

umbrella

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ARTISTS' BOOKS: JAPAN

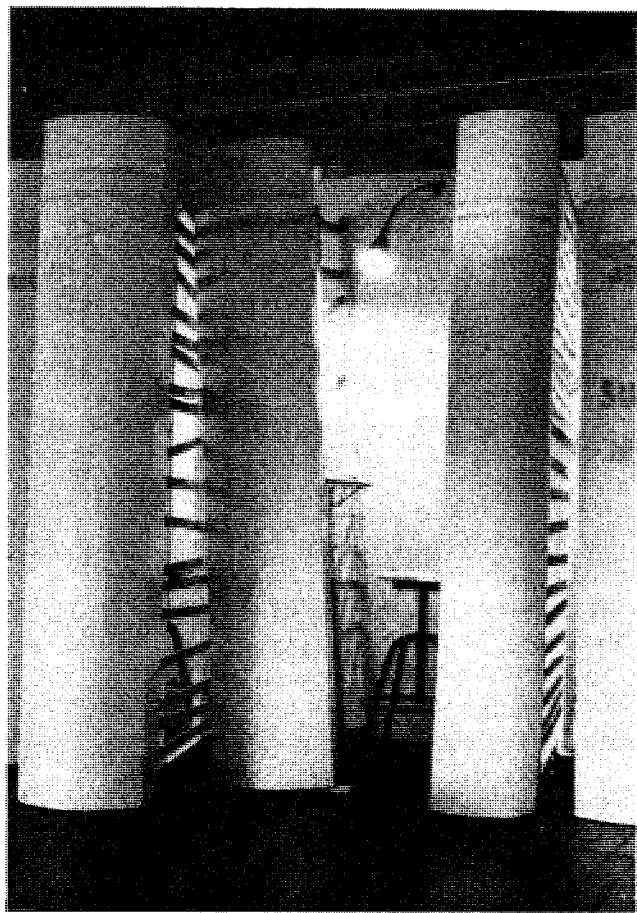
Kipling's proclamations notwithstanding, occasionally East and West do meet. They did so in the Franklin Furnace's recent ARTISTS' BOOKS: JAPAN exhibition from March 15 through April 20, and the encounter was memorable.

Featuring around 100 bookworks produced in the post-World War II period, the show was curated by Tokyo-based artist, teacher and critic Yoshiaki Tono. In the international capital of the art world, it provided a rare opportunity to examine up close some of the influences modern Japanese and American art have had on each other as well as continuing cross-currents in the two countries' popular cultures.

Usually more sculptural than literary, more playful than serious, whatever the artists packed between two covers in this show--when, in fact, their books had any covers at all--was probably not intended to be read as much as it was to be touched, caressed or merely contemplated by viewers. In many cases, physically, the starting point in making or appreciating these artists' books was more than idea of the book as a six-sided sculptural object than as a bound stack of paper (Katsuhiro Yamaguchi's mirror-covered tome "Liber-Liber," for example).

On the other hand, as Tono points out in his introductory notes, "Reading is not all that people do with books." Some artists represented here took the function of the book as their point of departure. Coming from a culture with along and rich tradition in printing and the graphic arts, they cooked up a wild batch of work which challenged ordinary concepts of what books can or should be

while tossing up some interesting design concepts of their own at the same time.



Installation view of giant, book-shaped reading booths designed by Tadashi Kawamata

PHOTO: Edward Gomez

Tono divided these works into several categories of book-as-art inventions. Along with other catalog-type volumes, "The Book as Documentation or Memory-holder" was represented by leading graphic artist Tadanori Yokoo's "Shoot Diary," a collection of per-

sonal photographs, and by several of his own original sketchbooks. Gempei Akasegawa's "Pictorial Cherry Blossoms, 1250 Agitated Days," a thick, illustration-filled volume reminiscent of manga (Japanese comics), also appeared in this group.

A paperback by Ryuichi Sakamoto, the popular leader of the rock group Yellow Magic Orchestra and soundtrack composer for Nagisa Oshima's film, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence," was included in the "Book of Skin" category. An illustrated compendium of imaginary titles, it contained his "Whole Catalogue of Unpublished Works from Honhondo," a proposed collection of outlandish book jackets which would never turn up in any bookstore. Some were actually constructed for this show. Genki Numata's "Metaphysics of No Smoking by Gyojin Karatani," for example, an over-sized, upside-down cardboard egg container, looked at first like a prop from a science fiction movie. On one cover side of this book, centered in a field of Japanese Kanji (written characters), a little plastic monkey sits Buddha-style in a tidy nest of wire; more than a dozen speedometer dials, intricately laced-up with string, decorate the other side. "Marcel Duchamp, or the Castle of Purity by Octavio Paz" consists mostly of green rubber-coated copper wire stuffed into a soft drink bottle. The wire "flows" out of the bottle's open mouth. At the wire's end, which extends out from a surrounding plastic funnel, some braided copper threads, slightly frayed, are exposed. Overall, this book by Jiro Takamatsu is a good exercise in the Duchampian nails-in-the-bottom-of-a-hand-iron mode.

Items such as Susumu Wakabayashi and Gozo Yoshimasu's locked-in-an-iron-box poetry anthology "Object-Book" (pictured in the exhibition catalog) are not even meant to be opened in the first place. And "The Book as Performance" completely subverts our normal book-to-reader relationship. The white nylon mesh pages of Sakumi

Hagiwara's "Wind" book probably "read" best hanging from a clothesline, blowing in a gentle breeze. His "Fade Out" as originally conceived, cannot really be read at all: the words written on its light-sensitive pages would vanish if the book were ever opened. (A more manageable, printed facsimile was also shown.) A rare copy of the original 1964, limited edition of Yoko Ono's FLUXUS performance manual "Grapefruit" was included here too. Its haiku-brief entries are instructions for various kinds of events and meditations. Other categories in Tono's taxonomy included "The Book as Concept" and "The Book as Picture Show" (illustration and photography-filled volumes).

These Japanese books were right at home at Franklin Furnace, which houses a repository of artists' books, mail art, performance art documentation and other "ephemera," which it has collected for the past nine years. Overall, the items included in this ARTISTS' BOOKS: JAPAN exhibition reflected the spirit of the international exchange of ideas between artists that blossomed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time when nationalistic boundaries in art were breaking down. Influenced by new technology and the communications potential of popular media such as film, magazines and television, artists, like politicians, began to think globally. Just as Japanese artists, well-grounded in their own burgeoning consumer culture, could relate to Pop Art's colorful canvases celebrating the everyday world of soup cans, comic book heroes and movie stars, their American counterparts were inspired by Japanese "art actions," which viewed art as a process in time as well as in space and greatly influenced the development of "happenings." This art-as-event flavor could still be detected in the "Book as Performance" works included here.

Finally, even as the whimsy of Pop gave way to the 1970s seriousness of Conceptualism, when typewritten des-

criptions of ideas for artworks replaced actual paintings on gallery walls, Japanese artists continued to fuse the new aesthetics with their own traditional approaches. "They combine seriousness and humor more than we do, and there's a certain light-handedness about what they do," Martha Wilson, director of the Furnace notes. "There is a lot of quiet humor in this show." This included, in its imaginative New York installation, Tadashi Kawamata's custom-designed book-reading booths: an upright row of giant book spines, each of which contained a stool, light, and built-in table.

"Despite the onrush of television and other media," Tono concludes in his exhibition notes, "we continue to reserve a special affection for the book, never letting it stray far from the grasp of our hand." In fact, these books often demanded to be held, and recognizing this, the show's designers thoughtfully provided a supply of book-protecting gloves for page-turning browsers.

A certain quality of thoroughness in the artists' craftsmanship was evident in a number of these works, the kind of clever and thoughtful planning one finds, for example, in Japanese kitchen equipment (they love gadgets) and industrial design. In essence, the conception and execution of these bookworks seem to share the same ideals, the result of which, as this collection displayed, was often an outpouring of remarkably creative energy.

The exhibition will be on view in Tokyo at Fuji Television's gallery from 24 May through the end of June.

--Edward Gomez

CONTRIBUTORS: TIMOTHY ELY is a consummate bookbinder and creator of extraordinary bookworks. EDWARD GOMEZ is a mail artist, a journalist and a student of Japanese culture, as we all are.

EDUCATION

FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY'S Fifth Annual Book Arts Seminar, 15-20 July including calligraphy, wood engraving, fine printing and hand binding. Write Renee Weber, F.D.U. Library, Special Collections, Madison, NJ 07940.

ICP offers Summersite 85 with Keith Smith teaching THE BOOK AS PHYSICAL OBJECT from 5 - 9 August. Write to International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Ave. at 94th St., NYC 10128.

OX BOW PAPER INTENSIVE 30 June - 20 July with Gary Frost, Ed Colker, Howard and Kathryn Clark, Walter Hamady, Hedi Kyle, Keith Smith and John Wood, among others as instructors. Write Ox Bow, P.O. Box 5809, Chicago, IL 60680.

BOOK ART/PAPERMAKING in Italy under Richard Johnson in Cortona, Italy. Write to Director, Studies Abroad, University of Georgia, Visual Arts Bldg., Athens, GA 30602.

Other courses being taught are CALLIGRAPHY AND THE TYPOGRAPHIC BOOK with Ken Williams at the University of Alabama College of Continuing Studies and the Institute for the Book Arts, 10-21 June 1985.

Visual Studies Workshop Summer Institute with Keith Smith, John Wood, Philip Zimmermann, Hedi Kyle and many more teaching workshops on various aspects of artists' books. Write to 31 Prince St., Rochester, NY 14607, (716)442-8676.

Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies presents a course IN THE BOOK TRADITION taught by Darryl Curran from 6 - 20 June.

Suzanne Horvitz, Claire Owen and Marilyn Rosenberg taught a workshop and seminar on ARTISTS' BOOKS & BOOKWORKS on 20 April 1985 at the PRATT GRAPHICS CENTER in New York City.

ARTISTS' BOOKS/OBJECT & SUBJECT was a mini-conference for Chicago area book artists on 18 May with Joan Lyons, Dennis Nawrocki, and Erica Van Horn

at Artists Book Works, 1422 W. Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60613.

A SLIDASET OF ARTISTS' BOOKS from the independent press archive is available from the Visual Studies Workshop, 31 Prince St., Rochester, NY 14607.

SERVICES

Robert Hadrill, New Pyramid Press, 99 Rotherhithe St., London SE16, England offers making handmade books and bookworks as limited editions of unique pieces, including letterpress printing, bookbinding in all aspects.

ARTISTS BOOK WORKS in Chicago offers workshops, lectures, classes and exhibitions. 1422 W. Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60613.

BOOKWORKS, No. 3 Arch Green Dragon Court, Borough Market, London S.E.1 promotes closer contact and collaboration between writers, artists, designers, typographers, printmakers, paper makers and bookbinders.

NEXUS PRESS has an Artist Book Residency. For information about 1986, write to Nexus Press, 608 Ralph McGill Blvd., N.E. Atlanta, GA 30312.

WOMEN'S STUDIO WORKSHOP, P.O. Box V, Rosendale, NY 12472 offers residencies for artists interested in making books. VISUAL STUDIES WORKSHOP also offers residencies to make books.

NEW OUTLETS

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK offers an exhibition space for bookworks in their quarters at 70 Twelfth St., SF, CA 94103. In addition, they take books on consignment for their book shop. Write to Jeanne C. Finley. They also review bookworks in their quarterly magazine SF CAMERAWORK.

CALIFIA BOOKS, 2266 Union St., San Francisco, CA 94123 sells limited editions, fine and rare books, as well as bookworks.

HAND-IN-HAND GALLERIES, 568 Broadway, New York, NY 10012 also carries limited edition and unique bookworks. Send slides or visit Lauren I. Lowenthal,

Director, Book Arts.

CÓMICOS, Espaço Inter-Media, Rua Tenente Raul Cascais (a S. Mamede) 1B, 1200 Lisboa, Portugal is a new outlet for new music, intermedia publications and periodicals for sale. Send current rates of subscription and/or special resale prices. This is a "first". It's non-profit.

NEW BOOKSHOP IN TEL AVIV. It will sell records, cassettes, new literature, and catalogues re: contemporary art, including books, exhibition catalogs, video, films, etc. Write to Tamar Berger at The 20th Century, an alternative bookshop, 5 Hagilboa St., Tel Aviv 65223, Israel.

ART PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

LOIS POLANSKY was featured in a detailed profile of her bookworks and her history in "The Metamorphosis of a Book" in the February 1985 issue of U & I, the international journal of typographics. Her bookworks can be seen at the Alexander Milliken Gallery in New York City and in various exhibitions of bookworks.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN has been teaching at UCLA during the Spring Quarter. Her book, ABC-WE PRINT ANYTHING-IN THE CARDS was recently given a long review in AFTERIMAGE. It is available along with her other books and critical essays from Documentext, McPherson & Company, P.O. Box 638, New Paltz, NY 12561.

PAUL ZELEVANSKY participated in a symposium on the Multi-Disciplinary Artist at SUNY Purchase in April, in a panel chaired by book artist Warren Lehrer.

SAS COLBY presented an illustrated talk, "Putting my Stamp on Artists' Books" on 3 April at the San Francisco Public Library for the Pacific Center for the Book Arts.

WARREN LEHRER is showing 60 pages from his latest bookwork, FRENCH FRIES, at the Print Gallery, Pieter Brattinga, in Amsterdam 6 May - 14 June.

AXEL HEIBEL is asking book artists who do unique and/or limited edition bookworks to send him photos of their book objects, a statement and description of their books, a resume for his ever-growing Book Archive. Write to