

FIRST ENCOUNTER

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**B**efore I started to write this short essay, I was trying to remember the first artist's book I bought and how I knew it was an artist's book rather than ... I hesitate ... than a what? A book book? It is clumsy, even stupid, as a term, but I think I am obliged to use it. Book books had been my experience before that chance buy, but even my book books had different statuses – the crime novel or other examples of genre fiction are housed in a place separate from, say, psychoanalytic theory or philosophy, neither of which nudge up to nineteenth-century French novels, although the latter are in close proximity to authors of the Oulipo. And then, of course, there are the shelves that hold the pleasures of Éditions Gallimard, such as its Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series printed on bible paper to allow a greater page count, with celluloid dust jackets; or Éditions de Minuit, with their austere covers decorated only by a star, the letter M, and a border in blue; or my latest passion, the publications of La Fabrique, their lovely colour combinations on the covers with blocks of type that should not work but do.

I know *these* to be books and others to be artists' books for sure, but I am deflected from pursuing the source of this certainty in considering what should be the correct plural of 'status', as a Latin fourth declension noun, which depends on context, as, of course, does a book or books, and perhaps this is not entirely a distraction, for I would like to think about the situations where things happen or are met. Last night (which will be long ago when a reader of this essay appears, who at the moment is quite abstract) I returned from an opening of an exhibition, or rather, a quartet of exhibitions, in the small French town of Château Gontier. There is a general title, *L'Art est la chose*, which encompasses the solo exhibition/s of Anabelle Hulaut and David Michael Clarke in one place, the Chapelle du Genêteil (Le Carré, centre d'art contemporain), and three exhibitions in three other locations: the Musée de l'art et d'histoire, the Salle Gothique, and the Médiathèque. It is the last of

these to which I will refer, as place and as context.

There, the artists, as curators, have assembled with great care and attention to detail an engrossing display of objects, editions, multiples, and books, their own and from public and private collections. These elements take up a curious position in the location, which is a place devoted to exchange, where books, periodicals, newspapers, music and film recordings are arranged systematically for reference or borrowing. It is a public space, a communal space for activities that are largely private or internalised. The objects seem perfectly at home, part of and apart from their surroundings at the same time. Most of them are in vitrines, but then, so is nearly every temporary display. They are removed from consideration, from pocketing or holding, from the flicking through of pages, but some I have touched in the past. The exhibition is entitled *Vide-poches*, but it is removed from the untidy act of emptying one's pockets by the thoughtfulness with which it is arranged, the next step, I suppose, in finding a place for what has been taken out, making a system for what has been scattered. In emptying the pocket, finding the scraps of things, one is reminded of what has been lost or what can be lost, if it is not collected. This is the way of small editions, the box of books that seems to last forever and then suddenly there are only one or two or worse still, none, and one cannot recall selling any or distributing them in response to any fervent demand. But they are gone, nonetheless.

The arrangement or collection includes artists' books among the book books. I know this because I know some of the artists. I know this because I have some of the books in my library, such as those of Roberto Martinez, which still make me envious of their sheer *cleverness*, such as *M*, in which he adds the rest of his signature to the M of ornamental funerary letters (the cover, of course, has a black border). I remember all his books, recognising them from their covers or opened spreads.

I recognise something about other books on display there, even when

I do not know who has produced them or when I do not have a copy myself (but would very much like one) such as the magazine format of *Collective Consciousness* that lies open at a double page spread of Olga Adorno in the Louvre, shouting the names of artists in a one-minute performance – she is on the right-hand page, and the stuttering names on the other – *tin-tin-tin-tor-retto*. I even know them for what they are when they look like the book books around them, which cede them a place, conditionally and enclosed, removed from use or circulation but present nonetheless. I even know it when the book is nothing but text, which some sources, like the Smithsonian, say is *only* a book (their italics, not mine) and so belongs on the shelves of a library, to distinguish it from an art object, which presumably has no place there. But I like my artists' books to live on the shelves of my library, even when they insist on falling off, as they are often placed with the cover facing outwards, leaning on and covering book books, or do not fit because they have been produced as too tall or too tiny, or have no spine to read and thus locate (or locate and read). I like the way they slip in between book books, too, when they confuse matters of identification, classification. Perhaps this is when I like them best, but not, I think, always.

I have book books that I do not read, which I treat as objects among other objects though I do not think of them as artists' books. Some of the books I have read become objects, retained for re-reading or simply to furnish a room. This does not make them artists' books, however attractive the cover, the design, the weight and type of paper, the way the spine breaks or falls; it does not make them book-like objects, as Stephen Bury writes of artists' books, adding that an artist's book is intended as a work of art in and as itself. I do not think that I am very keen on the book as sculptural object or the single product, though I have some examples of both, of which I remain fond, even when I am irritated (I need to be able to read, I am lost without that). I shudder a bit at the craft tradition, out of snobbery, I suppose, but also because of a certain unease or disapproval of too much skill, even when I like or

make what is well crafted. Often I am surprised – by books and book-like objects as much as by my shift in taste, my inconsistent desire – though it must be said many of the books in *Vide-poches* are cheaply produced, and this is oddly satisfying. They are not finely printed *livres d'artiste*. There is casualness about many, a cheery insouciance and a sense of democracy, one found often in slim pamphlets, made with modest means and all that.

I am back where I started. This happens increasingly. I had intended to write about some books I have bought recently, and to tell the reader where they may be found in my library, the positions and places they have been allocated (or have taken, but that is too fanciful). I was going to write in a descriptive manner, as though weighing up the book in all its aspects. I would still like to do so, but it would be terrible, or terribly embarrassing anyway, if these were submitted for the prize on offer and received no other reward than a mention here. I do remember that the first book I knew with certainty to be an artist's book (and it is an issue where the apostrophe goes, I believe), even though it was as a particularly dull student who knew little about anything to do with art, was Ed Ruscha's third book, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*. It is professionally produced, offset printed, but nonetheless rather democratic (but all books are that, or at least should be, no?). There was something about the constraint, the lack of context, the mundanity of supposed subject matter and format ... it was strangely exciting. It still is. I bought it (it seemed expensive to me at the time, and has accrued value since) in the bookshop at Nigel Greenwood Gallery, located just off Sloane Square, and so it had a place, one that gave it a context for the beginning of my collection, one that allowed recognition. Now it is in an extension to my library, in a room that serves for more than reading. I imagine this purchase as the founding moment – and yes, I imagine it, because all such moments are reconstructed retrospectively – of my first encounter with the book that is not a book book.





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