



# Artistic Research in Artists' Books

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of artistic research attracts considerable attention because of the growing integration between art, design and science. At the same time, it remains a challenging research subject that is interpreted differently by various scientists, designers and artists. This paper presents an attempt to investigate the relationship between artistic research and artistic practice, and the role of artistic research in artists' books. It aims to present a brief history of artists' books and show how various artists have captured the complex creative and artistic processes, results or stories behind the works of art.

The article also discusses the problem and potential of representation in artists' books and examines them as an effective mechanism for disseminating findings of artistic research. To present the multifaceted action behind a work of art implies challenges. The author's own attempt to capture knowledge from artistic research was challenged while working on a book project and will be part of the discussion. Finally, the study will illustrate how artists' books contribute to the process of capturing reflections of artistic research and make the manifestations accessible to people outside of the formal context of the lecture halls.

**Keywords:** artists' books, artistic research, interdisciplinary art projects, visual art

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## **Introduction**

Because of the growing integration between art and science the phenomenon of artistic research attracts considerable attention in academia. At the same time, it remains a challenging research subject that is interpreted differently by various scientists and artists. The current essay presents an attempt to investigate the relationship between artistic research and artistic practice, and the role of artistic research in artists' books. It aims to present a brief history of artists' books and show how various artists have captured the complex artistic processes, results or stories behind the works of art.

The article also discusses the problem and potential of representation in artists' books and examines them as an effective mechanism for disseminating findings of artistic research. To present the multifaceted action behind a work of art implies challenges. The author's own attempt to capture knowledge from artistic research was challenged while working on a book project and will be part of the discussion. Finally, the article will illustrate how artists' books contribute to the process of capturing the reflections of artistic research and make the manifestations accessible to people outside of the formal context of the lecture halls.

## **First part: A brief history of artists' books**

It is important to emphasise that this essay operates with the understanding of 'artistic research' expressed by Klein (2010). This scientist considers artistic research as a broad phenomenon encompassing any artifacts that accumulate artistic knowledge based on artistic experience. This knowledge is embodied in the products of art. Therefore, any product that contributes to the spread of artistic knowledge in some way might be considered an example of artistic research. The use of this understanding of the term 'artistic research' helps consider artists' books as an important instrument for disseminating artistic knowledge based on artistic experience.

The term 'artists' books' refers to a specific type of artwork that takes the form of a book. It is very hard to identify specific artifacts as 'artists' books' because people have different understandings of the notion of 'art', and others do not agree on the basic definitions of textual products. For this reason, most definitions of artists' books are general and consider their subjective aspects. For example, the one proposed by Bury (1995) defines artists' books as 'books or book-like objects ... where the book is intended as a work of art in itself'. Furthermore, most specialists agree that artists' books are usually characterised by a relatively high degree of control by the author over the process of their final appearance. Some scientists also argue that artists'

books are published in small editions; however, this opinion is not shared by most specialists (Drucker, 1995). Therefore, for the purposes of this assignment, it seems justified to conclude that the phenomenon under investigation is characterised by its form as a book or book-like object and by an author's intention to present it as a form of art.

The books of William Blake, *livres d'artistes* in France, and the pamphlets and posters of artists and writers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were peculiar precursors of artists' books (Dotson, 2018). They did not meet all the three criteria discussed above; however, even these early forms showcased an attempt to conduct a work of artistic research. For example, *livre d'artiste* books that contained original prints often showed comments and notes of writers, which helped the audience better understand their creative work and self-reflection (Drucker, 1995). At the same time, pamphlets and posters shed some light on the world outlook of artists, which also contributed to capturing of artistic research's reflections.

In a similar manner, antecedents of artistic research were also present in photographic books that were popular in the 1920s in Germany. However, the most evident roots of artistic research in artists' books before World War II could be observed in the books of the Dada movement by such authors as Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Hugo Ball, Hean Arp and many others. These artists had not yet attempted to use books as art; however, they already employed them as a means of expression, and publicly announced their intention to reflect their 'ethical and political concern for the function of art in a society' (Dotson, 2018).

The emergence of the artists' books in their contemporary form and their growing popularity were connected with the scientific and technological progress that expanded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, authors now had the opportunity to employ offset printing and photocopying, which made it much easier to produce and distribute books (Drucker, 1995). In the 1950s, the development of artists' books was associated with the names of such artists as Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaitre, and Augusto De Campos. For them, this instrument was a part of their experimental art.

Their readings contribute to the understanding of artistic processes. For example, Lemaitre created a number of unique letterform fragments in line with the concept of visual arts. Using visual elements, he tried to help the audience comprehend unique factors that were driving the creation of his poems (Bohn, 2001). For instance, a poem about the superficial view of life shaped in the form of a lady with a hat,

apparently pointed at the role of fashion stereotypes in deteriorating the social morale.

Dieter Roth is another example of an artist who succeeded in conducting and presenting artistic research via the medium of an artist's book. *Composition 2 C* presents an interesting attempt to combine a traditional paper format with innovative graphic solutions in an attempt to put the author's findings on light and movement into perspective. This artistic product simultaneously provided results of an artistic research and showcased the best features of an artistic form. The Danish textile manufacturer Percy von Halling-Koch was impressed by Roth's work, which he felt would make good patterns for textile and invited Roth to work as a designer in his firm based on *Composition 2 C* (Buhmann, 2004).

It is very important to emphasise that the phenomenon of artists' books allowed many artists to engage in open discourse via the instrument of affordable independent publishing. Before that, the audience was mainly only exposed to the reflections of successful artists. Even though their art works often discussed the hurdles and difficulties faced by an artist, the sole fact that they found an audience demonstrated the doubtless success of their author. However, independent publishing allowed even less renowned artists to share the results of their creative process with the audience. As a result, people had an opportunity to reflect on the specifics of artistic processes on a much deeper level. The artistic experience stands out in cases of successful and less successful works of art and art projects, and artists' books are among the few ways of analysing the experience of the latter, and that contribute to the accumulation of artistic knowledge.

The *Xerox Book* is one the best-known artists' books to present extensive results of artistic research. Its authors, Seth Siegelaub and John Wandler, as well as 25 other contributors, created an unprecedented art form that could be presented in art galleries. At the same time, this product of art was also considered to be one of the most interesting books on the conceptual movement because it reflects on its limitations and paradoxes. According to the authors, the aim of the *Xerox Book* was to share authors' ideas with the audience while saving artists immense amounts of money usually spent on art gallery exhibitions: 'You don't need a gallery to show ideas' (Norvell, 2001).

In the 1970s, the use of artists' books became widespread. Artists from different branches employed this instrument to promote their ideas as they recognized the unique opportunities provided by these products of art. Sheila Levrant de Bretteville

used it to promote feminist ideas in graphic design (Bohn, 2001). With the help of such an unusual medium, she managed to display her artistic experience in way that made many stakeholders change their opinions on gender stereotypes in society.

The tradition of using artists' books as a mechanism for raising important meaningful questions was established in the 1980s. Authors such as Buzz Spector, Janet Zweig, Karen Wirth, Robert Lawrence, Marshall Reese, and Nora Ligorano employed it to raise the topic of the book's role as a poetic, cultural, and aesthetic function (Drucker, 1995). Their example showed the path towards using artists' books to disseminate findings of artistic research, which is still followed by many modern authors.

Artists' books had turned into a popular academic discipline by the 1990s. A number of specialists started using them to aid their teaching and show the results of their artistic research. In many cases, artists' books were used as a teaching tool in engineering and liberal arts. For instance, Carol Barton used her books as a combination of sculptural, textual and mechanical products of art. These artifacts summarised the results of her artistic research as well as of her study of sculptural formats and engineering techniques. Thus, she was able to use her books in teaching three disciplines at once.

The fact that artists' books may be highly effective in the field of artistic research is confirmed by the growing attention among scientists towards the use of artists' books in arts education. For example, Kulp (2015) argues that artists' books may significantly contribute to the improvement of students' critical thinking and their understanding of the relationship between texts, images, and forms. Artists' books are much easier to interpret from the perspective of the author's creative processes than most other forms of art. Therefore, their inclusion in the curriculum of liberal arts at educational institutions was considered by scientists as a promising idea.

Similar ideas were also expressed by Burkhart (2006). The scientist pointed out that artists' books are relevant not only from the cultural but also from the historical perspective. They also draw interest because of their potential to encourage interdisciplinary research. Many artists' books show a broad picture of an artist, illustrating their preferences, expectations and desires. They bring the author and the reader closer to each other, simplifying and intensifying their dialogue. As a result, the audience gets a chance to follow the course of the author's ideas, capturing the specifics of his or her artistic research.

## **Second part: My own process of making an artists' book**

My own attempt to capture knowledge from artistic research was challenged while working on the book project *Ingeborg Stana Landscape, Painting* (2019). In this section of the article, I will describe the challenges and the potential I came across during the process. An overall feature of artists' books is that the artist is involved in the process. The acknowledgement potential that emerges in artists' books shows that you can envisage a connection between art and research in the sense of a thinking and self-reflective enterprise. In my view, there is an important distinction between artistic research and artistic practice, however. I see them as two different activities with different aims. As an artist, I create art, while as a researcher, I accumulate artistic knowledge based on artistic experience. The criteria for assessing artistic research are therefore different from those used in assessing artistic practice. In brief, it can be seen as alternating between two different positions, *creating* and *viewing*. In order to complete the project as artistic research, I was dependent on both components; to be in a creative process, and then to view the completed work, the process and the results. The decisive factor was putting the reflective process into writing. The challenge was how the artistic work could be translated into appropriate terms, language and reflections. I found myself faced with an ontological and genre-based dilemma, but at the same time with an opportunity to expand my understanding of my own artistry.

Personally, my biggest challenge was how to write a critical reflection on a creative process that I am so familiar with and in which I live. Initiating critical reflection requires distance. It is an ontological fact that just as a patient cannot be their own therapist, an artist cannot be their own critic. According to Merleau-Ponty the tension lies in understanding and not understanding, to make do with whatever perspective has been taken (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

The first-person and third-person perspectives are possible positions, and they always stand in relation to each other. The first-person perspective is my own, I am always my own subject. When I enter the third-person perspective, which comprises an objective view, I will never be able to completely enter a first-person perspective. By this, Merleau-Ponty means that we can never entirely understand another person's perspective. It means that as an artist, I understand art based on my own lived life, even if I try to take on another position. The other great challenge was choosing a genre. I had a fundamental problem in how to articulate myself. How to express the experience of creating art in words, in a recognisable verbal language? Most artists find themselves in a constant process of self-reflection, which is mainly

spontaneous, intuitive, either overly self-congratulatory or self-critical. To reflect critically at an academic level is a different genre altogether.

The understanding of a critical reflection builds on the use of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt school of sociology. They wrote about the negative aspects of modernity and wanted to identify its dominating forces. According to Brookfield (1995), reflection becomes critical when it sheds light on power relations and becomes conscious of the dominating assumptions that influence one's practice. Fook (2002) relates critical reflection to a post-modern understanding of knowledge, which assumes that there are many forms of knowledge. A possible approach is to re-examine established discourses in the field. Although it has traditionally been thought that these discourses dominate, colour and, to some extent, even encapsulate experience, the diversity of the artist's book shows that styles of language exist for different genre conventions within each separate artistic form. The quest to find a good balance between the artistic process and the critical-academic process was complex.

Some artistic research might help to highlight alternative ways of understanding situations, but the requirement of clearer methods and systems can contribute to erasing these differences, as they lead to reflection becoming more academic in nature. Much of the projects' originality documented in artist's books can be found precisely in the openness around what reflection can entail. We cannot impose rules for the use of discourse in every situation, because practice takes place in unclear, uncontrollable and unpredictable situations. In some instances, the artistic process should not be combined with the critical-academic process, here understood in the sense that the artistic process should be left to a more intuitive creative process. The language that returns to silence, the French author, Georges Bataille calls poetry (Bataille, 1957). In poetry, he believes that 'in its great defeat' philosophy finds its accomplishment. Sometimes it is appropriate to let go of critical reflection and instead break out in poetry.

The solution we tried out in the book was to show variations in reflection of creativity, the process and the result. Method descriptions, which describe the intention, approach and use of visual tools, inform the text from my sketch pads, almost like a chemist's diary. Since our intention was to provide insight into the creative process from start to finish, this type of method description proves limiting. It shows how an idea emerges and is developed visually, but only up to a certain point. To work on a technically advanced layer painting is comparable to laboratory work, but it changes during the process and becomes more similar to the work of a poet.

In terms of genre, the challenge was to render the process and the results into words, and we tried to solve this by incorporating other voices into the creative process. The art historian Erwin Panofsky writes that part of the interpretation process should consist of reading as much as possible when engaging with the composition, but he offers no suggestions for what to read (Panofsky, 1955). It means that the researcher absorbs everything, be it philosophy, art history, technology, natural science etc. The point is that many aspects can prove relevant when describing and reflecting on artistic works. The exchange of reflections I had with art historian Jørgen Bakke, authors Erlend Loe, John Erik Riley and Nikolaj Frobenius and philosopher Espen Hammer during this work was crucial to being able to view my own practice from different perspectives. My own texts are presented alongside fiction and non-fiction alike. The way I see it the essays shift between being objective, personal and with a conceptual distance.

The texts in the book belong to different genres. In the essay 'The ecological-sublime' by art historian Jørgen Bakke, artistry is placed in a wider artistic and cultural-historical context from the end of the 1990s up to the present (2019, pp. 13–73). The main part of the text is presented as an overview of my childhood and education and an overview of my production. Bakke then discusses key themes in my artistic works. Jørgen Bakke is an academic, and the text is objective in relation to the traditional academic standard. The philosopher Espen Hammer views art based on the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's ideas on natural beauty (2019, pp. 120–121). Hammer is also an academic in the traditional sense, like Bakke, but he writes from a conceptual distance. The authors John Erik Riley, Erlend Loe and Nikolaj Frobenius are not academics but writers of fiction. Instead of broaching the issue from an art history perspective (something he says he is not qualified to do), Riley chose to take Norwegians' general ideas about heading for the mountains at Easter as his point of departure.

There is a reason he made such a prosaic choice. His writing process took place in a mountain cabin in Svinslåa Svinslåa, a stone's throw away from Kvitfjell ski resort in Oppland municipality, where he listened to a voice on the radio reporting on recent avalanches and search parties (2019, p. 87). Loe, like Riley, writes based on his own personal situation and chooses to reflect on the creative process based on his own relationship to time (2019, pp. 11–115). In the two essays by Frobenius, who is both a fiction writer and a scriptwriter, he approaches the works from a film historical perspective (2019, pp. 93, 126). He places the artworks in a genre by employing formal devices from classic avant-garde films.



The authors' reflections generated theories in a different way than for non-fiction texts. The literary texts are characterised by another type of language, with a perceptual intimacy and personal approach. A first-person perspective that is theirs. A non-fiction writer does not necessarily attempt to communicate a message that is different from that of an art historian, philosopher or scientist, but they use a different language. It is about viewing and reflecting. While an academic would use reliable sources or evidence, spanning paragraphs, the author communicates similar sentiments in a few lines. We reflect on the same things, but we articulate them differently. The artist's book employs and often subverts contradictions between academic and poetic, non-verbal and verbal expression. The writers have their own literary standards and personal interpretation of the images — one tries to be objective, the other is highly subjective, but both artists and researchers view their work as production of knowledge.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate how artists' books contribute to the process of capturing and disseminating insight from an artistic process. In my own project, the most uplifting part of it was perhaps how other people's thinking managed to situate the art in a broader context with more room for reflection, i.e., in a universe of theory and terms. Their terms and theoretical perspectives contributed to linking the creative process to a wider academic conversation in a way that is perceived as relevant to the work of finding a vehicle for reflection within academia.

In classical rhetorical theory, arguments are envisaged as features in a landscape. When the right argument is to be found for the case in question, this landscape must be explored in search of arguments used in similar cases. Traditional knowledge production has taken place at universities and within research, but in the 1990s the term 'new knowledge production' entered the vocabulary, which is based more on solving practical problems and is used in interdisciplinary projects. Artists and researchers who are involved in interdisciplinary projects are interested in the same things, but may (?) use a different language. Discussion and reflection on different ways of understanding is necessary and rewarding. It requires us to venture into new fields and be open to cultures and values from other fields.

In conclusion, it seems justified to assert that artists' books are an effective genre for disseminating the findings of artistic research, particularly if the immanent challenges of the artists distance and self-reflection is adequately resolved. First, they can attract the audience's attention to specific questions raised by an author with the help of visual forms. Second, they may help readers understand the artistic processes on a

deeper level by displaying the factors and considerations driving the authors' creative processes. Third, artists' books are now an affordable medium both for authors and for readers, and can therefore be considered one of the best ways for readers to comprehend the nature of artistic processes from the perspective of not only successful artists but also of unsuccessful art projects.

## About the author

Ingeborg Stana is professor at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University and a visual artist, working across varied media, while fundamentally focusing upon the attributes embedded in creativity, drawing and painting practices.

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