

Michael Hampton. *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the artists' book*. Axminster, Devon: Uniformbooks, 2015. 174p., ill. ISBN 9781910010068. £12.

In *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the artists' book*, Michael Hampton's goal is to shift the grounds on which scholars seek to answer that perennially pesky question, "What is an artist's book?" In a gray-papered and un-illustrated 26-page (numbered A-Z) *Exposé* bound into the middle of *Unshelfmarked*, Hampton files the artist's book in an "ecosystem" that ranges from tramp art to pooh sticks via hopscotch, sewing bees, football fanzines and "rubbish of every kind" (O).

Hampton uses Germano Celant's *Book as Artwork 1960/1972* as his initial frame of reference. He has worked with this catalogue previously; in 2011 he published a manifesto, THEARTISTSBOOKANEWHISTORY, that also referenced Celant. Hampton's manifesto forms the basis of this current longer work. In both, Hampton takes fundamental exception to the notion that the first true artists' books were made by William Blake. Instead, he offers several examples of medieval manuscripts as truer harbingers. Leaving aside the obvious differences between Blake's completely self-generated work and that of the scribes who wrote other people's words in the psalters and Bibles they made beautiful, the idea that an enormous range of historical work feeds into the current notion of what constitutes artists' books is compelling, if not exactly new.

Hampton contrasts his broader definition with that of the "informal guild" (B) of authors who have written about artists' books. Hampton's list represents an accurate assessment of recent writing on the medium. It includes among others Lucy Lippard, Clive Phillpot, and Anne Mœglin-Delcroix. Not all of the writers on Hampton's list, however, embrace a unifying definition: Johanna Drucker, for instance, titled her 1995 book *The Century of Artists' Books* as an intentional challenge to Riva Castelman's earlier catalogue of *livres d'artistes, A Century of Artists' Books*.

In 1978 Joan Hugo (who formed her ideas about the book's possibilities while working as a librarian at MOMA, the New York Public Library, and the Sorbonne before landing at a small art college in Los Angeles in 1957) curated the first of two of the most influential early exhibitions that envisioned what the artist's book could become. Hugo stated that before printing all books were made by artists, and later wrote, "...one has only to recall the history of the book from painted stones and cylinder seals to Medieval jeweled covers and Russian Futurist books on wallpaper, to see how flexible these limits [of artists' books] actually are."



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Hampton's 50 examples of artists' books fit within Hugo's parameters and would generally receive no argument from the authors in his "guild." His canon includes Ed Ruscha, Dieter Roth, Marcel Broodthaers, Ronald King, and the Bechers. Also included are the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a Vesalius anatomy, an advertising volvelle from the 1940s, and a stack of Charles Babbage's punch cards. This broad inclusiveness underpins much contemporary understanding of the medium while helping to create barriers to a formal definition of the form and to an agreement about whether artists' books belong in the gallery or the library. Hampton might perhaps say neither.

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