Artists’ books are artworks that use the form or the concept of the book. Free from the constraints of traditional publishing, they are about nothing so much as themselves. They can be handcrafted or commercially printed; unique; or in limited or unlimited editions. Forms range from the traditional codex to sculptural works, or they may have audio, video, installation, online and performance components.

The spectrum of book art means that definition can be challenging. Angela Lorenz offers a few pointers to some of the possibilities of what might be defined as an artist’s book: artists’ books are usually intended to be portable; they are mixed media and combine many processes; they are usually intended to be touched and interacted with, often in a predetermined sequence. All of their physical attributes are not visible at once, so a single work may have a number of different display possibilities although they are generally not intended for simple display.

Which leads one to the question, why then does anyone collect artists’ books?

Artists’ books have become increasingly attractive as the subject of collections by galleries and libraries over the past few decades. This is an artform which would appear to fit in well with galleries, with their collections of art, and with libraries, as keepers of our printed literature. One would imagine that those artists’ books which are least like books in either appearance or content, that is artworks, would be attractive to the galleries (such as Mackay Artspace’s The Wave shown here) and those with an emphasis on the traditional book format will find their way to the library collections (some examples in Manly Library’s collected works on display). At the moment in Australia it is unique
Ken Botnick's Diderot Project (above and opposite) won an American prize, the Minnesota Center for Book Arts Prize (the MCBA Prize) last year. This is an extraordinary project, the result of a 5-year investigation into the Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des méta...
Bernard Appassamy is a writer, artist, graphic designer and teacher. In 2000 he says, in the year leading up to my fiftieth birthday, I found myself asking the usual big questions. What is humanity? What does it mean to be human? He started a paper sculpture on the medical professions and the idea of sacredness in a secular society below.

In Compendium of Knowledge-Appassamy assembled approx. 2,000 recycled microfiche, alluding to the librarian and archivist’s methodical dedication and infinite construction of systems of data. Each microfiche was drilled, folded and threaded onto fishing line and arranged in the shape of the infinity sign. He has now started a new project using all the Christmas and birth cards he has collected over the past five years.

Above, The Book of Asylum, by Bernard Appassamy 2013
Mainly Library Artists’ Books Collection 2013, 4x10.5x90cm
Villawood Immigration Detention Centre provides visitors with lockers and a paper slip with locker access instructions.

In this work hundreds of these slips issued to the Refugee Art Project volunteers and other visitor visitors are bound like a palm-leaf sūtra—a testament to their committed and sustained goodwill towards asylum seekers.

Below: Sacred Hands, 40x180x45cm
Goodwill towards asylum seekers.

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Guidelines for entry to the main artists’ book awards tend to be very free. This of course reflects the broad and encompassing definitions of artists’ books. Nevertheless, it may be an area which the organisers will find needs better definition in the future if the quality and integrity of their collections is to be maintained.

One of the important American awards, the Minnesota Center for Book Art’s Prize was established in 2009 and attracts high quality innovative design from around the world to its biennial awards. This award has laid down its definition of book art and states its conditions for entry as follows: ‘Book art, broadly defined, includes work that embodies narrative, instruction, reference, mapping, guidelines, documentation, and more. It is work that engages the viewer and propels the experience forward through narrative, sequencing, spatial elements, visual or verbal language, temporal, mechanical, aural, typographic, symbolic or material means.’

Their invitation for entries states: ‘Forms, processes, traditions and approaches are open. Work may include unique book objects, altered books, graphic novels, zines, concrete poetry, conceptual, visual and literary works. Processes may include any printing or printmaking methods such as photo-mechanical, hand-worked, analog/digital, relief printmaking, letterpress, intaglio, and screen-printing, as well as hand-lettering. Works may be in edition or unique. The finished work can depart from a bound book format to engage metaphors of the book in sculpture or installation. Work can be created collaboratively, but ultimately must result from an artist or artists’ vision and active participation.’

In each biennial competition, integrity—a unity of form, materials and content that reflects an artist’s vision—will be a determining criteria in the winning work. The primary impetus for the creation of the work must come from the vision of the artist or artistic collaborators. Related works on paper (broadsides, prints, photographic portfolios), journals or diaries, scrapbooks and blank books will not be considered for the award, nor will video or film unless it is integral to an installation that embodies the qualities described above.

Different Ken Botschke’s winning entry to the 2015 Minnesota Center for Book Art Prize is shown here. Another prize-winning work, Robin Price’s Love in the Time of War, Intertwined Handpainted Silk, 38 pages, in an edition of 70, is a collaboration between Price and renowned poet Yusef Komunyakaa who began writing these poems when the US invaded Iraq in 2003. These two examples are an indication of the skill and commitment required to produce remarkable artists’ books.

Beautiful and functional books

Australia’s contemporary design bookbinders have been exhibiting regularly over many decades at the Australian Bookbinders Exhibitions. Their manifesto is set out in the catalogue for their 2012 exhibition by Wayne Stock and Imogen Yang:

A good bookbinder is one who is able to make objects with integrity and resilience in form, function and construction. Objects which will last, and lend themselves to use over time.

A good design binder is able to bring individuality, imagination, experimentation and control to this fundamental skill set to produce objects which are expressive and unique. Objects which perform both a pragmatic and an aesthetic function, where the design of the book’s physical structure adds to, or collaborates with the content in a way that enhances or enhances our appreciation of the whole.

‘Design binding brings with it this inherent burden of proof—it’s judgement as art can hardly be separated from the soundness of its workmanship. Its fitness to perform a task cannot be subordinated to its ability to communicate as an artwork. Making a weak construction, just because it looks nice, or moves in an interesting way, is not good binding. The two elements—the craft and the art—must go hand-in-hand.’

Art v Craft

It is probably not surprising that the age-old debate about art and craft continues. In 1984, Ivor Robinson wrote in ‘Contemporary Designer Bookbindings: Europe and Australia’:

‘The bookwork, in which the maker selects and determines the nature and the form of the content, and where that content influences the nature and form of the entire work, often of necessity a total and integrated whole, is an experience of great significance to the future of book based visual activities.’

In the same volume, Edgar Mansfield writes: ‘The creative act does not reflect the age, it is the age. The rest is repetitive craftsmanship.’

‘Bookbinding is one of the most difficult of the crafts, and it may be also the greatest art form among the so-called crafts.’

This thirty year-old publication features a remarkable array of contemporary designer bookbindings, beautiful, imaginative and elegant. The times were very optimistic for a resurgence in interest in such books.

These views may seem fairly traditional, but the importance of skilled craftsmanship does need to be reinforced periodically to ensure that it is not lost. Of course it also needs to be taught. Their words were also a cry for wider recognition of the beautifully designed and bound book as ART. Mansfield, remember this is 1984, says that even the cover torn from a book and stuck onto a board would qualify (as art), while the original book would not.

Included in the publication’s illustrated design bindings is one described as an example of the book as a found object by artists working in other media. Sigmato by Helen Wellington (binder) and Peter Herzl (artist) is made of handmade paper from indigenous fibres and uses rusted nails specially coated. The maker states:

‘Traditionally the binder is not directly involved with the author or artist in the book creation whereas in this instance the realisation required close co-operation between the artist and binder to achieve a work in which book and binding are an integrated form.’

The rigid demarcation they refer to is no longer adhered to and clearly the two groups are moving closer together, and it is probably the book crafts which have
been making the greater concessions. Time perhaps for the artists to apply more craftsmanship to their artists’ books and for the award givers to encourage this. Then, just as artists need to be aware of the style or ethos of a particular art award or competition and who its judges will be in order to decide whether their work is likely to succeed, so book artists would become aware of particular guidelines for entry to book art awards and acquisitions appropriate to their work.

A 20th Century Phenomenon

Artists have been involved in printing and making books since early medieval times but what we call the artist’s book today is primarily a late 20th century phenomenon with its roots in such avant garde movements as Dada, Constructivism, Futurism and Fluxus—and before that, in the handwritten, illustrated, painted, printed and bound books of the English poet and artist William Blake.

At about the time of World War I, avant garde artists in Europe began to produce pamphlets, books and posters as a means to bypass the traditional galleries and to promote themselves. This was the time that Dada initially started, at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich by a group of artists exiled in neutral Switzerland. The protagonists became more and more politically active, producing books, periodicals, manifestos and satirical lithographs about the German bourgeoisie (Kandinsky, Marc, Klee, Kusserewijk and George Grosz). Artists’ books from this time onwards are avidly collected.

In the seventies and eighties artists’ books became recognized as a separate genre and began to be taught and studied throughout America and Europe. Collections were founded and exhibitions held, bookstores opened which specialized in artists’ books. The Library of Congress included artists’ books among its established subjects and maintains a permanent collection. In the 1980s and 90s, university programs in book art sprang up in colleges around America and an MA was established at London’s Camberwell College of Art.

Tanya Crothers is an artist, architect and art teacher. (See issues 3 and 4 of OZ ARTS, The Lowers). In 1969 she studied printmaking at Willoughby Workshop Arts Centre with Michael West and from 1979 on she exhibited in group shows with Sydney Printmakers, the Print Council of Australia and the Print Circle among others. Tanya says: The postwar influx of European migrant artists had ignited a revival of interest in printmaking that had once flourished in 1930 Sydney. Tanya Crothers began publishing her own books in 1996 and in 2001 was awarded Winner of Australian Best Self-Published Book with an illustrated account of the life and work of fellow printmaker Barbara Davidson.

Below: Tanya Crothers: Ruby Rat, 26 x 15cm
This was created for my grandchildren and hand binded using one of many traditional Japanese methods. The images are hand printed collagraphs and the text is hand written.

Barbara Davidson designs and prints all her images and hand binds the books usually using perfect binding. In the last 20 years, books have become increasingly important in my art practice and since 1990 I have produced approximately 40 artists’ books. Drawing on my immediate environment—home, garden, leisure activities and people, books allow me to create a narrative by presenting my prints in a continuous sequence of my own choosing without the intervention of glass. The idea of linking my prints to tell a story can be developed on many levels. Sydney Circular Quay illustrates a walk around the Sydney Harbour at Circular Quay in which an image of the Harbour Bridge is followed by another of the Overseas Terminal, then the Wharves and so on — until reaching the Opera House. In Time Flies references to the various stages of life are shown metaphorically by images of breakfast, lunch and dinner and all the cups of tea in between. Changes in tone, colour and movement are used to alter mood— as in a series depicting spectators experiencing the highs and lows of a sporting event. Above all, I enjoy the process of combining prints into a crafted, hand-
Future awards and acquisitions

Any discussion of artists’ books must make reference to Australia’s small presses, such as the Wayzgoose Press, producer since their beginnings in 1985 of over 50 limited edition letterpress books and broadsides. These publications have been acquired by collectors and institutions in the UK, Europe, America and, of course, Australia — typographic masterpieces unparalleled in Australian printing history, according to Des Cowley of the State Library of Victoria (OZ ARTS magazine, issue 5). While small presses continue to produce beautiful books in Australia this has become a very small and select gathering of dedicated artists.

It is not suggested that all makers of artists’ books should strive to replicate these exceptionally crafted and designed works but they surely must find inspiration in the passion they embody, for literature and, for many other environmental, social justice and political causes. Our international reputation for book making will diminish if there is no incentive to continue their production and so appropriate book and print awards and acquisitions which invite submissions including from this highly specialised category of artists’ books are important. Australian artists certainly have the skills and are able to compete with the best internationally.

Carolynne Skinner

References:
Angela Lorenz: angelalorenzartistsbooks.com
Contemporary Designer Bookbindings: Europe and Australia, published by Crafts Council of Australia 1984
Minnesota Center for Book Arts, mcbaprize.org

BRONWYN REES

I made my first artist’s book in 2008 in response to a call out from the Libris Prize in Mackay. I was shortlisted and attended the conference and so embarked on a steep learning curve about the wonderful world of artists’ books. I had been making prints for many years but had never considered books. Since then I have made books in between making 2D prints for exhibitions. Quite often books are where parts of the exhibitions end up, so it cycles between the two.

Left: Bronwyn Rees, Country, 2014, 58cm x 38cm, multi-layered coloured stitching, bound with alternating tabs formed by the pages Acquired by Manly Library Artists’ Books Collection 2015
The words from ‘My Country’ had been buzzing around my brain like a bee. Dorothea MacKellar was born in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was sent ‘home’ to England to improve her education and social opportunities and was horribly homesick. The poem ‘My Country’ was the result. We learnt it as a song at school and would scoff at its naivety, colonialism and corny sentimentality, but now I just want to cry for everything that’s been lost and everything that needs mending. I called the book ‘Country’ to honour the people whose country this really is, however much I may love it.

I used the techniques of layered colour etchings, cutting out windows to reveal words and progressive parts of the images. The crows and currawongs are depicted as embodiments of spiritual elements; the barbeque on the verandah represents a more prosaic narrative. The giant eucalypt reminded me of an ageing body, trying to protect the land from harm. The lens of sadness and nostalgia acts as a filter, creating a beautiful complexity of now.
Left: Bronwyn Rees with Elizabeth Banfield: A Different Path, 2015: Last year I participated in an exhibition primarily of books in partnership with Elizabeth Banfield at Stephen McGlaughlin Gallery. Elizabeth and I collaborated on A Different Path for this exhibition. Elizabeth is very precise in her methodology and techniques and I asked her to choose an existing print of mine to alter. She divided four large (editioned) etchings into strips and overprinted them with linocut. I collaged the reverse of each one in a unique but similar way. Elizabeth sewed leaves on the other side, in the same format, with the stitching complementing the collage and bound the four books with beautiful golden brown covers, matching the colour of the ink.

Below: Peter Charuk was an ANAT Synapse Artist in Residence at CSIRO Marine Research in Hobart in 2005 and in 2007 was awarded a New Work Grant from the Australia Council to develop glacies lux. His research engages with a thematic of ‘water’ in the broadest sense. He works with video, artists’ books, photography, sound and text.

Left: ‘No Diving’ references my love of water and of surfing. Leonard Cohen’s song Suzanne provided the book’s structure although not the words. The spiritual in art, the questioning of one’s existence in the universe these are underlying themes in my work.

‘The words to Suzanne helped give the book direction and a focus for the disparate images I had collected. A fascination for pop-up books was the motivation for the book’s format, so that it may be presented with a number of different scenarios.’ Exhibited at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery Art Award 2001, Sydney 4th Artists’ Books & Multiples Fair 2001, Brisbane 8th International Works on Paper Fair, 2001. Acquired by State Library of Queensland Collection of Artists’ Books.