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TOUCHING BOOKS -

About the experience of displaying artist books open & uncovered over
25 years of gallery activities

by Susanne Padberg

If you see Carina Hesper's artist book *Like a Pearl in my Hand* (2013) the way contemporary artist books are usually exhibited, you won't see anything—no, nothing at all. Even if opened to the normal double page to which books are reduced when displayed in a showcase, you would only see some black pages, a series of non-glossy black pages behind glass. And that would mean you would miss a particularly touching book. But it is only touching if you touch it! You need time, attention, physical warmth, and patience to see the text and images of this book because it has to be touched! And touched in the most radical way imaginable: not wearing gloves, not only on the book's edges, not just with your fingertips, but with the entire palm of your hand! The pages are printed with three layers of heat-sensitive ink; only through the warmth of the hand does the top black layer temporarily disappear. Underneath are hidden—or better, are revealed—life-size portraits of disabled and rejected children, with their name and age printed on the back. For anyone who has ever dealt with original prints and who appreciates their value, both material and immaterial, and who knows what is essential when conserving paper, it truly takes some willpower to uncover the images of the book this way (and only this way).



Why do I describe this in such detail? Not only because I think it is an extraordinary work that no one should overlook, but also because it is a radical example of why artist books must be displayed wide-open, and why, if at all possible, they should be shown outside locked showcases. And, I know what I'm talking about: I run the gallery DRUCK & BUCH in Vienna, which specializes in contemporary artist books. I have been displaying books this way for twenty-five years, largely without loss. Here I would like to share a few thoughts about my experiences, as well as some possibilities and ideas.

As befits a gallery, I have been accompanying and representing artists for years, showing their books in my own gallery and curating them in other places, promoting and taking books on trips and to trade fairs, and visiting collections and collectors around the world. Behind this is always the intention to sell, which means that the books I display must be sellable—that is, they must remain undamaged and survive all the handling just described.

And yet, my uppermost principle has always been to let anyone who visits a show look at the books the same way they were imagined, planned, and executed, that is, in their entirety, from front to back cover. I don't want to reduce them to the status of an object by presenting them behind glass like a panel painting. I am guided by the dynamics and intrinsic process of artist books, not by their object-like nature. Their

tactility and materiality, their dynamics, the rhythm of leafing forward and back: all of these aesthetic aspects, as intended by the artist, should be felt in one's own hand.

For this, we have developed different ways of curating exhibitions of artist books, as well as different ways of displaying them. This is what I would like to present here—as well as some related experiences.

Of course, the simplest way to exhibit artist books is to display sample copies provided by the artist for the purpose of the show, which will not begrudge some signs of use. Another important way is for me to be present at a show— something that can be ensured only rarely. But being present is ideal; it is even better if I am the person leafing through and showing the book! Nonetheless, experience has shown that most visitors are more careful than expected, asking with almost childlike excitement whether they can really touch the artist books. An open book commands respect that should not be underestimated! I often observe visitors wanting to “protect” the books by picking them up with both hands, a private gesture that is actually rather counterproductive. I have also noticed that visitors often spend a long time intensively studying books. It is not uncommon for gallery visitors to stay more than an hour.

I do have a large case where I display very fragile books, unique copies, or those that can be easily displayed open, such as long concertina books, behind glass. And in rare cases, I show certain books only on request. We have also developed a way of presenting books by floating them on relatively high shelves, not allowing easy access but still offering the possibility of seeing them directly. Most of the books, however, lie on or in movable cube-shaped shelves, which invites visitors to leaf through them on the spot.



Works that are particularly robust and visually eye-catching are placed on hanging shelves in the street-front windows. The room is large: The books have enough space to breathe and visitors have enough space to move.



Show openings are of course a special challenge: lots of people, open books, drinks. So, we only serve water and white wine, and only outside on the sidewalk, and we don't serve anything to eat. There is a good pub right across the street.

And another observation: At shows we display the books open, but almost every visitor who looks at a book from beginning to end carefully puts it back in its place—closed. I never know if they are just being protective of the book, or are following an inner sense of order, or are simply finishing the private act of looking at a book. It is always somehow touching.

P.S. I wrote this article at a time when no one was thinking much about traveling, being close, or touching—actions that have basically been banished since mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That, of course, had an impact on the theme of this article! All the aspects of directly experiencing artist books, mentioned above—openly being allowed to touch them at shows—are now part of a different reality. We hope it's a reality that we can soon ignore unscathed. In the coming weeks, to celebrate the gallery's twenty-fifth anniversary, we will be showing a selection of fifty artist books that I consider

particularly significant—they will be shown open, but we will have limited access and will not hold the planned events, since no more than four visitors may be admitted to the gallery at the same time. As a consequence, I have delegated the touching to myself. For my imaginary counterpart—in other words, you—I leaf through every single book from beginning to end, front to back. The only thing you can hear is the sound of the turning pages. Every book can be viewed from start to finish at the website www.druckundbuch.com. Of course, you see them at the speed I have chosen, but it is also possible to stop the videos at any point. While this is certainly not a substitute for you looking through the book yourself, it is nonetheless a hopeful step toward overcoming the current barriers! I am curious about the result.

