

FROM THE EDITOR

Since the last issue, California has endured fires and earthquakes. The other two seasons are floods and riots. Floods are expected (read: mudslides) as soon as it starts raining again--we have little to no rain this season, so we are anticipating a deluge, and as a result of the firestorms we have endured, the mountains are barren and thus will create havoc in Malibu, Altadena, Laguna, et al. I, too, since the last issue, have been in temporary quarters which I must now vacate as soon as I mail out this issue. So life is indeed in flux for me and for Southern California.

I want to thank all of you who have written notes of comfort and assistance as a result of my plea for help in the last issue. Not much has resulted from the quandary I am in, except a more positive attitude for 1994. Marina Abramovic, the Yugoslav artist who lives in Amsterdam and in Berlin, has informed me that since the lunar eclipse, life must indeed turn toward a more positive situation, and indeed it has. Little things have added up to a better situation, although the earthquake has added more stimulus to find another place to endure life.

It is hard to think of life and limb, when you do not know what it feels like to feel the earth no longer roll but literally hit you in a vertical way. It was a different kind of quake, and a different fault too. The aftershocks have put fear in our hearts--when will it ever stop? They say it may be another year!

This has not stopped artists from making art, people from spending four hours to get to work, and four hours to get back! And people trying to decide to leave California altogether! But your renewals are coming in, and that gives me courage to go on! Unless I found 500 new subscribers (at least), *Umbrella* is merely a labor of love. I must subsidize this publishing venture by finding clients, or find an institution that wants my collection and allows me to teach and catalog the collection for the next few years. If any of you have any ideas in this recessionary period in the States, then please send it along. My worldly possession are in storage--except for those few items which keep all of this going--and the news, journals, books and bookworks that keep the information network flowing. I cannot even afford a new computer (Mine is 7 years old), so I am happy I can generate this journal with what I have!

I wish you all a very Happy 1994. Keep sending me news, bookworks, announcements, gossip, and all that. I just felt you needed all this information today--rather than wait until I find another setting for my daily necessities and *Umbrella*. The phone/fax remain the same and the P.O. Box. I may not be at the end of either at the time you send a message, but you will always know how to reach me "live". After more than 1500 aftershocks, the earth seems to move more often -- and although my area has not been hit like Santa Monica and Northridge, nerves are jittery, people are staying home, and the pattern of driving has been radically changed due to the rupture in the freeway system. I don't want to rupture *Umbrella's* transit, and although I wanted to publish more frequently, the postage rates are still too high to warrant that right now. Here's to a better 1994 for all of us--with fewer jolts and fewer surprises!

COVER (front & back): Flood! A Novel in Pictures
by Eric Drooker, see p. 11.

COMING EVENTS

Photography and the Photographic: Theories, Practices, Histories, 8 -10 April 1994, Organized by the Center for Ideas and Society, University of California, Riverside. For information contact the Center at University of California, Riverside, 92521-0319/ (909)787-3987.

Linda Crabill, Julie Leonard/Bookworks: Paper, Book and Box, 14 March - 6 May 1994. Tuition, room and board, \$4000. \$3000 partial work study (8 hrs.); \$1500 full work study (25 hrs.). For information contact Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC 28765. (704)765-2359.

Center for the Book at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC will be the location of the 2nd Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing 14 - 16 July 1994. Contact the CBA at (202)707-5221.

The California Experience II, the Fourteenth International Calligraphy Symposium, will be held from 25 June - 2 July 1994 at the California Institute for the Arts in Valencia, a suburb of Los Angeles. In response to many requests for classes in bookmaking and book design, the conference is planned around a theme of *The Art of the Book*. Early deposits of \$100.00 can be sent to Molly Gaylor, Director, 11946 Avon Way #2, Los Angeles, CA 90066.

Words In and About Books will be a juried exhibit 9 April - 20 May at Tacoma Public Library. For further information, send a SASE to Randi Kander, 5901 N. 32nd St., Tacoma, WA 98047.

College Art Association, 16 - 19 February 1994, New York Hilton, New York.

The Book as Art is a city-wide event in 12 different locations in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1 - 31 March 1994 featuring one-of-a-kind books, installation works, hand-made limited editions and one-foao-kind small press books, performance pieces, workshops and demonstration, as well as a symposium on 5 March 1994 at St. John's College, entitled **What the Heck is a Book Anyway?: The Contemporary Book as Art--and--Artists' Use of the Book Form and Text**. Included on the panel are Sas Colby, book artists; Helen Frederick of Pyramid Atlantic; Nancy Pistorius, Librarian at the University of New Mexico Fine Arts Library; Silvia Rennie, a bookbinder; and the editor and publisher of *Umbrella*. For more information, contact Anne Ward Burton, Edith Lambert Gallery, 707 Canyon Rd., Santa Fe, NM 87501.

Umbrella is an occasional newsletter, focusing on artists' publications and twentieth-century art documentation including books by artists, as well as artists' periodicals with news and reviews. *Umbrella* is published by Umbrella Associates, and the Editor is Judith A. Hoffberg, P.O. Box 40100, Pasadena, CA 91114. Phone/Fax for Editorial Office is: (818)797-0514. Subscriptions are available for the calendar year only, payable in American currency. ©1994 by Umbrella Associates.

ARTISTS' BOOKS: TWIN 4-BARREL ASPIRATED OR ELECTRONIC FUEL INJECTED?

Let's get one thing straight from the outset: I love books, all sizes and varieties, especially those made by artists, and would hate to be considered anything less than their undying advocate. Having said this much I must go on to qualify my statement by reminding you that there are books and there are books-falsely-so-called, and many people are reluctant to draw a distinction.

When a writer or a speaker uses the word "book" I do not automatically think of an apply, a good deed, or even a carburetor. I normally envision an object, often but not exclusively made from printed and bound paper, which is discreet, intimate, and available to more than one reader or owner. In the Western tradition the two millennia development of the codex format book encompasses a number of innovations. Some of these, like saddle stitching or phonetically based movable type, are significant enough to have played important roles in the rise of universal literacy.

As with so many aspects of our postmodern lives, the criteria for what comprises a book are changing. All kinds of ideas make it into book form these days, some more successfully than others. In my time I have seen illegible books, which are regrettable, and unopenable books, which are coy. Whereas referring to a hypercard stack as an "electronic book" merely taxes the language to the limit of what it can comprehensibly support, referring to a sculptural object as a book, even a "unique book" dissolves both meaning and tradition in a wash of confusion.

All of this must sound annoyingly commonplace, obvious, and downright tendentious to those with any knowledge of books. But when a distinguished panel of librarians, curators, and publication directors at the 1993 CAA symposium on artist's books showed dozens of slides of second-rate sculpture masquerading as books, its large, supposedly well-informed audience did not so much as rustle a program.

It's not that I begrudge printmakers, papermakers, and other bibliophiles their share of the artist book market, either. Even though artist publications and the avant-garde movements which spawned them (such as Fluxus and dada) have nothing to do with archival preciousness, I'll give the printer's devils their due and admit that deluxe editions are an oblique precedent, part of an illustrious fine press tradition. But when image upon image of "unique" objects are shown to me as exemplary artist's books, I begin to fear I am adrift in metaphoric sargasso, my poor Mother Tongue unequal to the task of semantic navigation.

That a seminar purporting to be about "Artist's Books in the 1990's" should seem to hit wide off the mark is not too surprising. After all, things have been sliding in this direction for a number of years. The enthusiasm among printmakers for monoprints merely whetted our appetite for logical absurdity. Their success at valorizing one-of-a-kind graphics at a much higher fiscal threshold than was ever possible with multiples virtually guaranteed that book artists would follow suit. Yet the late twentieth century re-medievalization of the book arts by a self-serving fine craft movement is such a distortion of reality that, in Seattle at least, the artist's book colloquium felt like a Saturday afternoon session of the Society for Creative Anachronism.

The view I propound will not doubt offend many decent, right-thinking, god-fearing book artists. It is narrow, blasphemous, and slightly vain. I understand completely the dangers of the assumptions inherent in it. Elitism is not only futile, it is also hopelessly unpopular. In my headlong rush to avoid being compared with Hilton Kramer, I will again mention the accomplishments of the fine press movement. William Morris and ERic Gill, among many others, made valuable donations to the graphic arts, albeit in an elite sort of way. The predictable return to handicraft in an age of mechanical reproduction is not difficult to accept. As Benjamin, McLuhan, and Postman have all pointed out, new technologies make war upon those they supplant, and commercially obsolete techniques are usually relegated to the academy for preservation. What boggles my mind is that the hand-made tradition would be hellbent to append itself to the very avant-garde which is its antithesis.

Objets d'art described as books are even more problematic. The Duchampian proclamation that art is whatever an artist declares it to be is here exaggerated with a vengeance. Everything from specimen jars to meat cleavers now serve as "books designate", with accompanying gallery-sized price tags. This opportunistic rationale, which admits any object in sequential form to the library, so far transcends reason that it won't be long before the World Series is mistaken for a book.

Taxonomy is the single most pressing problem facing a sound historical appraisal of the artist book phenomenon. To lump letterpress poetry, Xeroxed fanzines, and 3-dimensional objects together is not just bad cataloging, it is poor critical hygiene. Personally, I've always been more taken by the elegance of an idea than with the opulence of its execution. Archival quality is a consideration in any design, but fine materials do not a book of a sow's idea make. Conversely, parsimonious production values do not demean or "ephemeralize" a splendid idea.

The irony of all this is that, no matter how hard we try to gyp the worms, books are ephemeral by nature, expensive ones as well as cheap. Unless they are keen to return to an era of palimpsests and incunables, artists and critics ought to realize that process counts for only so much. Combinations of adroit technique cannot mask oafish conceptualization. The responsible practice of art requires a better balance. In fact, the world's present condition demands that serious artists think and act with their minds and hearts, abandoning their appetites for luxury at Versailles, where they should have been left two centuries ago.

I began this essay by stating that, come what may, I am a friend to books and those who make them, especially artists. Along the way I've blown off a little steam, sworn a couple of oaths, and probably lost a few true believers in the process. I consider that a fair price to pay for clarity. In spite of all the new criteria, when a person speaks or writes the word, "book", especially "artist's book", I still do not envision an illegible apple, an unopenable good deed, or even a hypercard stack of carburetors, much less a library-quality unique sculptural object. Henceforth, maybe you won't either.

--David Stairs

David Stairs is the art editor of *Northwest Review*, and currently resides in Eugene, Oregon.