Action/Interaction: Book/Arts

The Center for Book and Paper Arts
Columbia College Chicago
June 8–10, 2007

REBECCA CHAMLEE
otis faculty development grant recipient
This conference was organized by an enthusiastic group of alumni, faculty, staff, and current graduate students. The process of planning this conference was remarkably engaging: It has provided us an opportunity to think about critical issues in our areas of interest (and we have a very diverse range of interests) and to examine how we can create experiences to explore these interests. Our planning meetings, in addition to encouraging us to examine our beliefs about book arts, created a sense of community and it is our hope that the conference itself will extend and expand that community.

“We are committed to promoting critical discourse in books arts: we think it is essential that we examine what we do as artists. In order to make work that is exciting, provocative, and serious we need to examine our methods, wonder about our audience, and define our goals. We are interested in the creative exploration of the intersection of book arts, artists books, poetry, installation, experimental literature, and other book-related creative endeavours. We hope this conference will provide a forum for furthering our goal of expanding the field of book arts in these directions.”

Organized by The Center for Book and Paper Arts at Columbia College Chicago
June 8, 2007

**SEEING CHICAGO**

Barbara and I arrived in Chicago the day before the conference in the late afternoon and by the time we made it to the Tremont Hotel we had little time left in the day to do much more than have dinner and take a short walk around the neighborhood.

Friday we decided to walk the mile or so from our hotel to the Center down Michigan Avenue. The weather was perfect. We especially enjoyed Millennium Park with the Frank Gehry designed performance center, the Art Institute of Chicago, its library, the water sculptures and the “bean.”

The Crown Fountain is two 50-foot glass block towers at each end of a shallow reflecting pool. The towers project video images of 1,000 Chicago citizens.
The Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection

At the John M. Flaxman Library, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

We had the incredible good luck to run into Judith Hoffberg while searching for the Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection. Judith is a librarian, archivist, lecturer, curator and art writer, and the editor and publisher of Umbrella, a newsletter on artists’ books. There could not be a more perfect person to visit the collection and introduce us to Doro Boehme, Special Collections Librarian. Details — the content, form and construction and back story about the artists — that Judith knows about so many of the books we saw was stunning.

A broad range of work was out on the tables that we were able to handle and look through. All items in the library may be viewed but only in the study room as the entire collection is non-circulating. Doro accommodates visits by the Institute’s classes and tailors the books set out to suit them.

The collection is nicely organized and accessible—treating each book with care in archival hanging folders and flat files yet not treating them so preciously that they can’t be out on the tables and available for readers.
One of my favorite activities of the weekend was Friday night’s presentation by the Editions Class. Three graduate students, Jill Lanza, Joseph Lappie and Liz Wolf, talked about the process of making an artists’ book edition. The year-long course is part of the MFA Interdisciplinary Book & Paper Art program at the Columbia College Chicago. Each student created original stories and drawings, made the paper by hand, printed and bound the books of a limited edition.


I was awed by the level of craft and skill needed to produce such exquisite books and impressed with the program at Columbia that can provide these students with the space, time and instruction to accomplish work of such depth.
On Friday night at the exhibition reception I turned when someone called my name and was completely surprised to see my best bud Cindy Marsh. Having no idea that she was even attending I was estatic. She rounded out our West Coast gang with me, Judith Hoffberg, Barbara, and Linda Dare.

Cindy is the former chair of Com Arts at Otis and current faculty of the Department of Art at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. She tirelessly dreams up projects to involve her students in helping develop the verbal, written and visual communication skills of the general public using letterpress and the wood type of the collection.

**GRANTS & FUNDED PROJECTS**
- **Tell Me A Story**
- **The Freedom Quilts**
- **ABIDE**
- **The First Amendment**
- **Culture Clash**
- **Words of War**
- **I AM...**
- **WASSUP ? ?**
- **What on Earth?**
- **LISTEN-UP ! !**

**TELL ME A STORY, 1998,** was a creative writing and poster-making project designed to uncover common experiences between generations of Clarksvillians. Senior citizens and local fifth and sixth graders were invited to create broadsides to describe memorable moments spent with somebody from a different generation. Rebecca went to Clarksville to help the participants set and lay out the wood type and print the posters.

**WORDS OF WAR, 2003,** resulted in a portfolio of broadsides that addressed individual concerns and attitudes about war. Clarksville is a city largely defined by military conflict because of its relationship to the nearby Fort Campbell Army post. Fifteen individuals — college students, teachers, veterans, teenagers, army wives, senior citizens — met to discuss and write about war.
Action/Interaction: Book/Arts Exhibition

The Action/Interaction: Book/Arts Exhibition was an invitational, juried exhibition which showcased work from book arts programs and centers around the country to provide a survey of the current activity in the field and to highlight the different characteristics, missions, and philosophies of various programs and centers. The goal of the exhibition was to allow access to the work so special reading stands and stools were provided to encourage the handling of many of the books. Wet wipes were available so everyone had nice, clean hands.

As soon as we walked into the biggest exhibition room, we saw the wonderful and colorful poster that Berton Hasebe did for his senior project in 2005 working with a hand press and silk screening. On the same wall was a series of themed posters done in the Book arts class. Current students and new graduates from Communication Arts had posters and small edition books in the show. We saw work by Scott Benoit (East Bay Lurks), Mimi Chong (Fresh & Fruity. 1.2.3), Cheryl Humphreys (Things to Think About), Christina Lundstrom (Fire) and Vanessa Waltz (I Am Vanessa’s Spine). There were also works by graduates Tracy Larson, Yuko Sawamoto, Adrian Symcox, Jessica Raddatz and Ryan Franks.

Barbara couldn’t help thinking that all the grads in the show are now in amazing jobs, and that the Typographic Book arts class and the Otis Lab Press gave them a place to be innovative and conceptual like no other place at Otis!
AUDREY NIFFENEGGER
Audrey Niffenegger is the best-selling author of The Time Traveller’s Wife and a faculty member at the Columbia College Chicago MFA in Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts. She teaches writing to visual artists, merging and combining text and images, by means of artist’s books, comics and installations. She also teaches letterpress printing, lithography, intaglio, fine edition book making, a seminar on visual narrative and the occasional drawing class.

Audrey gave the opening night talk on Friday. She spoke of her own work, primarily visual novels, drawings and paintings, photographs and collages. She loves the intimacy, the obscurity, and the quality of the line in printmaking. She said that her own work tends to be narrative, figurative and strange but, sadly, brought no slides with her. Her talk was personal and quite entertaining.

MARSHALL WEBER
Artist, curator and cofounder of the Booklyn Artists’ Alliance, Marshall promotes the expansion of the books arts through the exhibition, publication and sale of artist’s books.

Marshall’s keynote address on Saturday morning was something like a cross between a poetry reading, rock performance and call for revolution. It didn’t, disappointingly, have much at all to do with book arts. My take on the talk was that it was not relevant to the purpose of the conference and that he was trying very hard to be controversial. His performance and presentation just seemed sort of dated.
Book artist, visual poet and critic Johanna Drucker is currently the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. She discussed and showed slides of her most recent books and talked frankly and poetically about her process.

Damaged Spring: Pink Noir was a reaction to the horror of the onset of war and the devastating snow in Charlottesville in the spring of 2003. The images, based on newspaper images, are raw, aggressive and emotional. These are not illustrations of the text but what Johanna calls “image text”—text unto themselves. She began the book by making the images and then wrote the text. The design of the book is based on the codex or manuscript and its tradition but each line is shifted to give the pages a sense of disturbance.

Testament of Women was letterpress printed in 2005–06 at the Virginia Arts of the Book Center in Charlottesville. Johanna wanted to make a big work that would hopefully demonstrate to a community of younger printers what it meant to take on a project that would require over a year to see through to fruition. Testament of Women retells the tales of women in the old testament. The elements for each story are an image of a woman that is both traditional and contemporary who is based on someone Johanna actually knows. There is an excerpt from scripture, a retelling of the tale, the lessons that are to be taken from it and a description of the real woman. The book addresses the legacy that women are responsible for the fall of the human race.

During the Q & A period that followed the talk, Johanna answered a woman’s question about her practice as an artist with a busy life and the constraints of a time schedule. She writes every thing down and keeps extensive file folders filled with ideas. She makes clear spaces of time to think and conceptualize but feels that production can be accomplished anytime even with interruptions. This simple advice makes sense to me and is one of the beneficial things I got from the conference.
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**SESSIONS**

**SATURDAY 11:15 – 12:00**

**1A: SHAPING A NEW CRITICAL DISCOURSE FOR THE FIELD**
Mary Tasillo of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia led a discussion about forging a new type of critical discourse which incorporates creative formats, disparate perspectives and the wide variety of media that are pertinent to the book arts.

**SATURDAY 1:30 – 2:15**

**2B: ARTISTS’ BOOKS AND MAINSTREAM PUBLICATION**
Jen Blair, Columbia College Chicago, led the session about this desirability for book artists to pursue mainstream publication. Many in the room felt that the mainstream means less value and that limited editions is more precious. Print-on-demand services and vanity presses like LuLu, zines and graphic novels were explored. Using the web to sell and inform, marketing strategies such as donating to collections as advertising were among the suggestions.

**SATURDAY 11:15 – 12:00**

**1B: EXHIBITING ARTISTS’ BOOKS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**
Judith Hoffberg from Umbrella Online led a lively discussion about how and where artists’ books should be exhibited. Whether shown in museums, libraries or galleries how can we get people from different disciplines to see the book not just as a nostalgic artifact?

**SUNDAY 11:00 – 11:45**

**GRAPHIC DESIGN AND THE BOOK ARTS**
Crossover between graphic design and the book arts was the subject of this session. Karen White from the University of Arizona asked us to go around the circle introducing ourselves and our institutional affiliation. The discussion that evolved was more about the ways we try, in our programs, to encourage the overlap in the practice of graphic design and the book arts.

**SUNDAY 11:00 – 11:45**

**ARTISTS’ BOOKS AND CONTEMPORARY ART**
The women from Tango Book Arts, Karen Murken, Katie Baldwin & Lindsey Mears, that we met at the Flasch Collection discussed how the four characteristics of books: visual language, interactivity, containment, and temporality, help to situate book arts within the greater realm of contemporary art.
The Columbia College Chicago Center for Book & Paper Arts is one of the largest and most comprehensive book arts facilities in the country. The center occupies the entire second floor of the building and provides facilities and studios for MFA in Book & Paper students. It consists of a papermaking studio, a letterpress facility, a bookbindery, a gallery, classrooms and studio space.

The bindery is equipped with board shears, sewing frames, book presses, a guillotine and a gold stamping arming press.

The pressroom is huge, beautifully equipped, filled with light and well ventilated. Sigh...