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Conceptual and perceptual: the early artists' books of Robert Jacks¹

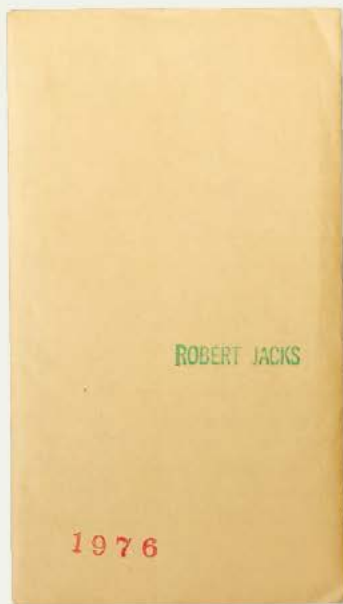
In 1980, the New York artists' book distribution company Printed Matter Inc. released a catalogue promoting a select collection of some 200 titles, 'artists' books that are excellent representatives of the field'.² The Heart collection was selected by the organisation's staff and board from Printed Matter's inventory of some 2500 titles and, as the introduction to the catalogue explained, the aim was to provide libraries, museums and collectors with a 'seed collection encompassing the many facets of the artists' book movement'. Included amongst the works in the Heart collection was Robert Jacks's *Color Book – Hand Stamped* (1975), described briefly as 'rubber-stamped grids with that endearing homemade quality'.³

Printed Matter began in 1976 as an artists' book distribution company, with an initial inventory of just 450 titles. Also established that year was Franklin Furnace, a multi-arts venue that also had a focus on artists' books and what were called 'artist readings'. While initially selling artists' books through its bookstore, Franklin Furnace later focused on the development of an artists' book archive.⁴ An early, undated eight-page catalogue for the Franklin Furnace Bookstore listed a range of 'book-like works by artists', including five titles by Jacks: three rubber stamp books, the offset printed book *Red Diagonals* (1976) and 'five envelopes, unbound rubber stamped'.⁵ Like the early Printed Matter catalogues, the Franklin Furnace catalogue listed prices for individual books,

as well as offering ‘package deals’, with ‘literally everything’ in the catalogue available for US\$1200. In 1980, the 200 books in Printed Matter’s Heart collection could be bought for US\$1300, plus US\$50 shipping and handling. In both catalogues, the average individual price for most of the books listed was around US\$5, with only a few priced at over US\$10, reflecting the core values of early artists’ books: they offered art ‘in a very direct way at a very low price and reach a great number of people’.⁶

That two organisations with a focus on artists’ books were to emerge in New York at the same time suggests that the medium – if that is the right way to describe it – had reached something of a critical moment in its development. The coincidence, however, also needs to be understood in the context of the rich mix of activities and personal connections that constituted New York’s ‘downtown’ art scene at that time. As Lucy Lippard has recently recalled, Printed Matter had its foundation in conversation across the coffee table with Sol LeWitt.⁷ While the initial impetus was the publication of artists’ books – ten were published in the first year of the organisation – the issue of distribution was also important. As LeWitt remarked in a 1977 interview, without a distribution network ‘the books just sit there’.⁸ In the beginning Printed Matter focused on mail order distribution from an office based in the Fine Arts Building at 105 Hudson Street but, in the late 1970s, it opened a storefront in Lispenard Street, just a few streets from Franklin Furnace. Almost 40 years on, Printed Matter is still operating, with both a storefront in the Chelsea gallery district, and a significant online catalogue.⁹

That Jacks was quickly involved in selling his artists’ books through these two new organisations is not surprising. Franklin Furnace was located close to where he lived at the time – in SoHo’s Greene Street. He had also known both Lucy Lippard and Sol LeWitt for a number of years, and both were aware of his artist’s books. In December 1975 Jacks received a personally addressed form letter from the Printed Matter collective as part of their initial scoping for the organisation: ‘we are investigating the possibilities of a publishing and distribution system for artists’ books. (This does not mean catalogues.)’¹⁰ The letter sought information from artists on published books, planned books and the names of other artists who might contribute. By this stage Jacks had already produced a number of books of different types, including the first three of the hand-stamped books that would eventually become a series of 12 standardised rubber stamp books produced between 1973 and 1982. Three of his early books had been noted in Lippard’s seminal anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.¹¹ Jacks sent copies of these books directly to Lippard in May 1971, accompanied by a letter noting



Robert Jacks, boxed set of 'hand-stamped' books, various occasions, published by the artist, 1973–82

Robert Jacks, *Five Packages*, New York, published by the artist, 1974–76 (1976 edition).

Photograph by Ian H H

that the enclosed publications drew from an original working book that 'is an accumulation of six years'.¹²

Although Jacks's first book editions were created in the United States, he began to develop the original working book from which they were derived in Melbourne in late 1966, just after his first and very successful solo exhibition at Gallery A.¹³ This new Minimal/Conceptual project informed the dramatic change in direction that became visible in his second solo exhibition, at South Yarra Galleries in 1967.¹⁴ The project also provided the underlying focus for new 'box pieces' linked to his *Red Painting* (1968).¹⁵ This painting was included in *The Field*, the important survey exhibition of hard-edge and colour-field works that inaugurated the new National Gallery of Victoria in August 1968.¹⁶ But by the time Jacks's work was selected for *The Field*, he had already left Australia for the United States and was working in Canada while awaiting the issue of a 'green card' allowing permanent residency. On arriving in Canada Jacks had quickly found himself a studio and began producing a substantial new body of paintings and watercolours, with individual pieces included in a number of significant group exhibitions, such as *Canadian Artists '68* and *Survey '69*,¹⁷ as well as his third solo exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto.¹⁸

During the period Jacks spent in Canada and his first years living in New York, the working book also provided the framework for the production of more ephemeral and conceptually based works. As Ian Burn noted in his important 1970 essay 'Conceptual art as art', Jacks's 'recent work in New York has moved beyond painting into conceptualized presentation of numeral systems and serial techniques'.¹⁹ Jacks's first opportunity to present this new work was facilitated by Sol LeWitt, who selected him to inaugurate a rolling program of free exhibitions at the New York Cultural Centre in January 1971 – the 'International Artist's Invitational' – with each exhibiting artist showing just a single work and selecting the artist to follow. This exhibition, *Modular II*, presented 'five diagrams executed in paper and felt'.²⁰ As documentary images published in Jacks's *Installations 1971–1973* (1974)²¹ show, it also included a copy of the working book from which the five pieces were derived.

In the context of *Installations*, Jacks gave the work exhibited at the New York Cultural Centre the title *From a Work 1966–71*, while a showing of related works a few weeks later at the Whitney Museum Artists Resource Centre, which is also documented in *Installations*, was titled *An Unfinished Work 1966–71*. It is this latter title that is now most commonly used to describe this body of work, and some of the book editions that derive from the working book also use that title, or a version of it. Jacks's subsequent 1972 solo exhibition at A Space, an 'artist-run centre' in Toronto, is also titled *From a Work 1966–71* in

Installations, so we can say that these exhibitions are both extracts from a work as well as being part of an *unfinished work*. In other words, while individual exhibitions may present a number of different pieces or elements, they are all part of one larger (on-going) work. In the four documentary images of the A Space showing, it is possible to see that the exhibition included both large 'diagrams', executed in diverse materials, as well as a line of pages extracted from the working book pinned to the wall. One documentary image shows the working book open on a table, with stacks of other books sitting beside it. While not identifiable as such in the photograph, these were copies of the two books Jacks had produced as 'extracts' of the working book *Twelve Drawings* (1970) and *An Unfinished Work 1966–1971* (1971). The first of these is made up of images extracted from the working book, while the second is of 'specifications'.

In correspondence written to accompany copies of these books, Jacks expresses some disappointment with the finished product, particularly in relation to the reproduction of the images in *Twelve Drawings* (1970). To Lucy Lippard, he notes of the books: 'They were an attempt to publish in part the book that I exhibited at the New York Cultural Centre. Unfortunately, much of it did not come out in the transition to printing.'²² Writing to the Canadian artist Peter Kolisnyk, who exhibited alongside Jacks in both *Canadian Artists '68* and *Survey '69*, he noted: 'the printing left out a lot and lost the casualness – the feel. Made them look a bit stiff'. Also included with the letter to Kolisnyk was the small book, *1–12* (1969) which 'is of a series of painting types works I did in 68/69 and am just getting around to exhibit them this month at 112 Greene Street Gallery'.²³

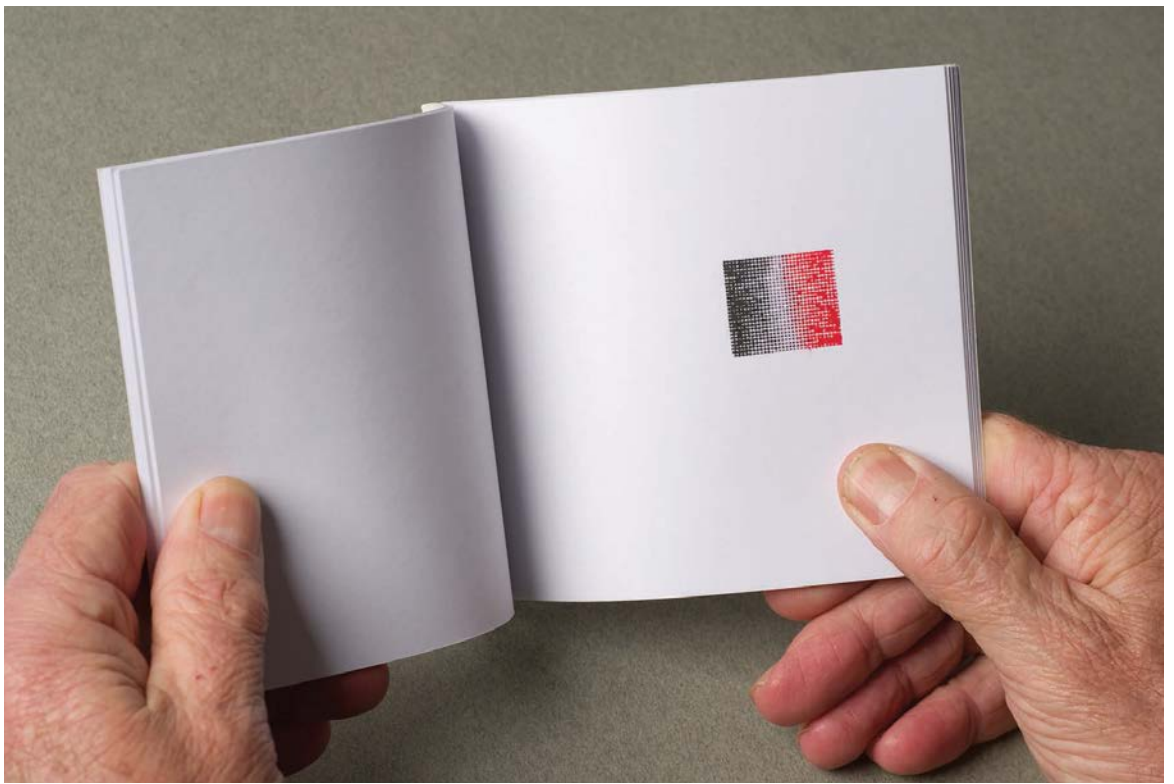
The exhibition at the recently established 'alternative space' at 112 Greene Street is also documented in *Installations*, with the photographs showing the work installed in the basement of the space. The exact circumstances of this exhibition are not clearly documented, although based on Jacks's correspondence to Peter Kolisnyk it seems certain that the showing took place in May 1971, just after Jacks had moved to a new loft at 96 Greene Street. 112 Greene Street was established by artists Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark in October of 1970 and many of the exhibitions involved casual interventions and works in process.²⁴ Jacks had been working on versions of the *1–12* series over the previous couple of years, producing permutations in watercolour and other mediums, with grid-based works linked to *1–12* having been included in the installations at the New York Cultural Centre and Whitney Artists Resource Centre as well as, later, in the A Space installation in 1972. Thus, the versions of *1–12* (1969) should be understood as a part of the

larger *An Unfinished Work* project, within which the 1 to 12 count references the 12 edges of an open box or cube. At around this time Jacks also used the alphabet as a focus for some experiments, producing a number of unique A to Z collage books, as well as the alphabet based ‘poems’ in *Listings* (1970).²⁵

One of the problems presented by these early book works is that the dates linked to each of them are as much a reference to the development of the work within the broader project, or elements of it, as they are a clear date of the edition of each book. In the case of *1-12*, there are a number of variations in both the format and methods used in the production of works under this title. In addition to the tiny (9.2 x 5.6 cm) book, there are larger versions in which each page is individually typed, with different arrangements of the count produced by clustering and arranging numbers and letters. Some of these were distributed in manila envelopes, while others were bound using staples or other simple commercially available bindings.

Based on the address included on the back cover of the small version of *1-12*, ‘96 Greene St. N.Y. N.Y. 10012’, it seems clear that while this book is dated ‘1969’ on the cover, this version was produced in 1971, as Jacks did not move to this address until early that year. While all the small versions of *1-12* use the same offset printed cover, their contents, like the larger hand-typed versions, are not uniform in the arrangement of numbers and letters. Although Letraset and offset printing are primarily used to generate the internal images, there are also some versions that use rubber stamps. In part this is a result of the strategy Jacks employed to produce this work: ‘I set out to make a tiny book from a single piece of paper, as a way of extending the work that was exhibited. As the intention was to give the book away, it was made small enough to slip into a pocket’.²⁶ But rather than produce a full edition at one time, Jacks gradually made up copies of the book as stocks ran low, making and collating new versions of the count and binding them in one of the original printed covers. This strategy was also used for the other books of ‘extracts’ produced as ‘giveaways’ in association with the exhibitions linked to *An Unfinished Work*.

At the heart of *An Unfinished Work* is the large unique working book, which gathers together drawings, specifications, documentary photographs and photocopied materials in an ongoing accumulation that both provides the framework for the production of elements within the project and documentation of each iteration. In many respects, this work sits awkwardly within the context of the artists’ book, functioning as a sketchbook, notebook, or working file, and as both specification and documentation of materials produced in an exhibition context. In some respects, it is no more than a collation of materials in a simple commercial binder, a mix of plastic sleeves



Robert Jacks, *Color Book*, New York, published by the artist, 1975. Photograph by Ian H Hill

and loose pages, held together with two screw bolts. Perhaps, in the context of book production, we might see this as no more than the manuscript for the various editions that have been produced from this master file.

As already noted, there were two books produced in the early 1970s that drew from this working book and, in May 1979, a two-volume edition was produced as one part of an exhibition at Art Projects, an independent gallery that had recently been established by the artist John Nixon in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.²⁷ This exhibition included three pieces drawn from the series *Modular I*, one each in cotton, paper and rubber, as well as the two-volume edition, which was purchased from this exhibition by the National Gallery of Australia.²⁸ Like the working volume, these two books use standard office folder bindings with plastic sleeves to contain photocopies, photographs and pencil drawings of pages derived from the working book. In his account of the books by Jacks that are held in the National Gallery of Australia's collection, Alex Selenitsch emphasises the use of simple office stationery in the binding of these works, describing *Twelve Drawings* (1970) as 'an A4 report', and noting that the 'simpler' version of *An Unfinished Work* (the smaller 'extracted' version originally produced in 1971) 'is bound like an office document'.²⁹ In 2009 Jacks produced a further edition of *An Unfinished Work* in a single volume, again

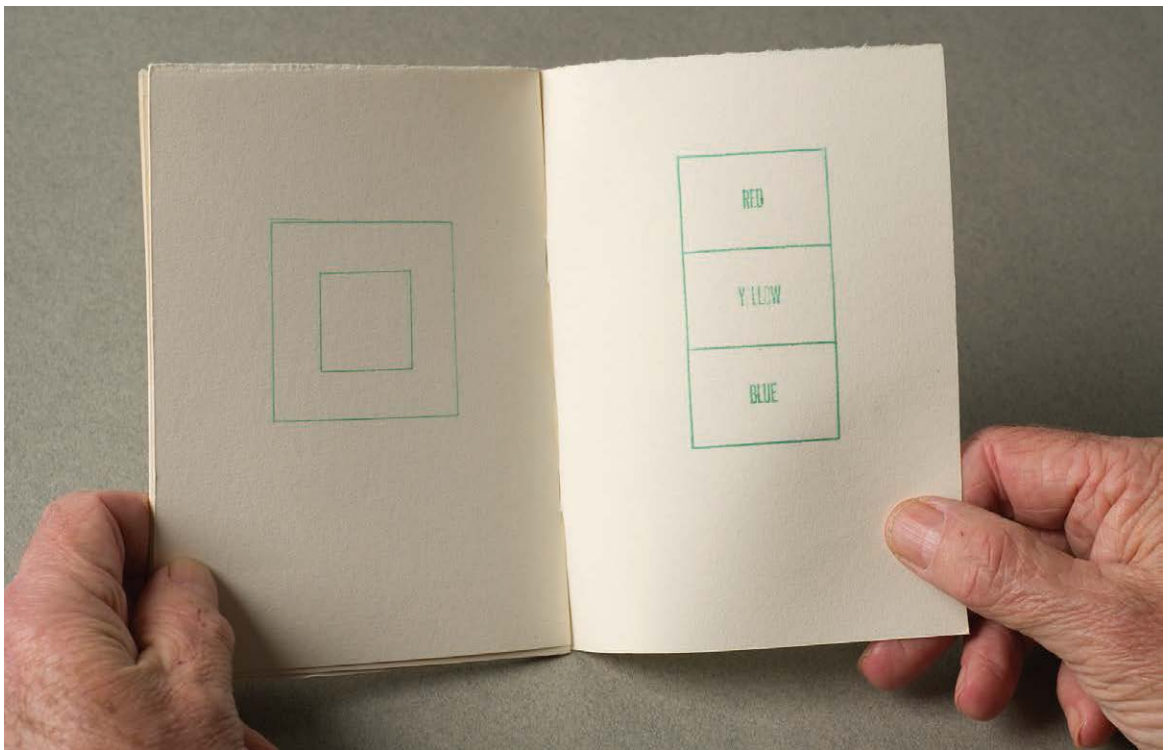
using standard office supplies as the binding. This edition of ten signed and numbered copies includes more pages than the earlier two-volume version, using high quality contemporary photocopy technology, with the addition of some hand-drawn elements.³⁰

Alex Selenitsch's account of Jacks's early books linked to the *An Unfinished Work* project notes the importance of the serial processes revealed in the page sequences. Discussing *Twelve Drawings* (1970) Selenitsch notes the way that the book moves through 'a slow, page-by-page removal of materiality', working its way through permutations of a grid form that 'manifests through cut paper and cut cloth [then] as numbers, letters and pen drawings of crosses or disks, and finally ends up as a simple line drawing lining up all the grid points'.³¹ In the case of the two-volume edition of *An Unfinished Work*, Selenitsch notes that the 'whole work presents an intricate and systematic analysis of the cube', directing 'the viewer's attention to the aesthetic potential of analytic processes'.³² Embedded within this are pages of 'specifications' that verbally describe the sculptural form under investigation.

For Jacks, the relationship between his studio experiments, his exhibitions and the developing working book shifted over time. While initially outcomes linked to his serial investigations had taken the form of paintings – as was the case in his early Canadian exhibitions – the sculptural focus of the work developed within the pages of *An Unfinished Work* was rarely made manifest. In May 1973 he sent the two volumes of 'extracts' from the larger project to Peter van Beveren³³ at the Art Information Centre in Middelburg, Holland, explaining that 'the books are an accumulation of information around a series of works started in 1966'. But while 'the objects remained the same ... [Jacks's] attitude to the book changed ... [and] the object became secondary to the book'. Jacks continued, 'it started with a minimal sculpture (objects to be made up later) but after a number of years I found it unimportant to make the objects'.³⁴

In this respect, the project might be understood within the broad framework of Conceptual art, although as some purists argued, Jacks's work was 'closer to a kind of process art than it is to a stricter definition of Conceptual Art ... while many works are of a conceptual appearance they still rest on a set of traditional assumptions'.³⁵ That said, Jacks's approach certainly seemed to align with the broad approach to Conceptual art outlined in Sol LeWitt's 1967 *Artforum* essay 'Paragraphs on Conceptual art':

The idea itself, even if not made visual is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work,



Robert Jacks, *Two Four-part Drawings*, New York, published by the artist, 1977. Photograph by Ian H Hill

models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest. Those that show the thought processes of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.³⁶

For Jacks, however, there remained a tension between the purely conceptual, and the residual perceptual focus of his work. In July 1970, in correspondence to Peter Kolisnyk, in reference to debates in New York that focused on the tension between ‘art and anti-art’ – ‘whether the object has finished as well as painting’ – Jacks noted that while he was still trying to make up his mind, ‘I guess I will finally return to perceptual rather than continue my present orientation towards conceptual’.³⁷ By 1973 he seemed to have made up his mind, including the following qualifying comment about his work in his correspondence to Peter van Beveren: ‘I would like to make it clear that although it has a conceptual format I am primarily involved in visual experiences’.³⁸

The exhibition projects documented in *Installations 1971–1973* (1974) concluded with a collaborative exhibition with the Canadian artist Ric Evans at A Space in February 1973. This project had its foundation in Jacks’s continuing serial exploration of the sculptural form of the cube and edge – a movement from an angle of 90 degrees to 45 degrees – made explicit

in the ‘cut pieces’ included in the first installation, and the sculptural form *Edge* (1968) (documented in a 1971 postcard edition).³⁹ But it also signalled a return to painting, albeit in a minimalist mode.⁴⁰ As Jacks noted in his correspondence with Peter van Beveren, to whom he sent a contact sheet of documentary images, this exhibition ‘is my first show of painting since 1969, they are painted on paper and executed at the gallery’.⁴¹ But Jacks had also returned to more focused painting in the studio, with an emphasis on the grid form. Some of these new works were exhibited in Australia in mid 1973 in solo exhibitions at the Bonython Gallery in Sydney and the South Yarra Gallery in Melbourne, the first exhibitions of his work in Australia since his move to New York, with one work also included in the Art Gallery of New South Wales survey exhibition *Recent Australian Art*.⁴² While Jacks’s work over the previous few years had used the artists’ book as a tool to clarify the conceptual, serial and process-based foundation of his work, the new grid paintings seemed to draw on more intuitive perceptual concerns.⁴³

In the context of his exploration of the grid, Jacks embarked on an investigation of methods and approaches to materials, including the use of existing gridded forms – such as cake cooling racks – as stencils, or floor and wall grates as the underlying structure for ‘rubbings’ or similar drawings.⁴⁴ The use of these simple methods for the production of grid-based works led to the use of rubber stamps, and the first of the series of hand-stamped books, *Twelve Red Grids Hand Stamped New York 1973* (1973). This first rubber stamp book used a selection of different small grid stamps to make simple postage stamp-sized images (25 x 25 mm approx.) in red ink on almost square pages (127 x 115 mm), with the whole being fixed with two staples and bound at the spine with red plastic tape. As the series progressed, the overall presentation remained similar, with changes in tape colour, cover title text and internal image base. While the book cover was offset printed, all other aspects of the book were handmade, and Jacks had the small rubber stamps made commercially to his specifications.

Between 1973 and 1982 Jacks produced a new volume within the series on roughly an annual basis, with the books tracking his location at the time, from New York (1973 to 1976) to Austin and Houston, Texas (1976 and 1977), then back to New York and then to Melbourne (1978) and finally to Sydney (1979 to 1982). As the series developed, so too did the permutations and variation in the images. The initial two books, *Twelve Red Grids* (1973) and *Twelve Drawings* (1974) were single-colour images, initially of grids, with the introduction of stamps of lines and dots in the 1974 volume. In *Color Book* (1975) Jacks introduced variations in colour, with some images produced by inking the stamp with two

different coloured inks. Elements of this sort of simple colour variation also occur in 1975–1976 *Hand Stamped New York*, which also introduces a play in scale, with alternating small (25 x 25 mm) and larger (50 x 50 mm) images. To this point, all the images had been single impressions, but with *Lines Dots Hand Stamped Austin Texas* (1976), Jacks shifted to producing images using two impressions of different stamps with different coloured inks, mixing grids, dots and lines. In *Lines Dots Number Two Hand Stamped Houston Texas* (1977), Jacks used the same basic format, but with larger images. *Dots* (1978), produced just before Jacks left New York, builds its image base with just four different stamps of 'dots', using colour variation and registration (or rather, slightly offset registration) to generate the images. *Vertical and Horizontal* (1978), the first book produced after Jacks returned to Australia, builds its images using pairs of 'lines' stamps, with colour, line scale, and orientation providing variety. Interestingly, Jacks's move to Sydney in 1979 produced something of a simplification, certainly a reduction in colour variation and play, with *Red Dots* (1979), *Black Lines* (1980), and *Green Lines* (1981), the latter including some images that are on single stamp impressions. The final book of the series of 12 books, *Right ... Left Hand Stamped Sydney* (1982) breaks with the pattern of the earlier books, producing images by the juxtaposition of two stamps rather than overprinting, with variation produced by the use of different colours, different stamps or different stamp orientation.

As a series, the hand-stamped books demonstrate Jacks's long-term focus on the production of art using simple patterns of order and variation, following through an idea using simple means and an exhaustive set of permutations. In other words, these books are firmly placed within the kind of serial approach Jacks had already established for the works he produced using the framework developed in *An Unfinished Work*. But from the beginning, these books appeared to generate a different kind of response – more tactile, visual and directly linked to the hand of the artist – than the earlier more austere 'report'-like publications. The hand-stamped books sold well once they began to be stocked by Printed Matter and Franklin Furnace. A note scribbled on an envelope from Franklin Furnace sent to Jacks in May 1976 is indicative: 'Robert – your books are going like wildfire, need more! M'.⁴⁵ Similar notes can be found on order forms from Printed Matter through into the early 1980s.⁴⁶

For Jacks, the use of the rubber stamp was often understood in terms of an expanded view of drawing, rather than printmaking. Jacks had already used the term drawing loosely to describe the various types of images in *Twelve Drawings* (1970), and the second, hand-stamped book *Twelve Drawings* (1974) uses the term in this open way yet again. In the case of the book *Two Four-part*

Drawings (1977), the stamp images were used for both the book's production and to make individual stamp works, such as *Four Part Drawing* (1976), a work held in the collection of New York University.⁴⁷ Jacks's use of the rubber stamp is thus not simply confined to making books, but is used more generally within his practice at this time, with the images of *Two Four-part Drawings* being linked to paintings and print works he had been producing during the preceding couple of years. The first three images in *Two Four-part Drawings* are directly linked to the format of paintings produced in the middle of the decade, such as the works shown in *Four Painters* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in June 1975,⁴⁸ with other rectangular works being divided horizontally, or in six vertical sections.⁴⁹

This process of treating the book as a work related to paintings or other artworks is also apparent in the offset printed *Red Diagonals* (1976), as well as in a set of related mock-ups produced in 1977 using Letraset and photocopy – *Diagonals (Black Book)*, *Jacks (Red Book)* and *Untitled (Blue Book)*.⁵⁰ In the case of *Red Diagonals*, the modular images echo drawings and paintings from the beginning of the decade, simple rectangles of adjacent squares of colour like *New York Greys* (1970) or the six squares of the pen and ink drawing *Window* (1971).⁵¹ Just as the 'specifications' of *An Unfinished Work* provide both the model and the documentation of related works, so too the modular forms presented in these books, and the stamp of *Two Four-part Drawings* (1977) function as works in themselves as well serving as models and a form of documentation.

Jacks outlined his position on the artists' book in a brief three-paragraph statement that was submitted to the Franklin Furnace archive in mid-1977. In reference to his first book works, Jacks notes that these were 'an adjunct to work shown in gallerys [sic] – a type of diagram or introduction to the work'. These inexpensive 'give-aways' were made so that the 'art work or part of it could be available to anyone who was interested'. Turning to the stamp books Jacks notes that they had their origins in 'mailart, then books'. He describes his use of stamps in terms of drawing, they 'are a direct, convenient and inexpensive way to draw and reproduce as the stamps are reusable and each year I reuse the images in new ways'.⁵² In the light of these remarks, it is essential to see Jacks's books, not as a discrete activity, but as an integrated element within his overall practice, with a direct relationship to both his painting and sculptural activity.

The handmade qualities of much of Jacks's book-related work at this time was not explicitly linked to a desire to create either a sense of scarcity, nor was it tied to the tradition of the fine press edition. Even when editions

were numbered, as was the case with Jacks's packages of stamped cards, *Five Packages* (1974–76), Jacks played fast and loose with edition numbers. In most cases, the stamped edition number – usually 100 – was a projection, rather than an accurate count of the number of works produced within the particular package. These envelopes of cards were 'made to be given away or sold very cheaply', with the work being 'about making art accessible to a wide audience'.⁵³

Jacks's use of handmade elements may, however, have made his work an awkward fit for some. As Clive Phillpot (who was appointed director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Library in 1977) has noted, the policy he developed for collecting artists' books for that institution focused on 'books – codex books – usually offset-printed, integrated visual/verbal paperback books, but not magazines, or packs of cards, or exhibition catalogues, or book objects, or signed and numbered fine press editions'.⁵⁴ In light of this, we can note that while Jacks's works are now held in this collection, this is a result of their earlier inclusion in the Franklin Furnace Archive of 13,500 works, which was acquired by MoMA in 1994.⁵⁵ As Phillpot notes, his collection policy focused on 'books that would exist in "open" editions, or – relatively – large editions of 100 copies or more', with this demonstrating a commitment 'to the multiplication and potentially wide distribution of their work'.⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that when Jacks produced an 'inventory' of his books in late 1977 or early 1978, almost all the 20 books listed are identified as being in editions of 100 or more. The exceptions are the small *1–12* (1969), the rubber stamp books *Two Four-part Drawings* (1977) and *Five Drawings* (1977) and three 'punched-hole' books *Circular Drawing* (1977), *Spiral Drawing* (1977) and *Top – Bottom* (1977).⁵⁷

Jacks's involvement with books, rubber stamps and mail art saw him included in a range of exhibitions focused on these related areas of activity in the United States and Europe from the mid 1970s onwards. In this context he became involved in the production of editions of stamped postcards and also various assemblings⁵⁸ and anthologies, such as the three photocopy collections he produced in 1977 and 1978 with Carol Bruns⁵⁹ and the 1981 volume *The Archives: Art Information Centre* edited by Peter van Beveren. In the case of the postcard edition produced by Guy Schraenen in 1977, Jacks did not undertake the stamping himself, but sent the stamp to Antwerp, where the edition was made.⁶⁰ In addition to holding a solo exhibition in Amsterdam at the Stempleplaats gallery, Jacks was featured in the gallery's monthly bulletin, *Rubber*, in February 1978. As well as his original stamp works, *Rubber* also included a brief set of statements by Jacks in which he noted that by using

rubber stamps ‘the process avoids the elitism of professional print activity’ ... ‘making works available to everyone’.⁶¹

The general position Jacks outlined in his statement was common at the time, with artists’ books being seen as a new ‘alternative space’ for art that had the potential to democratise the distribution and circulation of art. As Franklin Furnace founder Martha Wilson argued in her contribution to the catalogue of the 1978 touring exhibition *Artists Books / Bookworks*,⁶² the ‘rise in artists’ books as a prevalent means of distributing work came about in part due to artists’ dissatisfaction with the gallery system’.⁶³ For advocates of the artists’ book, such as Wilson, the potential for change in the way art was circulated and consumed was significant:

My hope is that soon artists’ books will be as commonplace as cereal boxes, read over and over again in a leisurely way in people’s living rooms, or given as gifts instead of stationery and soap ... artists’ books and periodicals provide alternative space, exhibition outside the gallery system, which will alter the complexion of future art and the public’s experience of art.⁶⁴

Artists Books / Bookworks, which toured to seven Australian galleries during 1978 and 1979, was a large exhibition that drew its material from both international and Australian sources. In addition to a selection of bookworks curated for the exhibition by Noel Sheridan from the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, the exhibition also included one-off, handmade bookworks drawn from the Franklin Furnace archive and a selection of works from the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art touring exhibition, *Artworks / Bookworks*, curated by Judith Hoffberg and Joan Hugo. This latter exhibition had already toured to a number of venues in the United States during early 1978. The catalogue for the Australian exhibition – 125 pages presented unbound in a manila folder – reproduced catalogue essays linked to the US exhibition. In introducing this section of the exhibition, Hoffberg noted that the objective was to ‘document the art information network, a distribution system which allows a direct access into verbal and visual thinking of artists today’.⁶⁵ Significantly, the following checklist of artists and titles also included the artists’ address, allowing the exhibition catalogue to serve as a further tool in a distribution network where ‘the mailbox is the museum’. Jacks’s book *Red Diagonals* (1976), his 1971 postcard collaboration with Ric Evans and an ‘envelope’ work from 1976 were included in the ‘international’ section of the exhibition.

The Australian artists’ books section of the exhibition was broad in its scope, including work by over 40 artists, as well as other ‘combines,

assemblages and group projects', from issues of *Magic Sam* to the 'catalogue' for *The Situation Now – Object or Post-Object Art*. Based on the catalogue entries, it is clear that there was a great diversity of material, with work that might these days slip into the 'literary' domain, such as books by practitioners who primarily identified as writers rather than visual artists, like Robert Kenny, Rudi Krausmann, and Kris Hemensley.⁶⁶ The exhibition also included works by Aleks Danko, Ian Hamilton, Tim Johnson, Bea Maddock, Mike Parr, Robert Rooney and Imants Tillers, not all of it purely visual in approach.

While a significant proportion of the Australian work included in the exhibition was produced using cheap reproduction technology, giving it a 'quick-copy' look, Noel Sheridan concluded his introduction to this part of the exhibition by noting that 'while recent trends might indicate that the art of the book is pressing forward to the illuminated manuscript stage, I still believe the best use of the book for artists lies in its power to give economical, fast, portable art information.'⁶⁷ Ironically, perhaps, none of the early 'conceptual' books linked directly to *An Unfinished Work* were amongst the 14 books by Jacks included in the exhibition, eight of the hand-stamped rubber stamp books, and *Red Diagonals* (1976) were augmented by two 'hole-punch' books, and four unique books of monochrome watercolour washes on onion skin paper. While handmade and small-run works, these latter two groups of books did not represent a turn to the signed and numbered limited edition. Instead they remained focused on process. The hole punch works – *Top to Bottom* (1977) and *Circular Drawing* (1977) – traced out the movement of the title through the consecutive turning of pages, and the shifting location of the single hole punched in each, while the books of single coloured pages – red, blue, yellow – provided so little information that the focus shifted from the 'image' to the sound of pages turning.⁶⁸

Jacks returned to Australia early in 1978 to take up a position as artist in residence at the University of Melbourne and, in this context, he began a new series of works that would mark the beginning of a new direction in his practice. The foundation of the suite of works he produced in Melbourne – 50 drawings, 50 watercolours and 50 etchings – was a set of sketches produced in west Texas and Mexico. From these simple sketches Jacks produced the group of works that were to become *Texas Sketchbook* (1978): 'Many of the drawings were slight or at least undeveloped notations and would never make any sense on their own but worked well as a collection which started the idea of making fifty small etchings and binding them into a book'.⁶⁹ This new body of work also saw Jacks moving away from the grid and the more formal post-Minimal, post-Conceptual approach he had pursued previously, with the

zig-zag opening his work up to the development of 'a personal vocabulary of signs'.⁷⁰ It was this more open approach that led to the style of work found in Jacks's subsequent boxed editions and books: *Paris Sketchbook* (1989), *Cornish Etchings* (1989), *A Family of Forms* (1999), *Robert Jacks: His Bloomsday Book* (2004) and *James Joyce House of the Dead* (2004). As Paul McGillick noted in his account of Jacks's career across the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, although a number of discreet 'phases' can be identified, 'what we see is a kind of recursive development', in which 'the concerns of one period may re-assert themselves in a later period'.⁷¹ While this was certainly true in 1981, it was perhaps less obvious then than it is now, with Jacks regularly returning to earlier styles and approaches later in his career. Over the last decade of his career he held a number of exhibitions focused on the concerns of *An Unfinished Work*,⁷² as well as regularly revisiting the use of rubber stamps as a tool for the production of books, cards and other works.⁷³

While Jacks's production of books and related works, and his interest in the field, remained a constant thread within his work, it is the early books that are the most integrated into the conceptual foundations of his practice. Perhaps this is not surprising given the important role the artists' book played across the period from the late 1960s onwards, both as an 'alternative space' and a fundamental element in the production of much process-based and conceptual work. What is most significant about Jacks's book-based work, however, is the way it straddles the divide between the book as a pure repository for conceptual work, and the book as a primarily perceptual object, an intimate space for encountering work that is at its heart concerned with the experience of careful looking and the process of turning pages.