

Bookworks

Author

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The Museum of Modern Art

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www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2393

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

BOOKWORKS

Bookworks is a current term that refers to mass-produced, inexpensive books, conceived and designed entirely by artists, and printed in a range of media (e.g. offset lithography, photocopy, mimeograph). Their pages may consist of abstract or photographic images, symbols, statements, verbally directed visual ideas, or narrative or mythological tales. They sometimes incorporate aspects of other disciplines such as sociology, mathematics, and philosophy. The 189 examples on display by 147 artists are from the Museum's growing collection of bookworks -- a large number of them on extended loan from a New York private collector -- and they reflect a great variety of subjects, styles, and intentions.

The genre started to flourish internationally during the sixties when there was a great propensity to experiment with new ideas. It was a time of combining media, in individual or group ventures, of "happenings," of looking into how the physical attributes of a medium affect art. Because of renewed interest in Marcel Duchamp's "readymades," which in the twenties moved the focus in art away from form and aesthetics towards an emphasis on idea, sixties artists began using simple, everyday books to make statements. Books were chosen because of their informality, immediacy, serial progression, and their intellectual import in contrast to minimal material value. At a time when transitoriness was being worked into much of the art, bookworks provided permanence and constancy to artistic ideas. "Pop," "Fluxus," "Conceptual," "Minimal," "Narrative," and "Expressionistic" artists utilized the form.

In the past seventeen years, many dealers, publishers, and editors in the United States and Europe have encouraged artists to experiment with the articulation of ideas in book form. For some artists, the desire to produce a modest bookwork was a reaction against the older, expensive, "illustrated book" in which literature and art were combined; for others it was a continuation of the Blue Rider book and Futurist-Constructivist manifesto tradition; while for others it presented a means of circumventing the commercial gallery system. No matter what the orientation, as an inexpensive, readily accessible means of presenting visual ideas, artists' bookworks have been sold in either bookshops or by mail at prices low enough for collectors with very limited budgets to afford them.

A selection of artists' bookworks is available in the Museum Bookstore.

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