

LAWRENCE WEINER IN CONVERSATION WITH UMBRELLA ON BOOKS

What has happened to artist books since the 60s?

Artist book is a misnomer. I don't know what an artist book is; a book is a conclusive question. Reading is a real time experience; looking is a real time experience.

The books of artists are in the form of a book, but artists are/were not afforded the status of having something to say that look the way other books look. Look at the 1920s or the late nineteenth century or the late 1800s. People who made their living as artists also published books, it's not that odd. I don't know how to pop from the late 19th century to visual art of the 20th century, and your primary interest is the art of the latter part of the 20th century. It was not unusual in that part of the century, since it had been done for decades before: the medium *book* already existed.

The medium existed, but the technology allowed the artist to have an easier time to make the book.

That sounds like a panel I was on that Printed Matter sponsored years ago and that was the kind of position they took because with the technology even back then, any artist who wanted to publish a book and had something to say could give up lunch for a couple of months and just send it out. Kathy Acker as a writer was able to use that whole situation too, and lots of other writers.

And if you remember, I am coming from a generation that first came to California in the late 50s. And there were things like Discovery Bookshop and there were other bookshops. City Lights etc. that sold books of poetry, and had absolutely nothing to do with artists, but they needed artists around because they had the technical skills to put the damned things together.

I did know how to make a book yesterday. I don't know how to make a book today. It will depend upon the content. And form doesn't follow function anymore, or I would know how to make a book today. *Form follows function* is a major problem of our generation. It sounded good at one given time, but it means that you understand the way the world works. And I did think that art was not about understanding the way the world works or the way a book works, because the book is a conclusive question. And it's not like a movie. You cannot move your eyes from the book and continue reading the book, listening to the soundtrack. And even silent films have sound, since you can hear the sound of the projector. We should know that from artists like Robert Morris and artists like Bruce Nauman where this was not an epiphany but this was a stated fact. It's just that no one bothered to realize that the fact was stated.

That's what we get into with books. That's what the problem for me is. I chose books because I really and truly thought that they would cross over. When people find my books, they find no preface and no explanation. Catalogs are different, most of my catalogs have no preface or explanation. I think that if you leave a book behind because you are traveling and you didn't have money for the chambermaid, there's a very good chance that that book will be passed around, and I have had that happen to me over the years.

It is like children's books, no preface, no index, and they understand just by the rhythm of turning the pages.

We're confronted at this particular point in time with a massive culture that finds itself against another massive culture. One culture believes that what is in a book is always right and the other culture believes that a book is part of the conversation. It's that simple. And when I say "massive culture", I'm not just referring to Islam. I'm referring as well to the fundamentalist readings of the Bible. I don't see the book as a *fait accompli*. I see the book as a questioning structure.

Making books is something important. The first book of mine that was published by a publisher was *Statements*, but I had already been making xeroxed pamphlets and broadsides.

I put the pamphlets up on the walls in the street or I left them behind in coffee shops. And somehow or other they entered into the culture. That's the nice thing about a book: it's not impositional, it's presentational. If there's something in it, it will be passed from one person to another. If there's nothing of use in it, it gets thrown on the cutting room floor. Until artist books became institutionalized and very often they get wrapped in some kind of preservative and put on a shelf. I saw one of the books I did with Edward (Ruscha) called *Hard Light*. People have told me that they saw it on e-bay for various prices and Edward found a couple of cases somewhere. I remember sending them to Pierogi in Brooklyn and selling them for \$25.00 at the same time they were going for ridiculous prices on e-bay. But that's fine. It's not a concern of mine.

Making was probably the greatest concern?

No. Getting someone to read it was the greatest concern quite frankly. Otherwise, why bother. Nowadays I will publish books by myself or with Moved Pictures. Quite soon another book will come out with Printed Matter. A new book is coming out with Flamarrion in Paris in November, *Trois Petits Canards Une Eau de Vie*, concerning conversations with Luc Veizin, the poet, about the difference between American culture and European culture.

Every once in a while there have been technical problems. The Danish book, *Having Waved*, required typefaces being

shipped from Iceland, Finland, etc. (it was pre-computer days).

Well, now technology has helped that problem.

Technology has helped an enormous amount—but the problem is that it has created a plethora of books. Because the technology is so simple most of the books

that you see carry with them the pre-program of whatever computer they are using— which is immediate institutionalization. Nothing against the pre-programmed program but if you're going to have a differentiation between so-called artist books and so-called publishers' stock books; there should be a breaking away from what you're told to do. The Chicago Rules of Grammar are very interesting to learn, but they are disastrous to use because they stand for moral values that are no longer in effect. And if we accept that, we cannot deal with the dignity of what we are writing about or what we are showing. We're saying that when they grow up, we'll pay attention to them. And if you haven't grown up, we shall not pay attention to you.

Now in your earlier days, you traveled a lot more than most artists. Weren't you more appreciated in Europe than in the States?

I have been coming to Los Angeles too—lots of times in complicated ways, but Canada, the Midwest, it's all the same to me quite frankly. Where I choose to live is my own personal choice, but I don't believe in provincial culture and I tend to break down the idea of a provincial culture. That's very important. But it's a social obligation and I accept that. I don't come out of an institutional situation. Because I found myself having to be an artist, that's my logic structure. And books represent a logic structure in a *mise-en-scene*; that's what attracted me to books. Because books represented work that did not fit into the society as it was and yet had already found an audience, it obviously had a use. A book put it into a context where it carried no authority with it other than what it was, and if you could find a use for it, you would. You notice all of the books build their own structure to do and determine what's being presented. When they don't, they fail. Then they become catalogs. If you take a *catalogue raisonné* and try to turn it into something else—like *The Films and Videos* book from 1992— when you pick it up it's a *catalogue raisonné*, but it doesn't present itself as such.

The *catalogue raisonné* of books—that has a funny little story to it; it was attacked in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for not being a real *raisonné*. And out of nowhere, it was defended in a very beautiful essay in that newspaper by a bibliographer as having told him what he needed to know. It was never written down anywhere what a *catalogue raisonné* was supposed to look like; there was no form, but everybody accepted the fact that there was a form. There were no rules; no one knew what a *catalogue raisonné* looked like and yet everybody's *catalogue raisonné* looked exactly the same.

Since you've always dealt with the codex, has it been the structure that feels right to you for the consciousness that you have of what the book does?

I really don't know what this "codex" is. Its inherent form in the West :read from left to right or in the East, from right to left. But in fact, it's the same thing. The catalog I'm doing in Stommeln(outside of Cologne) for a show in a synagogue goes the other way visually and reading-wise, because it's going on a synagogue. When I'm dealing with a structure that deals from left to right, I'll deal with it that way. It's the same for me. The majority of the world honestly thinks that everyone understands what a straight line is, and in fact it's not true. Most people do not understand straight lines. But they do understand things and they do communicate with each other, so therefore this so-called codex is a phantom, a total phantom. Why, in fact, does a book look like that when in parts of the world the books go straight down and in other parts of the world it goes the other way, and there are other parts of the world that have literature of a form and communication of a form that's on a cube, on a die. They can read it, because they know where it starts and where it ends. We don't, but people who don't know English don't know where it begins and where it ends anyway.

We're so happy to think we understand something that we put it into a category to be able to understand what we have accomplished because, in fact, it's a big deal. It's a big deal for me, because logic patterns about materials that I have are different from those logic patterns of some of the young people at UCLA that, for instance, were taught in school. I disagree with a lot of those who taught them. For them to be able to make the step to at least incorporate my logic pattern into their thinking to either be pro or con, that's a big deal.

As far as the aspirations of books, I don't know if I had aspirations for books when I made them. I had the aspiration that people would be able to see the work that I did and there was a closure of structure at that moment. And with that closure of structure, there was no other way to place the work that it didn't have to be adapted to a dominant cultural structure. And, in fact, I wasn't particularly against the dominant cultural structure, because it allowed me to see a Barnett Newman, allowed me to see many other things. So I wasn't against it. I just tried to build another structure that carried with it less authority of those people, and begin to carry authority of these people. Which I think is what you mean by the codex of the artist book.

But I also want to suggest to you that when you put out your broadsides and your posters on the streets in a tenuous atmospheric conditions whereby rain and snow might destroy it - or someone could pull it off the wall or pole and take it home, was that ephemerality something you considered?

No, they are not tenuous. As a matter of fact , it's easy to see now with digital information and beginning with Univac that those things are really temporal. Books have a tendency

(since the Second World War—if it taught us anything) that maybe you cannot find every book, but it turns up and it pops up; you find it in an attic, you find it in a bathroom, you find part of it being used as toilet tissue but it's read. Books are far more substantial than anything else we have, just as vinyl is more substantial because you can always pick off something from vinyl but you can't pick it off tape.

Once the tape is destroyed, there is nothing left. Whereas if you have pieces of vinyl, then you can technologically paste it together. It's not going to sound right, but you can have the sense. Well, a book is very much like that.

Well, I remember the mantra of the 1960s and 70s that the artist book was not made to last, was ephemeral.

Well, that was not my mantra. That was a misunderstanding of books; it was the mantra of people who were "making ephemera", but at the same time were collating it, archiving it, saving it, and selling it to people as ephemera. That's like the corporate CEO: to please his children every Sunday he marches in the street to *Save Willie*, and then goes to work on Monday morning running his tuna processing plant. It's duplicity. A standard problem.

As Lenny Bruce said: "If it's bent, it's okay, if it's broken, it's not." But the book—the spine may break, but in fact, it's never broken. And in learning these things, right now I don't know. I think books are books and I don't think there is an "artist book". How do you know if the author is an artist if it's a book? Why make something that you didn't want to make? You make a catalog when you make a show because you're asking people to take the car or the subway someplace and when they walk in, that is something that's there to take home. If there's someone there to explain it, or you are there, they can accept it or reject it. But a book is something that requires nothing except that someone finds it. That's why I try to make books that don't have a metaphor. Then it will carry from one set of people to another without having to carry any baggage. The book is basically zero. I do like Anne Moeglin-Delcroix's arguments that the use of a book is not fully neutral—zero degree. It's a nice take, but it's a take.

We learned that from Barthes, other people. And, in fact, it's not zero, it's a book. It pretends to have portent, but after the first book, the second one has no meaning. I've had the same argument with Heinz Gappmayr.

I have been looking at a great many books made by young artists who feel they are inventing the wheel, but many of their books are a great charge of *deja vu* for me. Because of the technology, the avoidance of staples and better binding, the problem is that their work is fine but reflects a great many 1960s and early 1970s bookworks. These young people have no histories of what went before - not because there are no histories (in fact, there are many more) but they do not refer to them.

And the reason we don't have a lot of histories is that the major practitioners of making books wanted to be special and they didn't think they could get their books in libraries or in a bookshop. I remember Seth Siegelau trying to place books at the Eighth Street

Bookshop, that was the mecca of book stores; all they did was say "that's not a book" and didn't take them. There was a misunderstanding on people's part that they should call them "artist books" and put them in a special section like the category of "world music". I still think that was a major mistake—we're living with it—and it's not going to change. I thought at the time and I was quite verbal about it, it was a major, major mistake. They were books and they had information that was useful for other human beings in relation to themselves and they should have just been incorporated. Then there would have been people who went to the library and stumbled over them. You always say: "you can't judge a book by its cover" and they take it down, get interested in it and it enters into that whole good mess. Somehow or other, everybody was too good for that mess. They were too good for rejection. It didn't occur to them that the majority of books that were published by anybody in any field, in any direction, any language, the majority of books fall by the wayside until someone finds them and picks them up.

And it's an epiphany with that sense of discovery!

Why do I make books? That's why I still make books. It's time-consuming to put them together. I make art and put art in books.

And then there are complications. You go to a printer and explain to them what it is you are trying to do. Today I can give them a full file, but it still takes quite a bit of work with a printer. But you take into consideration that the printer doesn't know what you want to do, but they know how to do it.

The book itself has to adapt to the material that is being presented. And the book is a very fluid medium. When you speak of the codex, then you may as well say that human beings, since they cannot fly, are codexed. They cannot fly so they have to build a machine to fly. With a book, you have to readapt the structure of what can be put into it and forget about what they tell you is necessary and again remember that your readership is smarter than most commercial places are allowed to believe, because they require a mass audience to pay for the enormous costs of production. The art world as we know it is more aware than the across-the-board audience, but it is smaller. There are not that many people that are interested in field hockey. Still across the board they play field hockey in almost every country, but it's not baseball, it's not football, it's not soccer. The material I am dealing with—the relationships of human beings to objects—is across the board and it's across class lines, but it's not for an enormous audience that can sustain a commercial publishing venture.

We found that out, haven't we?

Happily. I have nothing against these people, but is it your intention to read Peter Max or Leroy Neiman? Leroy Neiman is a serious artist, genuinely serious. His student center at Columbia is open to people. That's not the point. His needs are to cross other boundaries. My needs are to enter the culture and be used when necessary, to keep publishing things. I don't like too many; now it's the case to put the disk back in and print it again. If you did print 2000 books and they found an audience, print another 2000 later. The paper won't be the same. I'm not interested in first editions, and I'm not interested in unique books.

That is what Ed Ruscha did without the technology. He really set the pace for that.

Yes, exactly. When you talk about books, that's somebody who really has added to the concept of literature and the concept of art more than most people realize.

I think they're starting to.

I'm not a radical. I'm just a moving along artist. I'm not being modest. I did not have a radical approach to it. I did books just because I required a means of reaching a small audience that I knew could understand it. I made books to bring about a world that was closer to me.

They need you. It justifies their own work, it gives them a *raison d'etre*.

It makes it a lot easier to explain to their significant other why they are doing something. Somebody else is doing it, that's nice.

Well, it gives them an example of why they are doing it.

Artists are an example within the society. They cannot take away your art. They can stop your income, but they cannot stop your arting.

They don't get enough of that from their teachers. Especially artists who deal with ideas.

I don't deal with ideas, I deal with objects, which is why the books are capable of crossing all different lines, because they are about objects and objects are universal. The book is about one of the best ways to do it.

But how about your DVDs?

That's media.

Have they made it easier for you?

Actually, it has made it a lot more complex. I don't know whether you've seen the first DVD, *Wild Blue Yonder*, or the first to be released, *Blue Moon Over*, and now there is *Light Blue Sky* and *Deep Blue Sky*. *Deep Blue Sky* is being

shown here (in L.A.) and *Light Blue Sky* was shown in Paris in September. The DVD did not determine anything; it looks very much like it could be done by any other artist except that we had decided to not accept programs that already exist and we dealt with it on that level. I was very lucky to work with competent people who understand what I am trying to do. The reason we made so many movies is we used to make movies that required that everyone figure out how to use the medium as it was. Most of the people in film were not art-world people; they were movie people. Something we were doing was interesting enough for them to bring their expertise in and make possible to do what you were doing. That's why I like to use media. In order to get somebody to bring their expertise to something, you have to interest them in the subject. If you can't interest anybody in the subject, then go and do it yourself but begin to have a little bit of a thought that you're not exciting other people.

However, you obviously believe in collaboration.

Yes, on that level I believe in it becoming a part of the structure. And I also think that by using commercial printing facilities as they stand and trying to adapt them to your own needs doesn't carry with it any exotica. It's in the end a book. And if you look at novels, some of them have been printed in manners that didn't look like novels until they existed. What about *Finnegan's Wake*, how did they print that? How do you start a book that begins at the end and ends at the beginning? But they did and it sold. It passed enough to even bring down the wrath of the United States Customs. What else do you want? The book is still the most viable form of reaching other people. What is e-mail? It's just a book in another format, but it's a book; it reads from left to right, it starts at the beginning and ends at the end. But with the book, there is no beginning and there is no end. I designed a book recently, *Wild Blue Yonder*. Anywhere you open it, the story continues visually, pictorially, informationally. Wherever you open it the following pages from left to right will constitute a full, complete story. It works! That's the book which will come out with *Moved Pictures and Printed Matter*. Matt Mullican and I did a comic book; wherever you open it, you just keep going and you are not lost! You find yourself in context. And as long as you find yourself in context, you're more or less okay.

And it's different for each reader too.

Let's talk about *Printed Matter* for a minute, since we were both there before *Printed Matter* and we remember when *Printed Matter* began. It has survived through thick and thin. It has adapted. It has librarians buying the books for their libraries. You can get almost any book of mine in the New York City Public Library, and it's just a public library. It just required someone like Robert Rainwater to explain that these were books like any other books.

That's why we make books, so when we speak about a relational codex and things like that, how can you

appropriate the idea of a book? You cannot. It's open to anybody. It's a form that's genuinely accepted.

If you make a pop-up book that existed in China many years ago, all of a sudden it enters in and it's part of being a book. Sometimes books have pop-ups; sometimes books have sound or smell. But that's not appropriation. That's not anything. Still we're missing the point of the operation. Books are a means of presenting a composite set of information, within a context that's closer to what the information is trying to bring about. And if it doesn't, and it gets itself placed in another context, then you're in trouble. Then you're a hack. Nothing wrong in being a hack, it pays the bills and lots of people like doing it. Lots of people write hack novels, lots of people write hack screenplays; that's all fine and there's a public for it, but it's not what I want to be doing.

What do you think about interactive media?

What does it have to do with a movie? Interactive is a non-necessity unless the work itself demands interaction.

Well, the book demands interaction by the reader turning the pages.

Well, that's not interaction; that's curiosity. It keeps you keeping going. That's not a demand of interaction. I have to read like that, because I am compulsive and read to the end, but a lot of people understand where the book is going and stop when the going is good.

A book is something that is self-contained. It can be mass produced and placed around, and somehow or other when somebody comes upon it, he or she finds him/herself in a self-contained *mis-en-scene* that is self-relating to the material internally, not self-relating to the society externally. And without that, there is no reason for the book to exist.

That's the only game in town. There is no other game. Nobody has the time to go traveling around the world and making interpersonal relationships with anybody that might be interested. Even artists like Maria Nordmann find the book a necessity.

Yes! But her basic idea is interpersonal contact.

What I'm saying is when the book becomes self-referential, I try when I'm making a book that the place where I find myself at that moment denotes the way the book is made; you don't really know it's a Lawrence Weiner book until you pick it up and read it.

Then you have people who knock out book after book after book that looks the same.

I think it's questionable. Who am I to question it? Books are not supposed to be signatures. It doesn't justify the use of all

the resources that go into making a book—from the trees to the poison in the ink (there are no organic inks) and the glue.

What about the Internet?

It makes life more complicated because you have more conflicting information. I don't know. Everybody keeps going back to the late 60s; you try to figure this one out. Somebody in New York, somebody in Tokyo, somebody in Paris, somebody in Vancouver, somebody in Baffin Island and somebody in Toronto at the same moment find the same necessities in art to have a show like the Attitudes show. The N.E. Thing Company had a Telex, but no one had access to a Telex except him, so it wasn't that. So when you're looking at the times and say they're so different, perhaps they "ain't".

Perhaps books have changed radically in production, but in fact they are still the same self-contained *mis-en-scene*?

Our time now is not very much different from any other time. The 18th century, the 19th century, it's the old joke: How did the Russians, the Italians and the Americans invent the telephone at the same time - the radio? But they did.

As to the issue that demands critical inquiry, the most significant issue is Content. That's all there is: the content, not the form. I don't care if it has a spiral binding; I don't care if it's cut out; all I want to see is the content. And so does everybody else who buys a book or looks at a book. And because we have accepted this ghettoization of the artist book being taken out of the context of humanity, we are forced always in thinking in commercial terms. Most writers don't think only in commercial terms. Poets certainly don't. They publish books; you find them. Artists published books that could have been found if they had allowed themselves not to have to be self-protective. They build a tariff around their own production, and that tariff is what's bringing it down. It was not a necessity; it is only an economic necessity. For instance, for Melville only one book was a success. What about all the rest of them? Did he stop writing; did he stop printing? No.

