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A defining decade: Australian artists' books in the 1970s

The Bandaged Image: A Study of Australian Artists' Books is a modest 88-page publication, written by the author, poet and art critic, Gary Catalano, published in 1983.¹ It was, at the time, the first contemporary account of Australian artists' books, and remained the only title on the subject for nearly three decades.² One of the major achievements of Catalano's study was the identification of a 'list' of practitioners, including Ian Burn, Aleks Danko, Robert Jacks, Tim Johnson, Peter Lyssiotis, Mike Parr, Robert Rooney, Noel Sheridan and Imants Tillers, who subsequently became well-known exponents of the art form in Australia. Today, Catalano's study has passed from being a contemporary account to a historical document, which presents an opportunity to reread *The Bandaged Image* as providing a point of departure for new research into Australian artists' books in the 1970s. What is evident is the significance and influence of Conceptual art and 'post-object' practice during this decade in establishing the theoretical and material foundations for a field of Australian artists' books.

The international context and global conceptualism

Catalano's study began with reference to the international context, noting the importance of the American Pop artist Ed Ruscha's perplexing little publication *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), and acknowledging that

Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Alhambra, California, Cunningham Press, 1963 (1969 printing) ©Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

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most of the Australian artists' books in his account 'share Ruscha's lack of concern for the book as *crafted* object. In this respect ... they are vehicles for ideas, not monuments to craft'.³ It is worth noting that Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was not an instant critical or commercial success, with one respected art critic suggesting it was 'doomed to oblivion'.⁴ Today, however, it is a title that bears the weight of the history of international artists' books,⁵ or more correctly a particular variant, the 'multiple bookwork', which was at the 'epicentre' of the expansion of artists' books in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ Historical precedents for the multiple bookwork are often drawn with early 20th-century avant-garde Russian Constructivist and Futurist publications, while comparisons are sometimes made with the contemporary phenomenon of self-published zines.

During the 1960s and 1970s, books by artists, encompassing multiple and editioned works, unique copies and xeroxed booklets became a part of the so-called 'dematerialization of the art object'.⁷ While in 1973, an exhibition entitled *Artists Books* was held in North America, which led to the term 'artists' books' being used to delineate a new field of artistic practice.⁸ During the 1960s and 1970s, key supporters lauded artists' books as providing an 'alternative space' or 'portable exhibition', and as a 'democratic' art form.⁹ While Ed Ruscha may have epitomised the 'artist-as-publisher', the legendary New York art dealer Seth Siegelauab was one of the masterminds behind Conceptual art in the late 1960s, and the instigator of several innovative Conceptual art publications, including *The Xerox Book* (1968) and Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* (1968), which opened up the field of artists' books.¹⁰ Conceptual art provided the impetus for a number of the so-called 'art world champions of the offset multiple', including Ruscha, Weiner, John Baldessari and Sol LeWitt.

In the 1960s and 1970s, artists' books jostled for recognition alongside a range of other art forms and movements, including Conceptual art, environmental works, installation and performance art, photography, film and video. While North America and, more specifically, New York, may have played a disproportionate role in the emergence of Conceptual art and artists' books, during the last two decades there has been greater recognition of localised or regional manifestations of conceptual practices as a more expansive and enduring inter-connected 'global conceptualism'.¹¹ This is the case with Australian Conceptual and 'post-object' artists' books, where there are both identifiable connections and parallels between international and Australian practice, and conversely, unique local variations and distinctive strategies employed in Australian artists' books.



Ted Hopkins, *The Book of Slab*, Prahran, Victoria, Champion Books, 1983

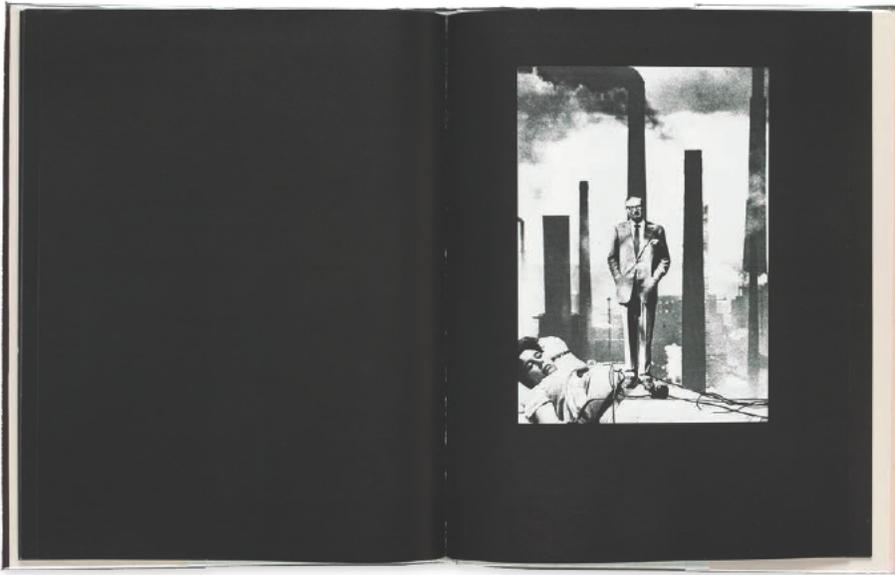
Australian artists abroad and at home

While London was the destination of choice for a cohort of Antipodean artists in the early 1960s, by the late 1960s, New York presented an alluring alternative, attracting modernist sculptor Clement Meadmore, art dealer Max Hutchinson, abstract painters Sydney Ball and Robert Jacks, as well as Minimal-conceptualist Ian Burn.

Burn's arrival in New York coincided with the ferment of Conceptual art, which eventually led to his involvement with Anglo-American collective Art & Language. During the years 1967 to 1970, Burn produced a number of book works using office technologies and commercial printing facilities, such as his series of *Xerox Books* (1968) and *Abstracts of Perception* (1968–69), and collaboratively, with British-born Mel Ramsden, including *Six Negatives* (1968–69) and *The Grammarian* (1970). Burn's practice illustrates the role of artists' books as one of the components of Conceptual art. As Burn stated: 'My own work is involved with books, not in a general sense of conventional dispensers of information about ideas, rather in the specific sense of using a book as an idea for form ... using a Xerox machine to make an "art" process'.¹² Burn's *Xerox Books* became known within Australian avant-garde circles when a number were exhibited in a group show with Ramsden and Roger Cutforth at Pinacotheca gallery in Melbourne in 1969, which was the first exhibition of Conceptual art to be held in Australia.¹³

Robert Jacks arrived in New York in late 1969. Like his compatriot Ian Burn, artists' books became an integral part of Jacks's artistic practice during a decade spent in North America. There are two distinct phases in his work, firstly, his 'conceptual' publications, undertaken from 1969 to 1973, and secondly, his hand-stamped books produced between 1973 and 1982, for which he is best known today.¹⁴ Jacks's output of artists' books represents a creative solution to the transient situation in which he found himself as an Australian artist abroad. His series of hand-stamped books, in effect, documents his travels; five were produced in New York, one each in Austin and Houston, Texas, another stamped his return to Melbourne in 1978, with the final four variations realised in Sydney over four consecutive years. This mapping is in the first instance geographic, but more importantly, is a conceptual and metaphorical binding of international practice with the field of Australian artists' books.

Back in Melbourne, Robert Rooney was an avid reader of American art magazines, art books and exhibition catalogues, and was one of the first Australian artists to respond to artists' books, principally through the work of Ed Ruscha. In addition to his personal interest in Ruscha's books, Rooney's



Peter Lyssiotis, *Journey of a Wise Electron*, Prahran, Victoria, Champion Books, 1981

affiliation with Pinacotheca brought him into contact with the Conceptual material sent from New York by Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden and Roger Cutforth in 1969, and, in the years following, Rooney established a seven-year exchange of ideas through correspondence with Cutforth based on their common interest in photographic conceptualism.¹⁵ Rooney's own photo-conceptual *War Savings Streets*, published by Pinacotheca in 1970, acknowledges the precedent set by Ruscha, yet Rooney reworks the idea by presenting his suburban Melbourne subject matter in a cross-referenced pictorial grid format. In addition, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rooney amassed a personal collection and archive of artists' books, artists' publications and catalogues that locates his own practice within the frame of global conceptualism.

Australian post-object artists' books

The term 'post-object' art can be used to identify Australian variants within global conceptualism, and was employed historically within the Australian art world to cover a range of practices, including performance art, film and video, alternative publishing and artists' books. The use of the term 'post-object' within the Australian context is often credited to the art theorist, academic and art critic Donald Brook. Brook was a vocal supporter of Inhibodress, an artist-run 'alternative' space in Sydney, which, during its short-existence in the early 1970s, was the local outpost of global conceptualism and a centre for

Australian post-object art.¹⁶ Inhibodress established an ambitious program of solo and group exhibitions, installations, performances and other activities, led by the three artists Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr.

Tim Johnson and Mike Parr were also active exponents of Australian post-object artists' books. Johnson produced a number of publications in which he documented his temporal installations, observations and performances, including *Fittings* (1971), *Disclosure* (1973), *Coincidence* (1974) and *ESP – Examples of 5 Spaces in 1 Place* (1976). He used his artist books to draw attention to the duality between the 'public' sphere, in which his performances and installations took place, and the 'private' experience of the reader's interaction with the content. Parr's interest in artists' books manifested itself in two ways, the first was as a means to archive his text and performance works by using the boxed 'book' format, as evident in *Word Situations 1 & 2* (1970–71) and *Wall Definition* (1971). His second intent was to realise a 'book as artwork', as he achieved most successfully in *One Hundred Page Book* (1971), which the artist claimed was 'the best and absolutely watertight example of book as artwork'.¹⁷

Alternative spaces and artists' books

By the mid 1970s, a number of either institutionally affiliated venues or publically funded arts spaces had emerged in Australia, including the Ewing and George Paton Galleries at the University of Melbourne, the Experimental Art Foundation established in Adelaide in 1974, and the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 1975.¹⁸ All three organisations played a significant role in the support and promotion of avant-garde and post-object practices in their respective cities, while they also established a mutual support network for the staging of events and circulation of exhibitions, including *Artists Books/Bookworks* (1978–79), which marked a milestone in the history of Australian artists' books. *Artists Books/Bookworks* was collaboratively organised and presented by the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, the Institute of Modern Art and the Experimental Art Foundation.¹⁹ The exhibition included a variety of international artists' books sourced from the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and Franklin Furnace Archive, New York, with the third section being curated locally, focusing specifically on Australian artists' books.

The section dedicated to Australian artists' books was curated by Noel Sheridan, the Irish-born artist and director of the Experimental Art Foundation, and included an eclectic array of material, comprising 146 individual works by 51 artists, and 11 group projects. These artists represented a range of art practices, covering printmaking, photography and sculpture, although there

was inevitably a large contingent from the post-object community. About half the artists were represented by a single title, as indicative of their wider artistic practice or as their first venture into the art form, while there was a handful of artists who had more than half a dozen artists' books, including post-object practitioner Ian Hamilton, Robert Jacks's near complete set of hand-stamped and hole-punched books, Tim Johnson's performance publications, and Pat and Richard Larter's collaged pop art journals. In retrospect it can be seen that Sheridan amassed as many Australian artists' books as he could get his hands on at the time. Everything that arrived in the post was included in the exhibition. His 'selection' was, in effect, based on the universal default clause: it's an artist book if the artist says it is.

Alternative publishing and artists' books

The great challenges facing Australian artists wanting to create artists' books in the 1970s were how to produce and where to publish these types of alternative publications. While self-publishing was lauded for its artistic integrity and for circumventing the taint of the commercial gallery system, self-publishing was constrained to the limited resources available to the artist, resulting more often than not in makeshift Xerox publications, rudimentary staple-bound works, or labour-of-love, one-of-a-kind books. It was not until the Experimental Art Foundation began its artists' books publishing program in 1976 and Champion Books was established in Melbourne in the same year that the technical facilities and creative environments were available and accessible for artists interested in exploring innovative publications.

The Experimental Art Foundation was the most proactive local alternative art space engaged with the production and promotion of Australian post-object artists' books through the 1970s and into the early 1980s. The foundation published or facilitated the publication of an ambitious number of Australian artists' books, as well as establishing a lending library and the first 'public' artists' books collection in Australia. Some of the Australian post-object artists' books published by the Experimental Art Foundation included a reprint of Tim Johnson's *ESP – Examples of 5 Spaces in 1 Place* (1976), Imants Tillers's *Rendezvous with Configuration P* (1977), Ken Searle's Lilliputian bundle of *Little Books* (1977), Noel Sheridan's installation-performance piece *Everybody Should Get Stones* (1978), Marr Grounds's *Sculpture at the Top Ends* (1978), and a plethora of publications in 1979, including Bob Ramsay's *At Home*. With the departure of Sheridan in 1980, subsequent director David Kerr continued the foundation's publishing program, which, among other titles, included two poignant environmental works, Grounds's *Oxide Street* and

Bonita Ely's *Murray/Murundi*, both published in 1981. In 1982 another six artists' titles were published. After 1983, however, the publication of artists' books tapered off.²⁰

One of the distinguishing features evident in a number of Experimental Art Foundation-published artists' books, is the way, to varying degrees, artists endeavoured to apply Donald Brook's theoretical propositions in their work, giving these titles a unique localised character within the international context of global conceptualism. Brook had taken up the post of Professor of Fine Arts at Flinders University in 1974 and was the 'resident' post-object theoretician at the foundation. It was not that artists prescriptively applied Brook's theories to their post-object practice and artists' books, rather it was a more amorphous 'configuration' – to use a term coined by Imants Tillers – in which there were references, temporal parallels and creative interpretations. These are particularly evident in Tillers's *Rendezvous with Configuration P*, Bob Ramsay's *At Home*, and Marr Grounds's *Sculpture at the Top Ends* and *Oxide Street*. There are connections between Brook's conception of 'unspecific experimental modelling' and Grounds's spontaneous creative acts and 'intuitive' responses to the environment, while the conceptual parallels are articulated and illustrated diagrammatically in *Oxide Street*.²¹

In Melbourne in 1976, Ted Hopkins founded the print co-operative Backyard Press and, alongside it, the avant-garde publishing venture Champion Books.²² Champion Books can be credited with a number of high quality book works that are exemplars of creative publishing at the time. Yet, as Hopkins recently cautioned: 'While several of the books produced are now considered artist's books, at the time there was a wilful avoidance of terms such as "artist's books," "avant-garde," "alternative" ... [T]he challenge was to engage the [newest print technologies] in expressiveness, experimentation, and irony while at the same time making the work as widely available as possible'.²³

Champion Books' inaugural publication was Graham Jackson's *The Coals of Juniper* in 1977, which was followed by other titles, including Glenn Clarke's *Suppression = Alienated = Oppression* (1979), Paul Greene's *Business as Usual* (1979), and two of Peter Lyssiotis's early artists' books containing modern fables and personal tales, *Journey of a Wise Electron* (1981) and *Three Cheers for Civilization* (1985).²⁴

Peter Lyssiotis is today recognised as one of Australia's foremost exponents of the artists' book in its many forms.²⁵ Lyssiotis's collaborations with Champion Books contain strong social and political comment conveyed through the use of photomontage. As Ted Hopkins recently recounted, 'the trick' in turning Lyssiotis's photomontages into book form 'was to create a

hint of a typical photo album presentation via graphic design and applying the highest grade of duotone offset printing on quality papers ... *Journey of a Wise Electron* is a [artists'] book that hovers between a commercial reproduction of the highest quality and a radical political view of society'.²⁶

The creative ambition and technical expertise available through Champion Books is most clearly evident in Hopkins' own *The Book of Slab* (1983), which is an artist book as cabinet of curiosities, containing various writings and texts, unusual or everyday images, with quirky material derived from various published sources. *The Book of Slab* illustrates what was possible using printing technology at the time. Moreover, the integration of content and form, the binding of the conceptual and the material, embodies the unifying ideal that underpins the most successful artists' books. In addition, a promotional flyer announcing the release of the publication reveals Champion's 'democratic' publishing agenda, with copies of *The Book of Slab* made 'available to enhance the wider dissemination of the book', priced and sold according to a 'means test', from a 'concession' rate of \$40, to \$500 for public institutions.²⁷ *The Book of Slab* is a hardbound time capsule that captures the ethos of the era in which it was conceived and realised.

The end of an era

The story of Australian artists' books during the 1970s is inextricably bound to the contemporaneous international history of Conceptual art and artists' books, and the alternative network that facilitated their creation and circulation within global conceptualism. This history provides the backdrop to Catalano's *The Bandaged Image*, and underpins the type of material covered in his study. Ironically, however, the majority of the artists canonised by Catalano had, by the time of his publication, ceased their involvement with artists' books. Ian Burn, Robert Rooney, Tim Johnson and Mike Parr, despite their important early contributions, had stopped producing books as art by the mid 1970s. In 1982, Robert Jacks concluded his decade-long project of hand-stamped books as the 'idea' had 'run its course'. In addition, the majority of the post-object artists, including Tim Burns, Glenn Clarke, Aleks Danko, Ian Hamilton, Ian Howard, Bob Ramsay, Imants Tillers and Arthur Wicks, who had experimented with artists' books during the 1970s, did not continue their engagement with the art form into the 1980s.²⁸ While the 1980s marks the end of an era, nevertheless, these Conceptual and post-object practitioners must be duly credited with establishing the legitimacy of artists' books within the context of Australian art, and for establishing the foundations for a distinct field of Australian artists' books.