INKUBATOR

An exhibition of artists' books and multiples

Curated by David Faithfull

Text by Neil Cameron

Introduction

INKUBATOR, a critically acclaimed exhibition held at Edinburgh Printmakers from 17 March to 05 May 2007, highlighted some 200 artists' books and multiples created by a variety of contemporary international artists. Curated by the Edinburgh-based artist David Faithfull, it aimed to broaden exposure and accessibility. Most of the works were presented on open display and available to be handled by visitors, thereby allowing a refreshingly direct, hands-on experience.

The approach was to classify the works according to three distinct but inter-related themes – *The Study*, *The Log Cabin* and *The Landscape*. These were signified by creating an installation using elements such as specially designed wallpapers created at Edinburgh Printmakers by David Faithfull and Nicola Murray, along with handmade floor-coverings, chairs and other faux-domestic paraphernalia. This allowed the gallery space to be structured thematically and provided a backdrop of rich but subversive visual interest, and allowed the books on display to be perused as though the gallery had been transformed into a personal rather than institutional space. *The Study* was decorated with a wallpaper designed by Nicola Murray which transformed genetically manipulated allotment vegetables into a William Morris-style pattern,

while David Faithfull connoted *The Log Cabin* with a wallpaper of repeated oak-branches to evoke a sense of an entangled, mystical forest. This theme was also evoked in the catalogue, designed by David Faithfull and Neil Cameron, the text of which was set in Gutenberg type and enlivened with imagery derived from the first Penguin edition of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau.

Highlighting work by artists including Frans Baake, Pavel Buchler, Otto Dettmer, Helen Douglas, Zoe Irvine, Wiebke Loeper, Colin Sackett and Miranda Schofield, the exhibition was described by one reviewer as "the best means of looking at this most underrated and misunderstood art-forms I have ever seen." (Iain Gale, *Scotland on Sunday*, 22.4.07)

Catalogue text by Neil Cameron

Do you see this square old yellow book, I toss I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about…?

It was with these lines that the poet Robert Browning introduced the physical evidence in the story of *The Ring and the Book*, the curious tale of the mysterious Count Guido Franceschini. These were the lines that came vaguely to mind when the artist David Faithfull asked me if I would write something for an exhibition on artists' books – an exhibition where visitors would be free to handle many of the works on display. In offering this chance to have a direct physical experience with productions which would normally only be available in specialist galleries and booksellers, there is a motive to try to democratise them. This seemed like an engagingly open and trusting attitude in a milieu which tends, however yellow the books may or may not

be, to have internal conversations between artists, publishers, curators and collectors rather than external dialogues with a wider public.

Artists' books have a long and complex background, and in this context it is only possible here to draw out a few diagnostic themes. In some respects, the artist's book can be traced back to medieval illuminated manuscripts. Some of the earliest European examples, such as the *Book of Kells* from around 800 AD, do not simply utilise text and image together but integrate them profoundly, allowing analogies to be made with modern idioms which are also concerned with this interrelationship, such as concrete poetry. Of course any history of book-making has to mention Johannes Gutenberg, the man who is credited with the invention of moveable type in the mid 15th century, the starting-point for techniques of mechanical reproduction which lasted until the development of the computer. Book-making and print-making are obviously closely allied, but the potential of the print as a separate entity with its own aesthetic validity found particular emphasis in the great series of wood-cuts and engravings produced by Albrecht Dürer in the years around 1500. In etching, the technical innovations and quite exceptional ability of the French artist Jacques Callot in the early 17th century took that medium to a level of sophistication which, arguably, has never been surpassed. In skimming through this subject, it is tempting to leap forward to the late 18th century to William Blake's highly idiosyncratic illuminated books such as the *Songs of Innocence* and then move on to the revival of pre-Industrial craftsmanship by William Morris and the Kelmscott Press in the mid 19th century, but the intervening period saw some surprisingly modern-looking productions which ought to be better-known, notably Gaetano Zompini's extraordinary large-format book of etchings from 1753 showing earthy, unidealised

representations of Venetian street-life. Following a rather different trajectory is the phenomenon of the *livre d'artiste*, where an artist illustrates a book written by someone else, as Edouard Manet famously did with *The Raven* by Edward Allen Poe. Later in the 19th century, the sinuous, sensual designs of the English artist Aubrey Beardsley took book-illustration to heights of self-conscious aestheticism. These are just a few examples which signal the breadth and diversity of themes which form the historical background to the artist's book.

It is perhaps only in the 20th century that the artist's book fully develops its own genre, defined in terms of the book as a complete work of art in its own right. Such productions may be handmade, are often created in numbered editions and typically interrogate the conventional format of the book. Because of this the parameters of the genre merge with related fields such as sculpture, print-making, book-binding, mail-art and poetry. This plurality was evident from some of the first modernist productions in the field including Marcel Duchamp's sculptural book-objects and the politically charged commentaries of the Constructivist El Lissitzky. In England, Wyndam Lewis produced the journal *Blast*, designed as a vehicle for his revolutionary Vorticist ideas with an aggressive approach to colour and typography which was a powerful later influence on subversive graphic design. The 1960s and 1970s saw a particularly rich period of experimentation with the production of conceptual book-based works by artists such as Sol Lewitt, Ed Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner, while the Joseph Beuys used multiples – editions of an art-object – as totems for his quasi-Messianic imagery. Ruscha's use of books of photographs as a mechanism for recording aspects of everyday experience and imbuing them with evocative power has been particularly influential and you can see this theme

continuing in the present day with artists such as Wiebke Loeper. In the later 20th century, Anselm Kiefer has maintained the power of the artist's book to haunt the present with images and words from a collective past. A more personal iconography has been expressed by Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose use of the book was merely one weapon in a creative armoury which encompassed subjects ranging from the imagery of the Scottish fishing industry to the continuing and subversive relevance of the classical tradition.

While there is in some quarters a tendency for the artist's book to be defined by exclusivity or rarity, the *Pocketbook* series, edited by Alec Finlay, has seen the genre expand into a much wider and popular context with works such as David Shrigley's *Grip*. In the same series, Helen Douglas has demonstrated in *Unravelling the Ripple* that it is possible to use the medium to express narrative through photographic images alone. In essence, then, artists' books cannot be corralled into narrow fields. The nature of the genre is that it interrogates its own form. In the historical context of the illustrated book that brings to mind the medieval *Bestiary* in which the pelican is said to peck and bleed its own breast in a metaphor of sacrifice. Metaphors are indeed central to this exhibition as David Faithfull has sought to bring order to the multiplicity of approaches to the contemporary artist's book by defining three key areas within the main exhibition area, clearly signalled by different visual codes. These are the study, the log cabin and the landscape, themes that are interrelated in various ways. Where they overlap most densely, there is a philosophical intertwining between leaves of trees and leaves of books.

Significantly, perhaps, in the context of the book, the celebrated Christian scholar, St Jerome, was depicted reading in very different contexts by two Italian artists of the later 15th century – by Domenico Ghirlandaio in a pristine study and by Giovanni Bellini in a remote landscape. Perhaps enclosure and emptiness are more closely related than they might first appear to be; the balance between spaces filled and spaces left empty is often particularly expressive in the design of artists' books, just as considered silence can be more eloquent than thoughtless speech. Wider connotations of 'the study' relate to scientific trial, musical experimentation, sketches in art, and, of course, the enclosed environment of the academic or writer, the quiet backdrop to intellectual exploration, the solitary venue for efforts that one day may escape the confines of four walls and find appreciation and understanding in other places.

The log cabin brings to mind *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, the writer who, in the 1840s, compressed a couple of years of solitary living beside a Massachusetts lake into a seminal book tracing four seasons of engagement with the natural cycle – environmental awareness at a time when such a term did not yet exist. Related to this theme are the connections between the nature of local materials and the influence they have on traditions of construction – whether the lumber-built cabins of the American frontier, the ice-block structures of the Inuit or the flagstone vernacular buildings of Caithness. Such indigenous traditions often have a subtext in our minds. In America, the log cabin is imbued with extra significance because seven Presidents, including Abraham Lincoln, were born in such humble structures. Because anyone with a degree of technical skill with wood and a few basic tools can build one, they seem imbued with the symbolism of independence and personal

fortitude and connote solitary, isolated lives such as that of the hunter. Their method of construction modifies natural materials but not so much that you cannot see the shadow of the tree, and the way in which each log is notched into the next creates an unintentional signifier of sturdy interdependence. Perhaps the resonances of this theme are not purely vernacular, as the Roman architectural theorist Vitruvius traced the origin of the classical column back to tree-trunks used as structural supports in classical temples. This is not merely fanciful; when Pausanias visited the Temple of Hera at Olympia in the 2nd century AD, it still had Doric columns made of oak. So the themes chosen to define the exhibition engender a rich series of connections. Wood – whether as forest, tree or paper – is at the core. These come together in David Faithfull's key image for this exhibition, a print composed entirely of leaf and branch forms made using oak-gall ink.

Just as the log cabin naturally has a rural context, so the study has an urban one. For David Faithfull, these themes merge in the phenomenon of the xylotheque (literally, 'wood repository') – a library of natural samples. Most countries have these to maintain collections of flora of all kinds and especially seeds. One was recently opened in northern Norway some 130 metres inside a mountain to provide protection against all potential disasters including the melting of polar ice and nuclear fall-out. Appropriately enough, the potential dangers of atomic energy production are something that concerns David Faithfull and he has explored these fears in works such as *Jettison*, a four-part piece which tracks an incident when a military jet almost crashed into the nuclear power-station at Torness on the east coast of Scotland.

On the surface, the landscape theme might seem like the most straightforward but in

fact it is the most elusive. The depiction of landscape in art is a vastly complex subject, just as perceptions of the natural world have changed throughout history. In art, as in experience, landscapes can be benign or threatening. The tradition of the *fête champêtre* in works by artists including Jean-Antoine Watteau, and later Edouard Manet, represented the countryside as a place for frivolous enjoyment. For others, such as the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, it could be imbued with sinister undercurrents and feelings of angst. The depiction of landscape can map out topographies of the mind. Today, perhaps there are some new dynamics which can be identified in perceptions of the land. The encroachment of the urban, the suburban and the industrial into places which have previously been a bulwark against development is clearly one issue. This is put into particular focus by the proponents and opponents of industrial wind-turbines in places of natural beauty or which have particular ecological significance. The environmental awareness shown in the work of artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton in the 1970s now seems more relevant and engaging than ever.

Increasingly, then, the countryside can be seen as a battleground for different interest-groups rather than a reservoir of changelessness. What for one person may be a beautiful, remote landscape can, from another perspective, represent a sector to be exploited. The sense of multiple viewpoints presented in some of David Faithfull's work is a rich metaphor for the fragmentation in our perception of what it is we are actually *seeing* when we experience natural environments. In his curation of this exhibition, he has also sought to demonstrate a sense of plurality - that diversity of viewpoints in all senses - through one medium. With its word-play on 'ink' and 'incubator', the content and aspiration of *Inkubator* are clearly signalled. Sent from

various parts of the world, the works on display represent a richly diverse library of ideas and formats for that most universal of creative productions, the book.

Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill.
Henry David Thoreau (1817-62)

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