

THE (R)EVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRATIC MULTIPLE

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From the early 1970s and into the early 1980s many artists were self-consciously producing or publishing artist's books that can be best described as democratic multiples: books published in an edition large enough to facilitate distribution to a wide (democratic) audience, and available at a cheap price. These democratic multiples were a part of the idealistic, populist zeitgeist of the 1970s, promoted by artists and paralleling the political and social transformations in the United States. Precursors of these democratic multiples included many conceptual and minimalist artist's books of the 1960s and early 1970s that were also sold at a cheap price and printed in large editions. However, these books were produced or printed by "galleries and art publishers" and they were not promoted or distributed to a wide audience beyond the art gallery system.¹ It wasn't until the early to mid-1970s when many artists and art activists worked intentionally to promote and distribute artist's books beyond the hegemony of the gallery system. In the early 1970s non-profit, often grant funded, print shops were established to print artist's books and/or train artists how to take control of their own printing and production. And by the mid-1970s alternative bookshops specializing in the sale of artist's books and magazines, were founded to help distribute democratic multiples to a wide audience. To this day the democratic multiple continues to be idealized by each successive generation of contemporary artists interested in the populist ideal embodied in (and institutionalized by) this subset of artist's books.

The first exhibitions to document important and early conceptual and minimalist artist's books, the predecessors of the democratic multiple, were held in the early 1970s. Germano Celant wrote an essay titled *Book as Artwork 1960/72* to accompany an exhibition at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery in London, and *Artists Books* curated by Diane Vanderlip in 1973 at the Moore College of Art Gallery in Philadelphia.^{2&3} The Moore College exhibition is widely credited with first using the term 'artists books' to accurately describe artist's publications from the previous decade. In his essay, Celant discusses the transition from hands-on creation of an artwork to the effects of technological

production (such as offset printing artist's books in large editions), which allowed them to remain conceptually linked to the finished product.⁴ Celant's essay succinctly captured this nascent and pivotal moment relevant to the production of artist's books as a new genre of contemporary art.

In 1974 the Center for Book Arts was founded in New York City, the first such organization in the United States. The Center was established "to facilitate communication between the book arts community and the larger spheres of contemporary art and literature through exhibitions, classes, public programming, literary presentations, opportunities for artists and writers, publications, and collecting."⁵ The Center embraced all manner and types of book arts, from book objects, to letterpress, to democratic multiples, and various other modes of artist's publishing. Almost a decade after Celant and Vanderlip recognized and identified artist's books from the 1960s, the Center hosted two important exhibitions that included examples of democratic multiples from the 1970s. The first was "Britain Salutes New York: contemporary artist's books from Great Britain," April 14, 1982-May 31, 1982. This exhibition included *Chinese Whispers* by Helen Douglas and Telfer Stokes, *Family* by Victor Burgin, and *Three Photoquizzes* by Maureen O. Paley, among many other examples of democratic multiples.⁶ The second exhibition was curated by Clive Phillpot, the library director at the Museum of Modern Art, titled "Collaborations," June 1, 1982-June 30, 1982. Phillpot focused on books created through collaborations of two or more artists.⁷ Examples included *Chinese Whispers*, as noted above, *Hard Light* by Edward Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner, and *Happy Days* by Augusto Concato and Vito Boggeri, among other similar artist's books. These two exhibitions intentionally drew attention to books utilizing the publishing and production methods most frequently associated with democratic multiples.

Many artists who began producing artist's books during the 60s were influenced by or active participants in one or more of the following: Fluxus, Japanese photography, performance art, happenings, conceptual art, minimalism, concrete poetry,

photography and pop art. Early artist bookmakers of the 60s were primarily minimal and conceptual artists interested in getting art off the wall, out of the gallery, and into the hands of a wide audience, and artist's books were the perfect medium for this type of contemporary art production. Artist's books from the 60s eschewed the aura of preciousness by using mass production technologies such as offset printing and commercial book production.

Few people stop to consider how these artist publications arrived on the open market prior to the early 1970s. "Many of the early artists' books were published by galleries or art publishers" who could afford to underwrite the upfront publication costs of these little books.⁸ Lucy Lippard has also noted that "dealers used them as freebies – bait to draw in collectors to buy the big stuff."¹⁰ Yet, the core element that is essentially invisible or never fully understood is that the printing and production costs for (so-called) democratic multiples were actually quite expensive. Up front, high production costs for plates, ink, labor, film, layout, and editing meant that artists needed funding to support the creation of a hundred or more small books that could be sold cheaply. For example, in the 1970s it cost \$150 for one set of 4-color 8"x10" separations.¹⁰ One of the myths of early artist's books is that they flourished beyond the hegemony of the gallery system. However, it seems that the artists with the most notoriety and success at selling their books in the 60s through the early 1970s benefitted from their gallery connections and support, not from the lack of them. "Artist James Collins commented on this fact in 1973 when he observed, "One tenable common denominator among [artists'] books... is that they've been cosseted by the art system."¹¹ Democratic multiples were intentionally promoted and distributed in part as a reaction to the artist's books of the 60s that were still seen as part of the gallery system.

One of the most prolific artists to produce artist's books in the 60s was Ed Ruscha who published seven titles between 1963 and 1969. His second book, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, published in 1964, included banal duo-tone photographs of small fires, from a gas burner to a lit match to a charcoal grill, etc., with a black and white photographic image on the last page of a glass of milk. This book did not include captions for the images, nor a colophon or any other descriptive text. Several years later this book was parodied by BRUCE NAUMAN who published a foldout poster that opened out from a stiff paper cover with the title offset printed in red: *Burning Various Small Fires*, published in 1968 (Plate 67). Nauman removed and burned each page from Ruscha's book of small fires, photographing each burning page. Nauman published a foldout poster composed of a grid of fifteen black and white photographic reproductions documenting each burning page.

It wasn't until the early 1970s that alternative models for underwriting the production and distribution of artist's books were created. This

enabled many artists to have their artists' books published and distributed outside of the dominant art world gallery system. These developments nurtured the belief in an idealized system of wide access, further promoting the concept of the democratic multiple. At this time many non-profit or institutional or artist cooperatives, often heavily subsidized by federal, state and/or local grants, provided opportunities for many artists' to create and publish democratic multiples. Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grants, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants, and State agencies helped many art centers get started altogether or get started publishing artist's books by supporting staffing costs and funding for the purchase of spaces and equipment.¹² Educational institutions and non-profit artist cooperatives formed to help defray costs associated with and assist with production and distribution of these new democratic multiples. Such organizations included: Cal Arts in Los Angeles (1970), the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1972), Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia (1972), The Visual Studies Workshop Press (1972), The Woman's Building in Los Angeles (1973), the Visual Language Workshop press at MIT in Boston (1973), California State at Northridge (1975), and Nexus Press in Atlanta (1976).

In 1972 Clifford Burke published *Printing It*, a book that discussed and detailed how to run a small press shop and/or to take printing and production into one's own hands. Whether artists used typewriters, photocopiers and staplers, or learned how to run an offset press, those without gallery connections or the opportunities and access to non-profit print shops and distribution networks could still make their own artist's books with the notion of selling and distributing them cheaply to a wide (democratic) audience. Of course, 'to a wide audience' presupposes that democratic multiples were interesting enough for the general public to enjoy and purchase. Lucy Lippard has noted that many artist's books were "accessible in terms of form, but not content."¹³ A poignant observation that many (and perhaps most) artist books were too esoteric for anyone other than a specialized collector, a curator, art student, occasional curious members of the public, and/or a librarian, to understand or enjoy. Though ideally created for a broad public and available cheaply, democratic multiples failed to gain market penetration often due to poor quality control issues such as improper bindings, poor printing and/or amateur design.

A critical challenge for artists who produced democratic multiples was the naive belief that these books could be sold at any bookstore or shop. Democratic multiples were books after all, therefore they could be offered for sale practically anywhere. This notion was supported by Lucy Lippard's infamous quote from the mid-1970s... "The fantasy is an artist's book at every supermarket checkout counter, or peddled on Fourteenth Street..."¹⁴ However, by their very nature as creative books by artists, these artists' books often lacked standardized

FIG A. Tony Rickaby
Oeuvre, 1975
Staple bound, offset printed book with pink glossy paper covers
3.6 x 5.8 inches
FA.B13.0183



features such as bar codes and dust jackets, standard sizes, and shapes that most book retailers were familiar with.

Numerous alternative shops selling artist's books have opened and closed since the 1970s. Two of the three most recognized such shops continue to be open for business: Art Metropole in Toronto and Printed Matter in New York City. In 1974 Art Metropole was founded by the Canadian artists collective General Idea as a non-profit artist-run archive and distribution agency for artists' publications and other materials.¹⁵ A year later the non-profit contemporary arts organization, the Washington Project for the Arts in Washington, D.C., was founded and included a bookshop in which artist's books were available for sale.¹⁶ Unfortunately the bookshop closed in 1995. Just a year after the WPA was established, Printed Matter was "[f]ounded as a for-profit alternative arts space in 1976 by artists and artworkers[.] Printed Matter reincorporated in 1978 to become the independent non-profit organization that it is today."¹⁷ Printed Matter helped to institutionalize the democratic multiple by requiring that all artists' books available for sale be printed in editions of 100 or more. This requirement, which the bookstore continues to enforce today, has helped to perpetuate the myth of the democratic multiple as available to a wide audience.

Selected examples of democratic multiples

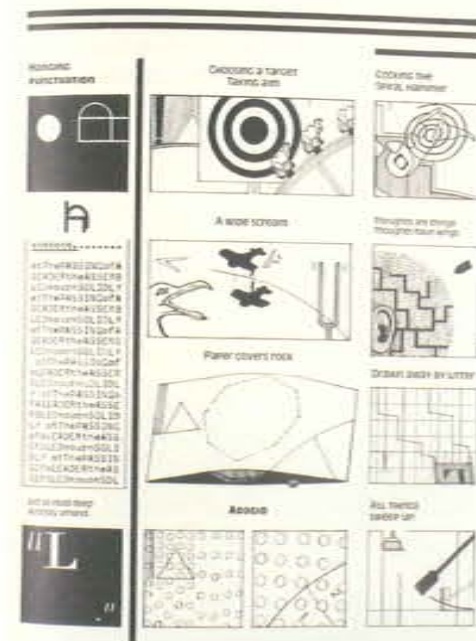


FIG B. Paul Zelevansky
The Book of Takes, 1976
Case bound book with black hide textured cover and tipped in abstract offset illustration
11.2 x 8.8 inches
FA.SA4.0243

printed and produced starting in the early 1970s included a wide variety of artist publications, some professionally printed in commercial job shops, while others were printed by artists with little training or who were self taught. What was essential about this second generation of contemporary artist's books was that many artists quickly realized that they had "total control over the end product" and could experiment and express themselves in "direct communication to a potential audience not mediated by critics, art historians, or other guardians of official culture."¹⁸ Unlike the artist's books published in the 60s, democratic multiples produced from the early 1970s to the early 80s were tremendously diverse in form and content. In 1972 SUZANNE LACY published *Rape Is*, with a second printing in 1976 (Plate 43). This small white book has a wrap around gate fold cover held in place with a one-inch circular deep-red sticker imprinted with the word 'Rape' to fasten the cover closed. To open the book the reader was forced to rip the sticker in half to gain access to the book's interior. Interior page spreads followed the following format: each verso page includes "RAPE IS" centered on the page, and on the recto of each adjoining page is a short snippet of text, for example "when your boyfriend hears your best friend was raped and he asks "what was she wearing?"¹⁹ On Lacy's website she notes that this is an artist's "book parodying the *Happiness* is... books [which were popular at that time] by revealing an escalating narrative of incidents that support, justify, and mythologize rape."²⁰ In 1975 Cynthia Marsh printed *Sporting Life* and Michael Beckett printed *Space Capsule*, and TONY RICKABY published *Oeuvre* (Fig. A). Also in 1975 Joan Lyons published *Bride Book: Red to Green*, in which she explores color and tonal possibilities of ink on paper, and the creative potential and 'narrative' of a static image. In 1976 Susan King printed *Letters* in an offset lithography class taught by Cynthia Marsh at the Women's Graphic Center in Los Angeles. And in 1976 Conrad Gleber printed *Raising a Family*, Peter Gainsborough published *Pointless Arrows*, Rachel Youdelman printed *Fresh Sea Bass From the Blue Pacific*, John Baldessari published *Brutus Killed Caesar*, and PAUL ZELEVANSKY published *The Book of Takes* (Fig. B). Zelevansky notes in the preface of that this book "...is a chapter of a larger work called Jericho. It is a book within a book..."²¹ This same year Michael Goodman printed *July 23. 24. 25. 26.* on the first offset press at the newly founded Nexus Photography Cooperative which later to become Nexus Press.²² Another important book published in 1976 included *Chinese Whispers* by HELEN DOUGLAS

AND TELFER STOKES (Fig. C). The book is in the format and size of a pulp novel, however the interior pages are all full-bleed black-and-white photo-images. On the Printed Matter website the following description is included for the book: "A hedge has to be cut and cleared before an entrance through a door can be made. Before the camera can get in, a flock of geese disappear into the gaping void of the open door. Inside, the set is slowly constructed for the action to take place."²³ The artists note that "[i]n Chinese Whispers a corner cupboard is constructed to the proportions of the open book to become both represented and literal space of the opening. Within this space words and phrases are given object status as the means of integrating text and image and developing the narrative thread."²⁴ In 1977 Alex Sweetman published *Survivors* at Chicago Books (operated by Conrad Gleber, Gail Rubini, and Jim Snitzer).²⁵ Except for the title page the contents only include sixty-one tight-cropped, close-up images of women's faces seeming to be enlargements from newspaper photographs. As with many democratic multiples following the style of Ed Ruscha's little artist's books, the images are seemingly banal, amateurish, lacking a specific narrative and without captions or a descriptive text. Also in 1977, VICTOR BURGIN published *Family* (Fig. D). The layout and design of this small book mimics a children's alphabet book. Burgin includes reproductions of black and white photographs with accompanying short texts that describe the deterioration of family life. In 1978 MARTHA ROSLER published *SERVICE: A trilogy on colonization* (Plate 87). This book was printed offset in an edition of 1000. The book includes three short stories about food; the narrative of the third story is in both English and Spanish. Originally the content of the book was conceived as a mail art project in which the stories were sent out in postcard format. Also, in 1978 AUGUSTO CONCATO AND VITO BOGGERI published *Happy Days* (Fig. E), in Italy, and ED RUSCHA AND LAWRENCE WEINER published *Hard Light* (Plate 92). *Hard Light* is a photo-narrative that documents conversations with

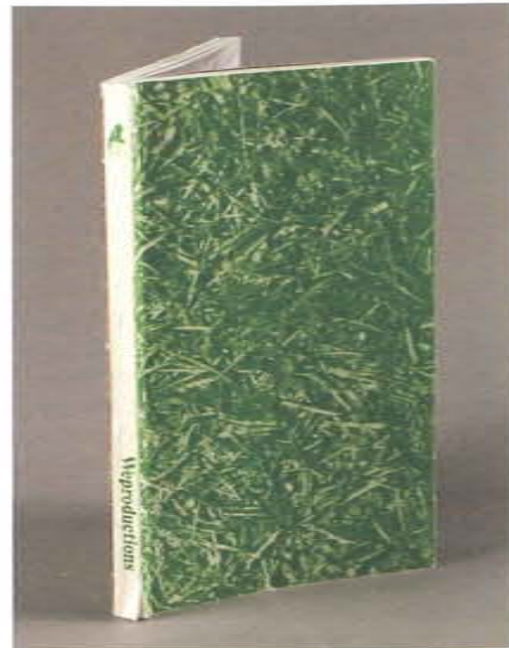


FIG C. Helen Douglas; Telfer Stokes
Chinese Whispers, 1976
Perfect bound book, full bleed illustrated on front and back covers, offset photographic halftone images
7 x 4.3 inches
FA.B23.0023

three women. The narratives are presented in nine chapters, each in a different setting. The only text, other than chapter headings, is in chapter eight: "IN THE YEAR 2000 ALL RACE CAR DRIVING WILL BE TAKEN OVER BY WOMEN."²⁶ And through the late 1970s Miles DeCoster and Rebecca Michaels published an occasional publication ARGOT. In the spirit of the ideal democratic multiple available to a wide audience they would randomly select names and addresses from the Chicago phone book and mail their publications to an unsuspecting public. By the late 1970s the democratic multiple had become institutionalized.

In 1980, just eight years after Burke published *Printing It*, Philip Zimmermann printed his MFA thesis in book form, *Options for Color Separation*, as a manual and guide for other artists who wanted to print their own artist's books using color offset printing techniques. This book helped promote the myth of the democratic multiple by further

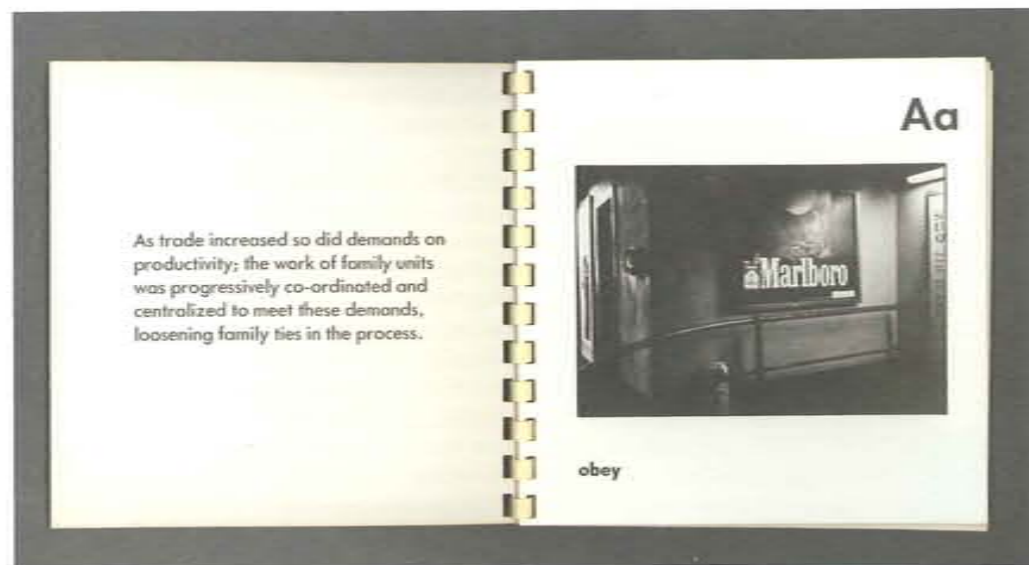


FIG D. Victor Burgin
Family, 1977
Spiral bound, black and white offset printed book
6 x 6.1 inches
FA.B4.0034



FIG E. Augusto Concato; Vito Boggeri
Happy Days, 1978
Pamphlet bound with stapled binding; color and black and white offset printed
6.7 x 9.4 inches
FA.B55.0781

empowering artists to print multiple copies of their books for sale. Artists such as Sally Alatalo and Laurel Beckman both note that they often used Zimmermann's book as an instruction manual – each learned to operate an offset press to create their own artist's books. The opportunity to create democratic multiples at home or in one's studio further intensified the notion that one's artist's books could be made available to a wide audience. From the late 1970s to early 80s artist's were energized by greater access to printing facilities and a seemingly wide network of alternative book shops and distribution networks for selling these artist's books: thus was the era of the democratic multiple.

Beginning in the 1980s the harsh reality of the Regan presidency had a negative impact on arts organizations and opportunities for artists. "In the early 80s... the confluence of various strands of artistic activity marked an abrupt shift in values from the previous decade..."²⁷ This abrupt shift ended the period of populist idealism that buoyed the belief in artist's books as democratic multiples. And yet the ideal or the myth of the democratic multiple persisted and many artist's found opportunities, whether with non-profit print shops or by printing and producing artist's books on their own, to distribute their books. Examples of books printed at this time included Gail Rubini's *Forever Yours* printed in 1980, in which she experimented with ink selection during the printing process. Using a four-color plate set she used red ink on the magenta plate and red ink on the cyan plate. She also experimented with over and under inking to further experiment with the printing production. The narrative of this little book includes images and text that comment on domestic relationships.²⁸ Also in 1980 KEITH SMITH published *When I Was Two* (Fig. F), MAUREEN O. PALEY published *Three Photoquizzes*, in London (Fig. G), and SUSAN WEIL published *Bird Songs Heartbeat*, in Sweden (Fig. H). In 1981 BART PARKER published *A Close Brush With Reality* (Fig. I), and LINN UNDERHILL published *Thirty Five Years / One Week* (Fig. J). In 1982 Rebecca Michaels published *A Book of Hair*. In 1984 Patty Carroll publishes *Double Message*. In 1985 Scott McCarney published *Safety in Numbers*, and NANCY HOLT published *Time Outs* (Fig. K). In 1987 ANN FESSLER published *First Aid for the Wounded* (Plate 26). The

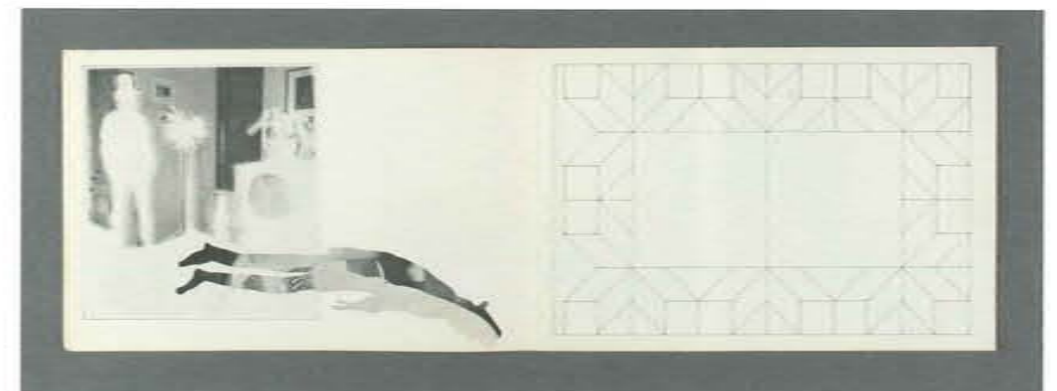


FIG F. Keith Smith
When I Was Two, 1980
Black and white offset printed
7 3/4 x 12 inches
FA.B16.0241

book uses "illustrations of life-saving techniques from the 1950s to tell a story about a man who marries a woman in order to disguise and repress his homosexuality."²⁹ The production of artist's books continued at a rapid pace during the 80s despite the chilling political and economic climate.

In the mid 80s the rapid development of computer technologies had a profound if not revolutionary impact on the design and production of artist's books. In 1985 Apple began offering the first WYSIWYG layout software program: *MacPublisher*.³⁰ And in this same year the *LaserWriter* printer became available on the consumer market.³¹ The opportunity for individual artists to have desktop publishing opportunities at home or in the studio created "... the possibility that anyone [could] make a book, anyone [could] lay it out and have it printed in editions of limitless size. Thanks to the liberating potentials of desktop publishing..."³² This development was revolutionary and transformative in relation to print production and publishing of artist's books. For example not only could artist's layout and design their book pages on the computer screen, they could also utilize various type fonts within their document. Prior to desktop publishing artists who did not have access to typesetting equipment could only create text with a typewriter, or by hand. From the mid-80s through the 90s, increased access to desktop publishing technologies accelerated the evolutionary transition away from the ideal of the democratic multiple. At the same time more and more artists were publishing their own artist's books, zines, and related publications. Though the production of artist's books was becoming much more democratic, and many more people had access to these artist's books, this new 'artist's publishing' paradigm was broader in scope and reach globally than simply the 'democratic multiple' as institutionalized in the 1970s. Diverse examples of artist's publishing that leverages the concept or the ideal of the democratic multiple include [*Collection of Books*] by FA POONVORALAK printed in Bangkok in 1990 (Plate 79), *Additional Survival-Coupons* by Dragan Protic and Dorde Balmazovic, members of the artist cooperative SKART in Belgrade (Plate 99), and *How Books Work* (Plate 14) by JULIE CHEN AND CLIFTON MEADOR published in 2010.