Peter O'Brien

Recent Canadian Artists' Books

THIS SURVEY of recent Canadian artists' books will be, like its topic, idiosyncratic, meandering, and perhaps a bit diffident. Artists' books have always had a rather ambiguous relationship both to art and to books. They have been the unassuming but sometimes petulant poor relative to the former, never having quite achieved from critics, gallery owners and collectors the affection or dowry that more blustery and confident artistic offspring are afforded. Despite the fact that many artists produce books as an integral part of their artistic production, the books are often ignored by reviewers or treated with casual and capricious respect. To books they have at times a dismissive relationship, at other times a combative alliance, and on occasion, a rather cozy and amorous partnership. Because they often subvert commonly held notions of what a book is — and the attendant power to define, teach, record and entertain that books have been given throughout history — the conversations that artists' books have with other more orthodox books on the shelf can be quite strained.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of attention given to artists' books is that people are not sure what they are, how to read/view them, or how to nail down a precise definition for them. The best definitions of artists' books have traditionally been the simplest, and therefore the most inclusive:

Marcel Duchamp: "It's an artist's book if an artist made it, or if an artist says it is."

Lucy Lippard: "artists' books are not books about art or on artists, but books *as* art."

Nancy Tousley: "an artist's book is a book made by an artist."

Keith A. Smith: "If that person declares it a book, it *is* a book! If they do not, it is not."[1]

Sometimes artists' books are a collection of similar-sized pieces of paper that are arranged in a sequential fashion, and bound together with staples or string or glue: what most of us

think about when we think of books. But they can also have no paper at all and no binding mechanism and no sense of definitive organization. They can contain or incorporate feathers, buttons, sweet grass, eggshells, sheet metal, cloth, felt, coffee beans, plastic, batteries, butterflies, hair curlers, leg hair, wood, compact disks or almost anything else. They can be a collection of papers or cards that are meant to be rearranged at the will of the reader/viewer. They can be sheets of glass. They can be a series of photocopies or the transcription of a television game show or a defaced primary school text book.[2] Apart from their physical characteristics, they also create their own function, their own desire. An artists' book is or can be, says Nancy Tousley, "a form, a medium of expression, a link in a communications network, a container, an object, a subject, an exploration, a sculpture, a narration, a system of information, a utopian space, an exhibition, a specific site, a performance, a document, an equivalent, an index, a definition...."[3]

One of the most innovative artists currently working within and outside of the book format is North Bay artist Lise Melhorn-Boe. Her books come in a variety of formats and shapes, from a boxed set of the letters of the alphabet measuring 48.5 cm x 37.5 cm x 8.8 cm (*The Purple ABC*, 1981, edition of 1); to a folded, pie slice-shaped piece of handmade paper, "bound" by a pink haircurler, that encloses a semi-circle of accordion-folded paper which gathers the hairdressing stories of various women that she knows (*Come Into My Parlour*, 1986, edition of 500); to *Hairy Legs* (1982, edition of 10), a collection of advertisement statements on society's desire to see women shave their legs, together with personal stories of acceptance and resistance from her friends. The nine book pages, each three feet long, are in the shape of legs and are composed of handmade paper, leg hair and garter belts, with the "binding" being a handknitted wool sock into which the pages fit. "Pages" from other Melhorn-Boe works have been in the shape of shoe insoles, breasts, children's clothes and sanitary napkins.

For Melhorn-Boe the book, like society, is a form that should constantly be questioned, redefined and transformed. Most of her books have a political scaffolding that speaks to and critiques the way culture has defined women and men. They also

document the wisdom, anger and yearnings of women that she knows (Melhorn-Boe often sends out questionnaires to women she knows asking for their opinion on various topics, which she then incorporates into her books). Books have traditionally been a male construction, and their power has often come from the way men define and distribute the teachings and news they choose. For Melhorn-Boe books become a place to collect women's voices, to hold a mirror up to the more facile indocrinations that boys and girls are inflicted with, to subvert the bland acceptance society gives to media's proscriptive and sexist messages. Art writer and psychiatrist Jeanne Randolph states that interacting with a physical object evokes attributes, powers, inclinations, motivations of which the person is capable."[4] For Melhorn-Boe there is a need for women to have books of their own, physical objects where quotidian stories can articulate change, and where personal anecdotes can undercut the ignorant denotations of the social and intellectual marketplace. Melhorn-Boe's books offer corporeal space for women's long-ignored powers and motivations.

Although the packaging of Melhorn-Boe's books is sometimes inviting and colourful, the texts are often trenchant and the message enclosed often ominous. In *Good Girls Don't . . .* (1994, edition of 30) a series of pop-ups from historical Madonna paintings confront the audience flipping through the pages. Around the perimeter of each page are a series of societal admonitions: "Good Girls don't scream, Good Girls don't fight back, Good Girls don't do that!, Good Girls don't complain, Good Girls don't make demands, Good Girls don't get dirty, Good Girls don't get pregnant . . ." The list goes on and leaves an empty, speechless, adventureless woman in its wake. *Playbook* (1989, edition of 22) involves the reader in an ominous game. The book is bound by black rubber and three metal bolts. The pages inside are a three-tiered flip-book, with the reader able to exchange upper, middle and lower body pictures of various women, from a coy, fully-clothed woman to one clothed only in garters and holding a machine gun. The audience becomes a peeping tom, holding the bondage cover in his hands, and manufacturing, as society does, his own fantasy about women. Many of Melhorn-Boe's books are an impassioned statement of

personal resistance to the politicized world that constantly threatens to engulf her and other women. They are a tangible way to escape the world's desire to belittle women's intelligence, individuality, bodies, stories.

Also insisting on and articulating a personal space within her books is Nathalie Caron from Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. In *Filions* (1990, edition of 250) Caron commingles typeset text and handwritten text with familial snapshots (friends drinking wine, a person drinking water from a garden hose) and other snapshots of small, self-contained moments (a nose, a birdhouse, a toolbox). In *Bouches d'ombre* (1993, edition of 250) she continues this calm evaluation and understanding of the world. It is composed of seven, small, unbound, unpaginated signatures of text, with photographs at the beginning and end of the book providing visual parentheses: "À la salle de bain, je reste dans l'obscurité. Blessé à une patte, le chien laisse des traces de sang sur le plancher. Le vent s'est levé, la pluie a fini par venir." Caron's books are commercially produced, and although they do not have the mark of the hand-made that Melhorn-Boe's books do, they focus the attention of the reader on the intimate and the private. Both the text and the images resemble whispers told from one friend to another, or perhaps whispers softly uttered from our past to our present.

For Toronto-based Doug Guildford, artists' books are a form of "self-portraiture," a visual diary of personal inquiry. Guildford has produced many artists' books, some in small printings of twenty or thirty which he produces at Toronto's Open Studio, and some in editions of one. Guildford often sets up rigid visual and linguistic structures and then works through these self-imposed restrictions in an intuitive way, the conscious form of the work slowly superseded by Guildford's subconscious iconography. Some of his books are richly layered, with images, markings, bits of paper and resonant colours building up a thick texture on the page. Earlier work is sometimes cannibalized: the paper is overpainted, with the earlier lives of the page sometimes showing through and sometimes only an allusive shadow. The pages become, with each new visual membrane, intensely personal, metaphoric musings on the seasons, the body, the fractious way the imagination functions, and the confrontational

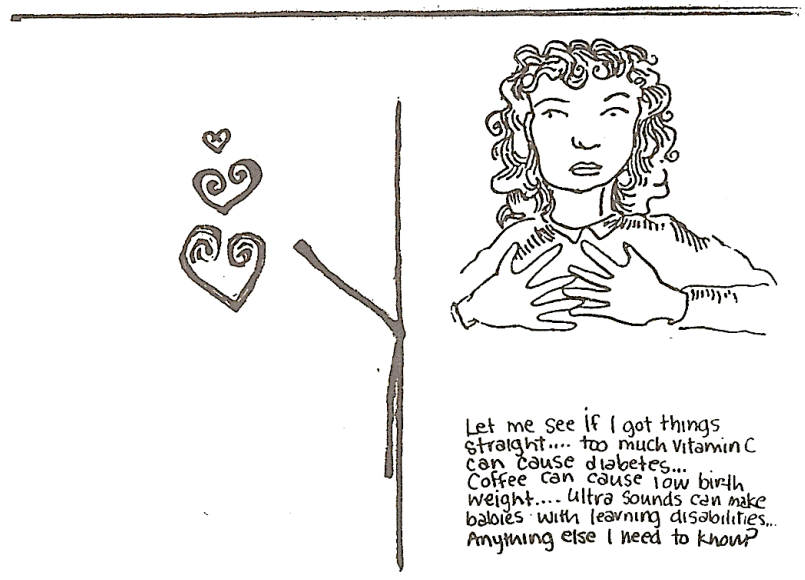
way society resists homosexuality. As he says, books are a way for him "to draw my way through a metaphor." The intricate mixture of memory and desire leaches through the layers on the page.

Doug Guildford, *F-words* (1992).

In some books Guildford visually enunciates hundreds and sometimes thousands of small hieroglyphic markings, as though he is allowing his hand and his eye to mutate a simple circle or shell shape into a multitude of other different but related worlds. In other books Guildford prints from precisely cut silk screens (*F-words*,1992, edition of 26; *fugue*, 1994, edition of 48). These small books are a way for him to investigate and muse upon individual words and their ocular and semantic traces. He is intensely interested in definitions: sometimes through words and precise dictionary definitions, at other times through colour and layers of images. Books are an integral part of his artmaking, but he also produces paintings, installations, limited-edition calendars and rubber stamps. For Guildford the book is a clearing house, a way to record things as they pass: "you can't remember everything…books are a way of dumping things."

Erella Vent, also based in Toronto, documents the individual moments of her own affections and passions. She recently

finished a five-book series called *The Adventures of My Inner Child* which traces her recent pregnancy and the birth of her daughter Celeste: "This series has grown from my real feelings and experiences," she says. "In the process I've discovered the true meaning of emotions as I dance from awe and joy to trepidation. A definite labour of love — dedicated to those who share my growing pains. This is PART 2 of a series that may end when my baby is born." Her books also re-tell encoded maxims and folk tales. Erella Vent has produced approximately fifty books over the years, all from her tumultuous house, whose every room is virtually bursting with colour, objects, books, food, music, and artwork. She has been one of Canada's most active book artists for many years and has been a supporter and publisher, through her Droplit Books, of other artists who produce books. Most of her books are very small, measuring from 2 ¾ x 2", to 4 ½ x 2 ¾", and are meant to be held and read, not treated as precious objects. Her books could all quite easily fit, as she says, in one shoebox.



Erella Vent, *The Adventures of My Inner Child* (1994).

For Toronto artist Julie Voyce, the book format is an inexpensive way to disseminate her art. She wants her books to be accessible, "a routine attachment to one's life…it's not a problem if the covers get frayed or a little bacon grease gets

spilled on them." Her books are dreamy, magical narratives with the words and images intertwined on the page. Her book *1957 (04-05) 1993-2037* (1993, edition of 250) is a collection of snippets of her life: shopping, looking in on wealth, friends, the vicissitudes of living in a "flat on the top floor." *The Lost Woman of San Clemente* (1994, edition of 271) is a poetic free-fall of visions and bodily mysteries: "I paced then stewed, one of my helpers slipped into a fold. She resided as a thin film of magic between all my skin and veins in bloody meat. She parked herself at the foot of my soul just before dreams bid my eyes to close." The physicality of Voyce's books is an essential complement to the narratives: the colourful covers are dry and flat to the touch, the pages inside an explosion of image and text. The pages are frenetic, boisterous, scattered, with the covers a colour-saturated way to gather the words inside. For Voyce, as with Erella Vent and Doug Guildford, the mark of the hand, the imprint of the artist, is an essential element of their book art. The books are a way to minimize the distance between artists and audience. As Voyce says, "Books are about people holding on to them."

In contrast to these intimate and personal books, Calgary-based artist Alan Dunning generates books that are an assault on meaning, interpretation and linearity. Dunning's texts seems to come from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. The words in *The Grey* (1990, edition of 200), for example, are amassed from an encyclopedic database that he created, with the texts coming from the Internet and a variety of other sources, including Wordsworth, Terry Eagleton and Chinua Achebe. This database, a "stew" of language, eventually grew to "a few million words long." Reading *The Grey*, if that is possible, brings on a sort of intellectual vertigo, a sense of allusion with no end or conclusion in sight. At the top of every page there is a computer-generated image of the world that haltingly rotates, seemingly oblivious to the torrent of words below. In *Words about Words about Words*, Murray Kruger refers to the "equivalence" among all texts, which makes terminology such as "primary" and "secondary," or "privileged" and "dependent" texts obsolete.[5] There is present in *The Grey* a perpetual mutation of language, as though each and every word has its own pedigree, its own self-reliant swagger, and yet is also an insignificant scratch mark on

the page, equal to all other scratch marks. The real movement of the book occurs not on the page, of course, but in the desperate and inquisitive machinations of the reader's imagination.

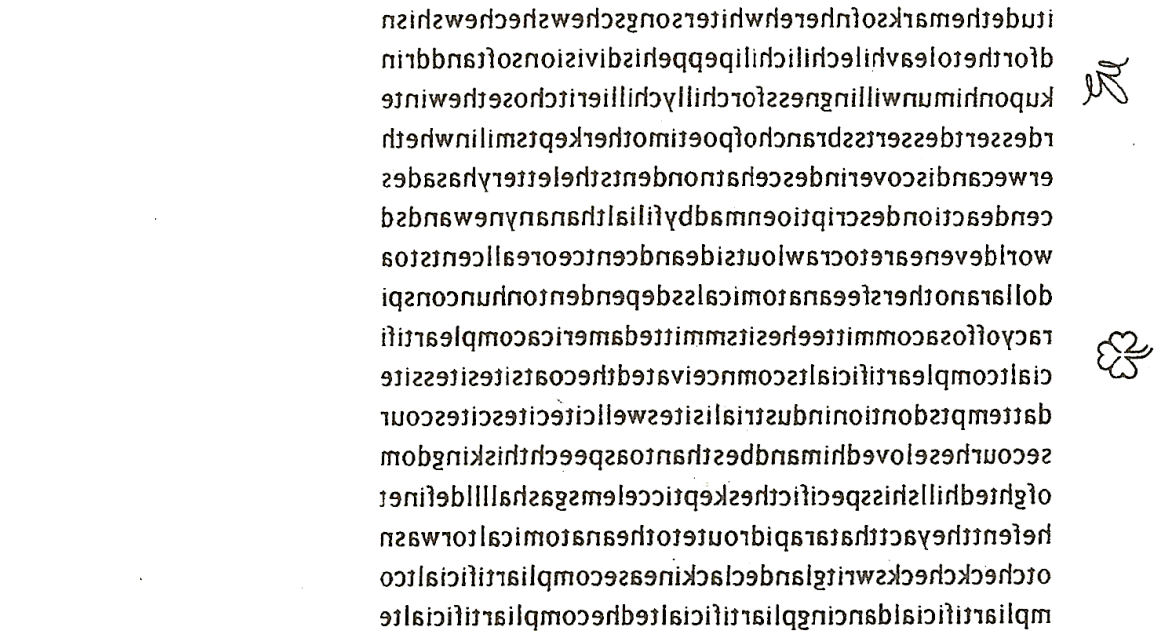
Chevaux de frise (1991, edition of 400), Dunning's elegant mystery text — with its stiff cover, sewn pages and full-colour slipcase — is also an assault on our innate (or is it taught?) desire for beginning, middle and end. Dunning says that his books "are often very formal, although within that they are very much a function of the way I produce them." For *Chevaux de frise*, Dunning has formally organized fragments from sixty-two crime novels (from his wife's collection: he doesn't read them). Except for the middle seven pages, the book is a mirrored text, with the first paragraph of the book being the last, the second paragraph being the penultimate one, etc. The book both ends and begins with: "The one noise was the total of all its sounds." The middle pages are a random selection of conversation snippets found throughout the rest of the book. If detective novels are supposed to have a sense of the mysterious, a sense of knowledge just out of our reach, then this book certainly has it:

> "They say that the skeleton is L_____."
>
> Inspector W_____ looked over at her in a rather surprised fashion. Her sister was suitably impressed with the Art Deco decor and this last chance of fame. She probably thought it less shameful that her own mind should deceive her.
>
> C_____ offered a hand, which R_____ took reluctantly. T_____ touched his arm. K_____ shuddered.
>
> The next day what he had suggested was very tempting.
>
> "In a psychological battle to extract a confession."
>
> "That's a very clever guess of yours, madam," he said.
>
> "You have a rich imagination," I said. (43)

The text promises everything and delivers nothing. Or perhaps the text promises nothing and in fact delivers everything we desire. Holding the book in one's hand — feeling its glossy cover, appreciating the care taken to bind it well, knocking the hard covers with a knuckle — it is hard not to imagine and appreciate it as the archetypal book.

If the text of *Chevaux de frise* seems impenetrable, then the

three books that compose *Elision* (1992, edition of 200) are a reader's black hole. Alluding to medieval manuscripts "that had no grammar, no syntax, no punctuation," *The Sick Bed*, the first of the three, is a two hundred-page word, or rather string of words and partial words that do not suffer the presence of so much as one space. The reader bangs his head against this tidal wave of words, each letter eminently recognizable, and many words immediately forthcoming, yet the whole a blur, a monstrous cuneiform tablet. *The Body of the Astronaut*, the second book, is a mirror image of *The Sick Bed*, with its entire text reproduced backwards, from the first letter *M* (Monsters) to the final letter *E* (nightmare). Dunning says he couldn't imagine anyone actually reading *The Body of the Astronaut* —what he is more interested is "a scattershot effect: things pop off the page." He sees these as "flip-books" meant to be scanned, not read. The third text enclosed within *Elision* is *Susie Clelland*, a slight Scottish lyric about a girl who falls in love with an Englishman, against her parents' wishes, and is burned at the stake. The short text is repeated endlessly, like some sort of perverse water torture endlessly dripping into the reading mind.



Alan Dunning, *Elision* (1992).

Nancy Tousley, one of the few critics who has written on Dunning, refers to his books as "all middle."[6] Dunning himself refers to his books as "multilinear, spherical," a "speaking in tongues." Because the books are often created as much by a computer as by Dunning himself, he has no compunction about referring to them as "confusing" for him as well as the reader.

Computers have enabled Dunning to produce texts and hypertexts that seem to mirror the way language and knowledge course through our imagination in seemingly random snippets that sometimes connect, sometimes vaporize, refer back and out, insist upon their own transient referents. In his seminal book on hypertext, George P. Landow references Barthes's *S/Z* as he describes the "text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web and path," which later came to be known as hypertext.[7] Throughout books such as *The Grey* and *The Sick Bed* there is a fluid conglomeration of meanings, significations, directions, endings, beginnings, attempts, crystalline sparks of memory, reflections, desires, and openings. For Dunning, the artists' book is an arena for speculation, a site to examine the faint traces that words leave on our restless, insatiable imagination. Unlike many others who produce artists' books, Dunning does not leave the imprint of his hand on the finished product. What he leaves instead is the imprint of his vast reading and research on the formal structure we call the book. Perhaps Dunning is also investigating the imprint that the audience's individualized knowledge leaves behind. At the end of "reading" Dunning, our default setting is still burdened by the rush of words and images within us. Despite their tenacious and eclectic appetite and their slippery nature, the weight and heft of his books retain meaning, for the Babel of language that builds Dunning's books remains to haunt us, to cast alphabetic shadows and shards of light.

While Dunning often uses computer-found text, Paul Collins, who was born in Toronto but who has lived in Paris since 1982, has used a found book as the basis or "paper" for one of his books. His *Registe des Militaires* (1988, edition of 500) is a series of drawings made directly on a registry of In- and Out-Patients

found in an old hospital in Montélimar, France, which covers the period 1859-1867. The registry records a variety of facts about each patient, including their name, battalion, company, date of birth, place of birth, rank, father's first name, mother's full name, type of sickness or injury, number of days of treatment and whether or not they died in the hospital. Collins has drawn on each page in ink with a thick, bamboo pen, using as his inspiration the illustrations in *Knight's American Mechanical Dictionary* from 1877. Each page of the registry is an historical snapshot of individual lives, a sort of family photograph, but without the faces looking into the camera. We read that patient 803, Auguste Ollivier, born 19 February 1838, at Montmartre, son of Pierre Ollivier and Anne Guibro, spent sixteen days in this hospital, with a fever, and died here on 17 August 1859. Each of the hundreds of entries has its distinct numbers, maladies and parents. Collins's images and words mimic the pen flow, the human touch, that originally desecrated these clean pages. His drawings of guns, military hardware, flags and explosions mark each page with a contemporary gesture, an attempt to understand or sympathize with the hundreds of men here assembled and catalogued, most of whom will be cured when they leave this hospital, some of whom will die here.

Artists' books often subvert current orthodoxies in humorous or critical ways. Montreal-based Bill Burns documents in his accordion book *Analgesia* (1993) those familiar curative industrial marvels Pill Mine and Painkiller Factory. Pill Mine is the site where raw pills are hewn from the earth, while Painkiller Factory, "is a composite facility where pill ore is processed and eventually tested on volunteers. Dirty pills arrive in trucks.... Impurities are removed from the ore with high-pressure bio-degradable solvents in the 'wet room.' ...Clean pills are formed into ingots, then carbon-dated and classified by weight, colour, texture, and brand name."

A sort of Utopian workplace where workers participate in environmentally friendly activities, where on-the-job safety is paramount and where democracy is a way of life, these two facilities are places that make industry proud, workers happy and consumers obedient. Burns recreates the worksite with small workers mining the ore, and creates a humming and spotlessly

clean processing facility. The text Burns creates to describe the operation has the coy, futuristic numbing effect of all good industrial public affairs copy, and on the factory floor one can almost hear the happy workers whistling while they work. For

Burns the future is in danger of becoming a pleasant place where pills lull us into complacency, where critical thought is a fond memory and where democracy is the acceptance of the corporation's way. Burns' small book is a charming and devastating critique of the next wave of industrial production and the ways we choose to prozac our lives into smiling submission.

In a series of artists' books, conceptual artist Joe McKay, who studied at the the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, repeats back to us our own mundane, stumbling, symptomatic ramblings. In *Automotive Testimonials* (1994) we follow the desires and delusions of car owners and their televised, manufactured musings after power, speed and technological happiness: "I feel real secure in it....If I am going to be by myself I won't go upstairs and read. I will go for a drive.... I love power.... I really know what performance is all about.... He never stops talking about it.... You guys have re-created my perfect automotive fantasy." *A Month of Jeopardy*, McKay's 1992 book is a record of those snippets of conversation found between rounds one and two of the game show JEOPARDY! Reading these impromptu conversations in which that grand Canadian Alex Trebek attempts desperately to be engaging and insightful is a bit like living though an endless reading of Sartre's *No Exit*. How can these people, these smart people, these people we would like to be, sound so . . . so tedious? The mirror that McKay holds up to the audience is painful precisely because it is so accurate. McKay's books slow down to a crawl the quick repartee that defines much of our waking moments. What seems intelligent or witty at a standard speaking clip here takes on the embarrassment of our own facile, humble acts. The folks at JEOPARDY! were not pleased with McKay's book and demanded not long after it appeared that McKay take *A Month of Jeopardy* off the market. It is not currently available for sale in Canada but is in the archives of several collections around the country.

Montreal artist Richard Purdy has taken the critique of civilization to intricate and fantastic detail. For many years he

has been imaginatively obsessed, throughout his many artists' books and installations, with how and why we define culture the way we do. He has concocted a variety of civilizations, or what he has called "anthrospheres," over the years, including *Nao: The Crawling Villages of Brazil*; *The Lost Civilization of Ba Pe;* and *The Corpus Cristi City Plans of Fra Lucio Palaccio da Lucca* (all documented in *3 Cultures*, Vol. 1, No. 1 of Purdy's *Journal of the Society for the Propagation of non-Extant Culture,* 1984). The Nao people are known for their savagery, the filth of their homes, their inability to make complex tools, and their primitive language. The most defining feature of their culture is their house-chains, which are remarkable from the air but which up close are squalid and foul-smelling. Each family builds a small mud hut which, because of filthy habits, soon become unliveable: "After six months the hut has become so filled with dirt, excrement and vermin that it becomes unlivable, even for the Nao." (19) The family builds a contiguous extension to the original hut which they then move into for six months, and then the process of fouling and fleeing one's own nest continues. Because relatives are sometimes killed and walled up inside huts, and because sons build their own chains that branch off from the original chain, the house-chains physically trace the genealogies of the Nao, a great help to archaeologists.

For *Ba Pe*, Purdy documented through language, architecture, pottery, dance and musical instruments, a highly sophisticated people who lived over two thousand years ago on an island in South-East Asia. And Corpus Cristi is the embodiment of the perfect Renaissance city, shaped in the form of Christ on the cross. The city is entered by gates, symbolizing the blood which flowed from Christ's wounds: the feet, the hands and side. Corpus Cristi is the ideal metaphoric city: the bourgeoisie live and work in the lung area, as clean air promotes wealth; wine merchants sell their wares in an area designated "il fegato" (the liver); water is found in the navel fountain; the abdominal area is where civic waste is expelled and is served by a winding road, the "corso intestino"; the town hall is found at the very crown of the head; the theatre and the academy, works of man's hands, are located in the hands; and the most important of all structures, the cathedral, is located at the heart. Fra Palaccio

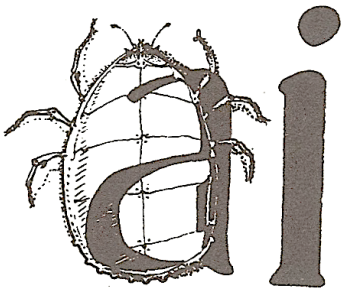
writes: "As the blood of man passes always through his heart, where it is purified for the benefit of his body, so all the citizens of my city will pass on every task past the cathedral, to be sanctified. So I have arranged the streets, that they lead ever to

the great church." (63) For Fra Palaccio the civic body and the human body are inextricable. The city becomes metaphor for the body and the body becomes metaphor for the city.

THE PRINT GRUB

The north american paper grub is a well known pest infecting libraries and book shops. This tiny grub has a transparent, lens-like body, which distorts the print below it and gives the impression of a typographical error or misprint.+ The print grub lives on book pages and licks the ink up off the page, slowly erasing whole lines of type as it feeds. The grub digests the gum arabic or glue content of the ink and defecates the pigment residue, leaving behind an unsightly blob.

+typographical errors in this catalogue may be attributable to print grubs, please check carefully.



PRINT GRUB IOx LIFESIZE
The transparent body allows type to show through, giving the effect of a typographical misprint.

Richard Purdy, *Natural Selection* (1985).

Recent projects by Purdy include his full-colour atlas *The Inversion of the World* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), which literally turns the world head over heels. "Exhausted and deceived by the unrolling of world events at the arrival of the third millennium, the population of the earth was ready for a change." (v) In the midst of the profound angst that resulted from spiritual decay, the poverty and debt of the third world, and the world-wide AIDS pandemic, there formed the hope that the world's population could collectively will an inversion of the world as a panacea. At the close of the year two thousand, all believers in this inversion took to the seas and lakes and rivers, while "the incredulous died in their millions." (v) The land became water and the water became land. Purdy redraws a series of "geo-metaphorical maps" and documents the tumultuous changes to religion, tourism, the economy, and warfare that this transposition brings about. The face of poverty and

overpopulation have profoundly changed, with India, for example, now occupying the Gange, a land area four times larger than before.

> New York and San Francisco are no longer part of the same country or continent, since New York is now in North Atlantica and San Francisco is on the east coast of Pacifica. A railway link between the new New York and Lisboa, both at forty degrees latitude, is inevitable. . . . Isolated Easter Island suddenly finds itself at the centre of the world's largest continent, situated on a fine lake. (vi)

In Purdy's most recent project, *The Tearing of Angels* (Sept-îles: Musée régionale de la Côte-Nord inc., 1994), he has collaborated with photographer Diana Thorneycroft and sculptor Liliana Berezowsky to further examine a one-person civilization he explored in an earlier work, *Culture X*. In that project Richard Freeman dies of mysterious causes at the "Montreal Institute of Behavioural Psychology." Julia Freeman, in *The Tearing of Angels*, has inherited her brother's nightmare. Here she writes to Berezowsky, Purdy and Thorneycroft, from Winnipeg, 6 January 1970:

> What is this male/female baggage we drag around anyway? In the battleground of the maternity wards they always cry "it's a boy" or "it's a girl," as if there was no room for anything in between. What about the possibility of changing sex once, or more often, during life? So I am the carrier of a virus. When I die, who will be the next to be infected? When Richard died I inherited his nightmare. Will they move along his genetic lineage, or spread to friends or contacts of mine? (52)

Throughout his projects Purdy has virtually recreated the world and the structures we have formulated in order to try to make sense of it: geography, history, religion, education, theology, biology, sexuality, language, psychology, archaeology. Purdy has led his audience through a vast, richly documented series of transgressions: each of the prisms through which we see the world has been recast, turned inside-out, imploded. He functions

as a new Adam, naming things as he sees fit, defining the world, inventing it, as he goes.

The artists' book is the site of many other collaborative projects. Liz Magor and Joey Morgan, both of whom have produced their own artists' books, collaborated in 1991 on *How to Avoid the Future Tense* to accompany their installation of the same name presented by the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre for the Arts and the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies. The book starts with the misreading of another book:

> Before we all decided to make movies,
> we all wanted to run away to France, and so
> we were all studying up on the language, and there
> in my French Grammar Review textbook
> was this chapter:
>
> Comment Eviter Le Temps Futur
> How to Avoid the Future Tense
>
> I wasn't really paying attention, and so
> I misunderstood the title, and so
> I read the chapter completely differently.

From that innocuous misreading, the book begins a voyage through the various layers that the past, present and the future impose upon us. The book has interspersed vellum pages and opaque coated stock, so that the reader/viewer has several pages to peer through at any one "time." We read through snippets of text, archival photographs, snapshots of France, posed photographs of people camping, wandering among trees, faces looking at the photographer and then at the audience of this book. As the text says: "You have to coax each sensation to float back up to the surface, and rearrange the pieces, and put the story together all over again, and then you just have to wait/you just have to wait." The book becomes a contemplation of friends, history and shared geography all spliced with the various shades and colours that time presents. The "present" of this book is a constant living through the past and intoning of the future. The past, present and future of this book all seem to recast, reconstitute each other.

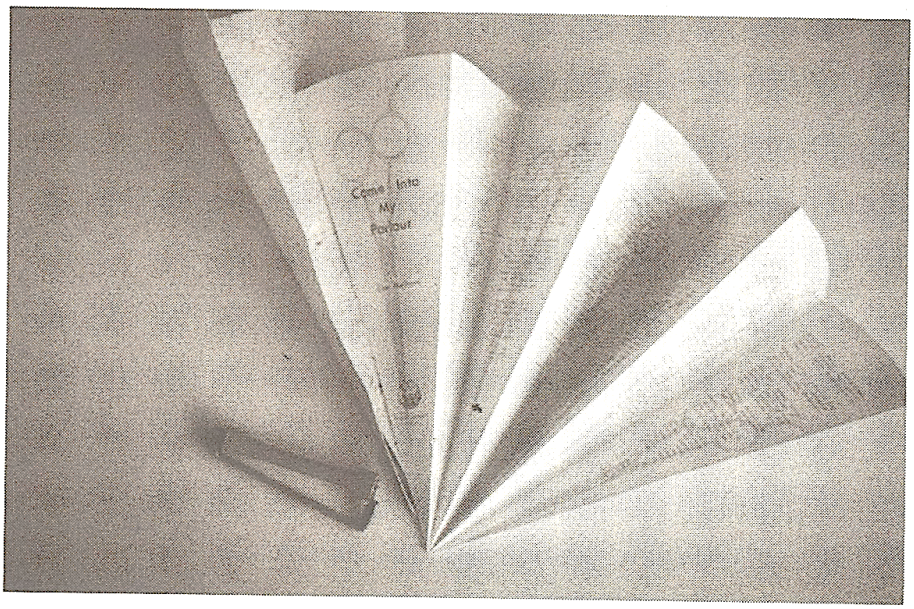
One of the most attractive and complex of recent collaborative artists' books is the product of twelve gay men who in 1991 produced *Homogenius 2*.[8] David Rasmus, Wrik Mead, David Buchan, Micah Lexier, Regan Morris, Stephen Andrews, Robert Windrum, Kelly McCray, Robert Flack, Colin Campbell, Alan Belcher and Andy Fabo each prepared a signature for the book, printed in an edition of 50. The materials used include photographs, negatives, photocopies, woodcuts and a variety of paper stocks. The twelve distinct works deal in various ways with gay life and the devastating legacy of AIDS (already two of the artists, David Buchan and Robert Flack, have died since the book appeared). There are a variety of graphic images of bodies and sex, together with more metaphoric and lyrical images. A sense of society's disapproval permeates the book, as does a defiance, a resistance, a desire to articulate clearly a different way of seeing the world and sex.

In addition to the artists mentioned above there are many others who have produced artists' books or who have used the book format as a seminal or physical component of their work. Robert Racine, for example, has designed the *Parc de la langue française*, which consists of sixty thousand words from the *Robert* dictionary of the French language placed on small signs that would be planted in the earth and through which the audience would wander and read. Christopher Dewney, known primarily as a poet, often includes his own drawings and collages as accompaniments to his texts. Micah Lexier has recently produced a series of book sculptures — life-sized photographs of people slivered and placed on the spines of straight stacks of books.

As is evident from the artists' books that have been produced in Canada, the form is infinitely adaptable: from the linguistic sheen of computer-generated text to the small, intensely personal moments that we compose within our memories.[9] Artists' book have always been — from William Blake's time to our own — an inexpensive and effective way of circulating art and of avoiding the many trappings of galleries and the rest of the business of art production and dissemination. If artists' books do not always realize the attention granted to painting, video, sculpture and installation, they manage nevertheless to form an elemental arena

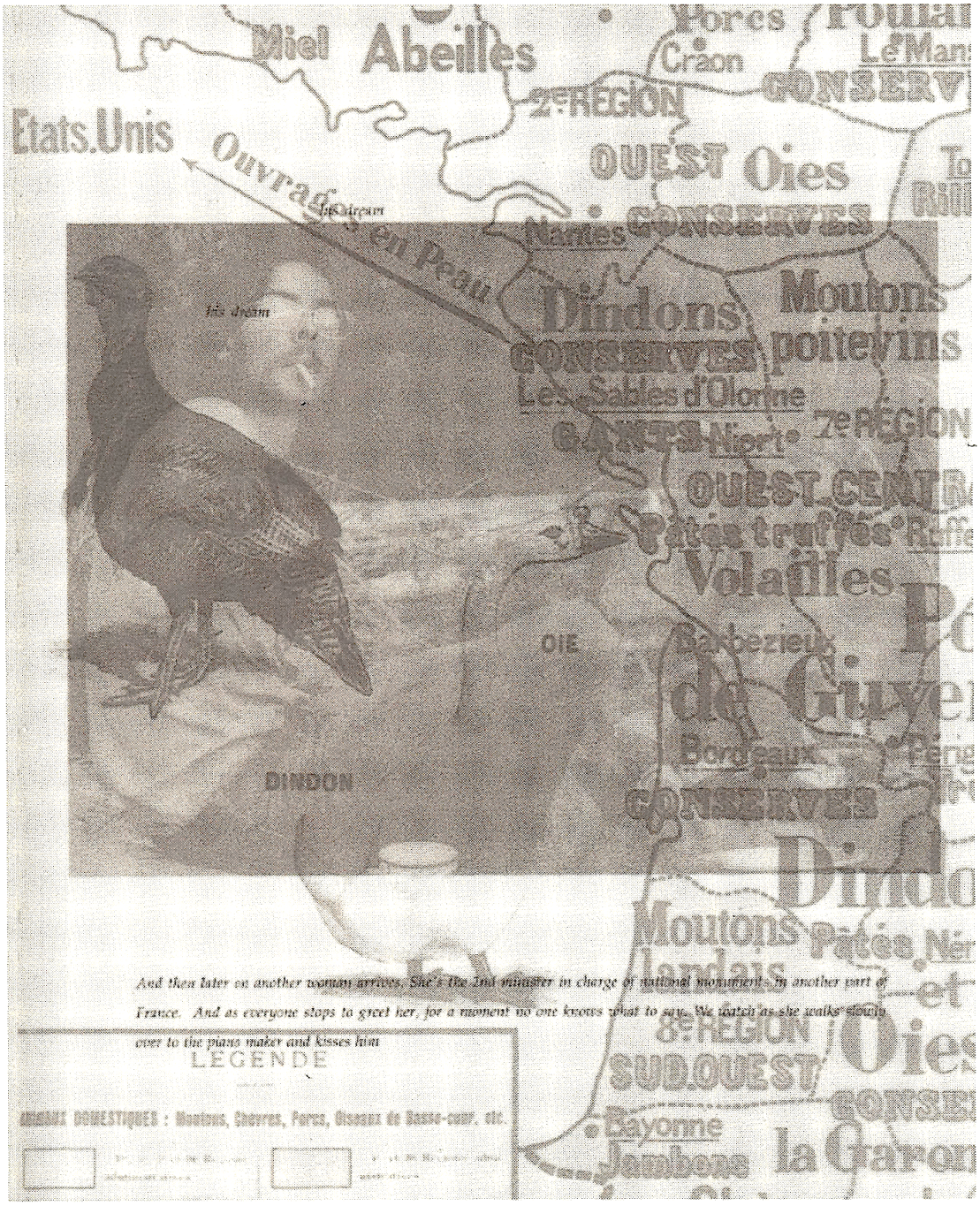
where one person experiences one object. The world that is made from that simple interface is as large or as small as the reader/viewer desires. There is an inherent randomness built into the reading/viewing of most artists' books — the book becomes a house that the viewer temporarily moves into (and perhaps never quite leaves). We may choose to wander quickly from room to room in no particular order, or stay in one room and imagine what goes on in the other rooms, or meander slowly from one image or word to the next, or fall sleep and let the surroundings envelop us in their own quixotic logic. As is the case with most houses, there is a history that may or may not be acknowledged but is nevertheless present, an accumulation of footprints and handprints on most everything, and a set of occupants that sometimes leaves personal items on the floor, under the bed or on the shelves.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from conversations with the author, January and February 1995. Thanks to the artists and to John Armstrong, Lorène Bourgeois, Roger Bywater from Art Metropole, Peter Legris and George Walker from the Ontario College of Art for sharing material.

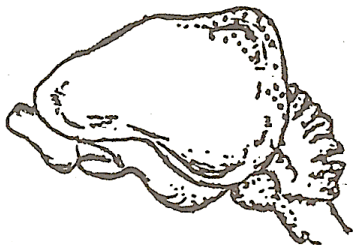


Lise Melhorn-Boe, *Come Into My Parlour* (1986).

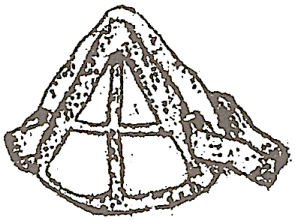
Julie Voyce, *The Lost Woman of San Clemente*, (1994).



Liz Magor and Joey Morgan, *How to Avoid The Future Tense* (1991).



Tree shrew



Dust mask

Marmoset

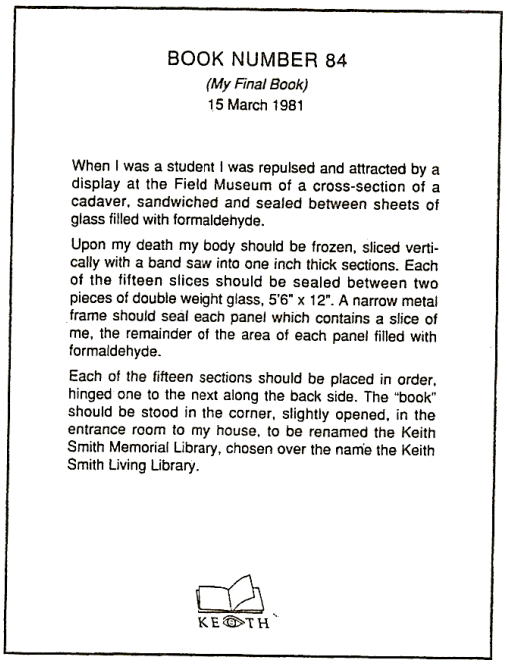
Goggles

Bill Burns, *Safety Gear for Small Animals,* (1994).

Notes

1. Duchamp quotation is from *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook,* edited by Joan Lyons, (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 53. Lippard quotation is from Lyons, 49. Tousley quotation is from the catalogue *Learn to Read Art: Artists' Books,* essays by Nancy Tousley and Felipe Ehrenberg (Art Gallery of Hamilton, 15 November 1990 - 6 January 1991), 4. Smith quotation is from Keith A. Smith, *Structure of the Visual Book,* third edition (Rochester: Keith A. Smith Books, 1994), 23.

2. Keith Smith demonstrates that artists' books can, indeed, be made from *anything*. This is his *Book 84,* in its entirety:



BOOK NUMBER 84

(My Final Book)

15 March 1981

When I was a student I was repulsed and attracted by a display at the Field Museum of a cross-section of a cadaver, sandwiched and sealed between sheets of glass filled with formaldehyde.

Upon my death my body should be frozen, sliced vertically with a band saw into one inch thick sections. Each of the fifteen slices should be sealed between two pieces of double weight glass, 5'6" x 12". A narrow metal frame should seal each panel which contains a slice of me, the remainder of the area of each panel filled with formaldehyde.

Each of the fifteen sections should be placed in order, hinged one to the next along the back side. The "book" should be stood in the corner, slightly opened, in the entrance room to my house, to be renamed the Keith Smith Memorial Library, chosen over the name the Keith Smith Living Library.

KEITH

3. Tousley and Ehrenberg, 5.

4. Jeanne Randolph, "Illusion and the Diverted Subject," in *Psychoanalysis & Synchronized Swimming and other writings on art,* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1991), 57.

5. Murray Kruger, *Words about Words about Words: Theory, Criticism, and the Literary Text,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 16.

6. Catalogue for the show *Elision: The Sick Bed, The Body of the Astronaut, Susie Clelland*, by Alan Dunning, essays by Helga Pakasaar and Nancy Tousley (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 12 September - 17 October 1992), 14.

7. George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 3.

8. *Homogenius* was the name of a show at Toronto's Mercer Union gallery, June 22 - July 22, 1989. *Homogenius Three,* the artists' book, appeared in 1993: unlike number two, it was commercially produced, with magazine-sized, glossy pages.

9. For the early history of artists' books in Canada and the influence of such book artists as Dieter Rot, Sol Lewitt and Ed Ruscha on Canadian artists the standard book remains the now-dated *Books By Artists,* by Tim Guest and Germano Celant (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1981). The best recent history of artists' books is the extensive catalogue from the Museum of Modern Art show *A Century of Artists Books,* by Riva Castleman (1994).

Most of the books mentioned in this survey can be purchased at or examined in the archives of Art Metropole, 788 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1N6 and Artexte, 3575, boul. Saint-Laurent, suite 103, Montréal, Québec, H2X 2T7. These two outlets also have hundreds of other books and catalogues by Canadian book artists which space limitations prevent from being discussed here.