

The book as a work of art

I awoke on New Year's morning, 2005, with a surprisingly clear head and a determination to situate San Francisco's vibrant book arts scene squarely within the international context of contemporary art. I wanted to initiate a fine arts book fair and international symposium that would bring critical thinking, the high standards of fine printing, and the floribundant artist book into a single focus. Thus, the Codex Foundation was conceived.

For two years, Susan Filter and I traveled to Germany, Italy, England, and the eastern seaboard of the United States, attending symposia and book fairs, and visiting book artists whenever possible. At every opportunity we studied the layout, program, and sequence of fairs and conferences – all the while thinking of the Codex events that we were planning. We scheduled the events to coincide with the San Francisco International Antiquarian Book Fair, the largest antiquarian book fair in the world, to take advantage of potential synergies. I should point out that we were highly critical in our appraisal of the fairs and conferences we attended, and settled upon the idea of naming our conference a “symposium” (a “drinking party” in ancient Greek). The convivial nature of such a party would be the goal to which we aspired.

In Frankfurt, New York, London, Los Angeles, and Oxford we met artists from every continent and were deeply impressed by the diversity and seriousness of their work. To our great satisfaction, many of the most exciting and committed artists, printers, publishers, booksellers, and curators whom we approached expressed first an interest and then the intention to come to California. We knew immediately that we all would benefit from seeing each other under the benign winter skies of Berkeley, that friendships would be forged, and that eyes would be opened. The further we traveled and the more our plan developed, the more interest we encountered.

We soon began receiving generous donations of time and money from friendly and diverse sources. Due to these commitments, we knew we would encounter few financial difficulties, and we began the final steps to incorporate a new foundation, invite exhibitors to our book fair, and select a handful of informed speakers for our symposium.

Researching the field, we began building a reference collection of materials from previous book fairs, conferences, and colloquia – publisher's catalogues and monographs on artists and presses, and exhibition catalogues of artist books from outside

the English-speaking community. We were building a reference collection to help us create an inclusive global marketplace where intellectual and commercial interests would be equally served.

We planned two major events – a symposium and a book fair – that would be delicately balanced and perfectly synchronized with receptions, related exhibits, and parties. The symposium was designed to attract the intellectual, art-critical, and curatorial community, as well as the greater world of arts and letters; while the book fair would bring old and new collectors, students, artists, writers, and the curious public intrigued by the idea of a handmade book.

The events were designed to include time for artists and collectors to meet each other at parties and at related events across the San Francisco Bay – endeavoring to bring together socially the most important contributors to the continuing survival of the handmade artist book. Most importantly, we worked to insure the presence of buyers, collectors, curators, reviewers, and publishers to create a context where both books and ideas would be exchanged. We were determined to create a marketplace that would survive and repeat and grow with our own expectations and aspirations. The Codex events had to reflect back on us the beauty of the thought and energy that we put into our own books. No other plan would work.

By December of 2006, our labor was paying off – all available space in the book fair was booked. Susan and I had just returned from a two-and-a-half-month-long printing project in Venice, and along with the other directors, we threw ourselves headlong into Codex. We were now in the last stretch, and our crew of volunteers lined up for duty. By this time, the enormity of our project was more than clear; we had no time for looking back or second thoughts.

What had appeared in 2005 to be a small target way off in the future was now a series of planning meetings, fund-raising events, parties, exhibitions, dinners, book fairs, lunch meetings, lectures, symposia, and follow-up events. The entire enterprise was beginning to look like a “happening” from the 1960s or the beginning of a happening that verged on becoming a world-historical movement budding in hysterical California.

Fortunately it just looked that way for about two months. When it was all upon us and underway, it ran smoothly and efficiently from the opening reception all the way to the warm goodbyes and exhausted departures. Although we were not discovered by the mainstream media, and there were no Today Show or Oprah Winfrey interviews, we knew we had accomplished something.

The result, presented here in *book art object*, is not a curated exhibition but rather a focused record of many of the world’s most highly accomplished artists and writers who identify themselves professionally with the book form. Exhibitors from the book fair were invited to select a few of their books to be photographed, speakers from the symposium were asked to submit their papers or transcripts of their lectures, and correspondents were invited by editor David Jury to report on the state of the art from their perspectives.

The Codex exhibitors displayed an unprecedented wealth of high-definition work, both in terms of concept and craft, magnificently representing on a world-wide scale the state of the art, ranging from the classical to the bleeding edge. Unfortunately, due to the splendid abundance of work and limitations of page space, we can document only a small percentage of the best work exhibited.

To describe in detail all the different approaches to the *mise-en-page* exhibited at the Codex book fair and symposium would require an encyclopedic treatise, so great are the distances between the poles. There is, however, a profound similarity to be noted: we are in the presence of artists who have emerged from artistic, literary, and philosophical traditions deeply rooted in what a colleague refers to as the “word/image disciplines.” With a few brilliant exceptions in which no text in letterform appears, the vast majority of work exhibited a highly sophisticated collaborative fusion between text and image.

Beyond object and icon there is a more complex concept of the book: the book as a work of art.