.

Craig Dworkin and Kyle Schlesinger (2008: 1), in their attempt to align artists' books with the contemporary art scene, suggest that "a series of fundamental relationships – form and content; structure and material; art and literature; the visual and the verbal; seeing and reading, – create, where they intersect, the artists' book. ... that dramatic third element". This viewpoint is not only in keeping with a Hegelian synthesis, it also suggests the deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida. The question which arises here is whether, in the attempt to define 'artists' books' according to a singular definition, it is possible – or even necessary - to establish an autonomous field in which to locate artists' books. It appears that this need for autonomy, being exclusive, could be the reason why attempts at defining the artist's book remain elusive. Further, considering artists' books as works of art equal to the Modernist art object presents its own set of problems. Jonathan Lill (2007: 18) notes that artists' books have not reached "the same expansiveness of expression seen in other modes of artistic expression", and that the resulting marginalisation of the artists' book is due to factors intrinsic to the book such as form and expression. This argument can be turned inside out by a postmodern approach, rendering the artists' book the opposite: a field in which various forms of expression can co-exist simultaneously, hence opening up expressive potential both visually and verbally beyond what modernist art practice has to offer. The factors which Lill (2007: 18) considers intrinsic to the book – its size, medium etc. – can, for argument's sake, be used to achieve expression which the modernist object could not afford in that words and sound, which would be considered incongruent to the modernist object, can be introduced to co-exist in book form.

Hence, the notion of the work of art as a 'thing in itself' takes on a different face when considering artists' books. The artist's book is, firstly a book, which is also a work of art. The book may consist of a number of art items, either drawing, painting, print or design, even photographs compiled in a specific manner into book form. Generally, the individual pieces may be able to hold their place as individual works, but the full meaning of each work is disclosed when viewed and considered integral to the bigger continuum offered by the book. In this regard, Drucker discusses the book as a "democratic multiple"<sup>6</sup>, referring to the book as it has been produced since the Industrial Revolution. This democratisation of the book coincided with a time in the history of art when the modernist object made its appearance. It seems then, historically, that the development of modernism and the democratisation of the book, along with the democratisation of the art object,<sup>7</sup> coincided. Carla Gottlieb (1976: 39) describes the democratisation of the art object as a "remedy for bridging the rift between the artist and his public". Artists' books contain ample potential to do just that. Most avant-garde movements also produced books, leading one to draw the conclusion that the artists' book can trace its very roots ironically to that historic moment which gave the modernist art object its impetus. Some postmodern theories also place its very own origins at a time before the formulation of modernism.

The conceptual underpinnings of much modernist art, and the belief in the liberating power of art as an agent of transformation, found expression more overtly and aptly in writing and hence also in book form. This trend came to the fore pronouncedly in the 1960s, when

so-called conceptual art made its appearance. The existence of art outside, and independently, of the gallery, found echo also in book form: both contribute to the ‘democratisation’ of the art object and to its dissemination. It is therefore no surprise, when considering the history of the presence of books in much of the art before the mid-twentieth century, that these objects became self-sustaining and developed in their own direction after the end of World War II. The history of the artist’s book will reveal that, although there are some connections between the development of the artist’s book and mainstream art, the artist’s book has its own, independent history. The artists’ book hence maintained the conceptual underpinnings of much avant-garde art, whilst also continuing its own existence as ‘democratised’. Some critics also argue that the artist’s books contributed to the idea of the “dematerialisation of the art object”, a process often quoted as typical of the postmodern (Drucker 2004: 72). In this respect Joan Lyons states, when talking about the democratisation of art during the 1960s and 70s, that “it was at this time too that a number of artist-controlled alternatives began to develop to provide a forum and venue for many artists denied access to the traditional gallery and museum structure. Independent art publishing was one of these alternatives, and artists’ books became part of the ferment of experimental forms” (Drucker 2004: 72).

The issue of individual style has dominated modernist art practice since its inception but particularly since the end of the nineteenth century. In this, uniqueness and autonomy are key principles which cannot be copied or duplicated by anyone other than the individual responsible for its creation. Greenberg (1973: 6) explains this as:

[t]he avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.

The postmodern condition has rendered this unique individualism as “dead”. But “corporate capitalism”, according to Jameson (1983: 115), “has not only rendered the individual non-existent, but has rendered it a myth”. The implications of these positions for artists’ books and a supportive theory are fortuitous: the author of a book could be an artist, or more than a single artist, as authorship, in the individualistic, unique sense, is no longer required; and coupled to that is the realisation that, as ‘the author is dead’ so is the uniqueness of his style. The artists’ book can have more than one author hence more than one style and more than one approach: artist, printmaker, bookbinder, writer. The death of the individual (author) implies, for Jameson (1983: 119) also a breakdown in structuralist terms “of the relationship between signifiers”, a situation which he labels as “schizophrenia”. (Jameson 1983: 119). While Jameson uses the terms not as a diagnostic tool but as a description of the postmodern condition, he manages to describe a condition in which temporal continuity is dismantled and the focus resides instead in “a far more intense experience of any given present of the world ... as temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and ‘material’ ...” (Jameson 1983:119 - 120).

## **A critical debate**

An ‘expanded’ field of cultural production intersects across different disciplines and fields of knowledge, allowing the book format to function as multiple; as an electronic file; as conceptual art; as photography; and so on. The book can, as a result and as it loses its identity, escape the narrow conventional definition of ‘book’ to become something else, such as video, digital book, engineering, architecture, performance. The book in itself can be considered to be the arena where the postmodern occurs and is acted out, almost a ‘zone of activity’ (Drucker 2004: 2)

where different disciplines and activities intersect. The book has, hence, been deconstructed and reconstructed as the postmodern object.

Many questions were encountered in the literature regarding a suitable critical theory for artists' books. These range from how the "world of artists' books can be brought in touch with the big world of contemporary art" (Eason 2007: 15) and the view that a suitable criticism "should embrace more of the dimensions of contemporary practice" (Eason 2007: 15); to "[b]ut what might limit our attaining the same achievements as other works of art?" and the concern that the limitations of the medium of the book are limitations linked to traditional modes of production (Lill 2007: 18). Drucker (2005: 3) feels that "the field of artists' books suffers from being under-theorised, under-historicized, under-studied and under-discussed, it isn't taken very seriously" and

"[o]ur critical apparatus is about as sophisticated as that which exists for needlework, decoupage, and other 'craft'... we do not have a canon of artists, we don't have a critical terminology for book art aesthetics with a historical perspective, as we don't have a good, specific descriptive vocabulary on which to form our assessment of book works".

Drucker has certainly addressed some of these issues in her book *A Century of Artists Books*, but she does not recognise that a postmodern theory might underpin artists' books. Tango Book Arts (2007: 23) has offered a possible solution of integrating artists' books with the contemporary field, in that they suggest that all art is related in terms of the elements of visual language, interactivity, time and structure. As these elements can be located, according to them, in all art, artists' books and book arts can hence be meaningfully placed within the contemporary art field, which is by its very nature postmodern. Postmodernism, in its opposition to modernism, does not deny the existence of art, nor the act of painting, sculpting or drawing. Its oppositional nature focuses on dismantling modes of perception, which have been steeped in Enlightenment theory, with its characteristic division of knowledge into various faculties, as separate hermetic entities. An oppositional postmodern theory will not deny painting its canvas, paint and brushes, but it will dismantle a modernist approach to painting. Jameson (1983: 115) concludes: "[h]ence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum". This means that creative production of any kind will be done and perceived in a new kind of way – a 'schizophrenic' way – not to create the unique, but to recreate in a way demanding a revised perception of subject matter and media not considered 'art' by modernism. Likewise, cultural production continues to function as such, but with an approach which introduces new relationships between subject matter and materials. Within this context, the container remains, but its materials, imagery and conceptualisation change to align themselves more with the contemporary world of mass and consumer culture, of cyberspace and electronic media. In an expanded form, the World Wide Web is also a book. The production of books is hence no longer a field of specialisation residing only with the master binder.

## Conclusion

The current focus on defining artists' books, and the related need for a supportive theoretical and critical debate is rooted in the perception that the artists' book should align itself more closely with contemporary art practice. A postmodern theoretical foundation for artists' books will allow the book to function alongside other contemporary forms of expression, not in competition with them, as such a foundation takes account of how the world is approached, perceived and made meaning of. The notion of the artists' book as a separate category is also problematic, as it falls within a larger continuum of art and cultural practice. Such a perception of artists' books defies



definition. The postmodern aim is not to change the identity of art and culture, but to change the ways in which we approach those identities.

## Notes

1. See Drucker (2004).
2. By 'book' is meant any form of a book from single sheets, folded books, concertina pages, tunnel books, pop-up books to fully bound hard cover books.
3. Historically, books have been made as collaborations, since the author, illustrator, printer binder and book seller all work together on one book.
4. Kandinsky (1979).
5. Various stances have described the postmodern as running concurrent with modernism since the Age of Enlightenment but more specifically the Industrial Revolution; as the postmodern occurring prior to modernism; and the postmodern as a reaction to the 'high' character of modernism. This reaction has also been described as a development from modernism.
6. See Drucker, (2004), Chapter 4. See Gottlieb (1976), Chapter II.

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