

The NY Art Book Fair

Jason Fulford

In October 2008, Printed Matter hosted the third annual NY Art Book Fair in New York City. Over 130 rare book dealers and small publishers gathered to display and sell their publications. In 2006 and 2007, the fair had the feeling and the energy of a DIY record fair, with long communal tables set up in the old empty Dia space in Chelsea. Each year the fair has grown a little in size and in the attention it generates. This year, in the clean, labyrinthine Phillips de Pury space on West 15th Street, it felt more like an upscale art fair. Each booth had its own table and about 100 square feet of white wall space. The author shares his impressions and observations of the fair.

This is Yesterday

"Why". [sic] said the Englishman, "do the French call an apple 'pomme' when everyone knows it is an apple". [sic]

From the essay "To Those Who Feel" in the 1956 catalog *This Is Tomorrow*

There it sat, on a glass shelf. A chunk was missing from the cover, edged with tiny bite marks (a hungry mouse?). One can view the entire book online at http://thisistomorrow2.com/images/cat_1956/cat_web/FrameSet.htm, but here was the real thing. *This is Tomorrow* is as much an art book as it is a catalog. The twelve participating teams of architects, artists, and critics who created the catalog included Richard Hamilton, John McHale, John Voelker, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison and Peter Smithson, Nigel Henderson, and others. They must have considered the book a sort of traveling exhibition, or at least a companion to the actual exhibition, which took place in 1956 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. In the exhibition as well as the book, "the visitor is exposed to space effects, play with signs, a wide range of materials and structures, which, taken together make of art and architecture a many channelled activity, as far from ideal standards as the street outside."¹

Marcus Campbell Art Books of London was selling this nibbled copy, while Sims Reed Bookshop, a few tables down, was offering a clean copy for eight times the price. Each was from the original edition of 1,300, printed in 1956.

I found myself with conflicting feelings as I flipped through the yellowed spiral-bound square pages. I love the book as a fetish as much as for its intended messages, one of which is that art is where you find it, that is, everywhere. These conflicting feelings plagued me over and over as I wandered from booth to booth.

The book fair was a cross between an exhibition, an indoor market, a library, and a party. According to many of the book-sellers, the crowd was looking more than buying. The sheer volume of material on display was intimidating. I spent two days soaking it in and went away with a heavy tote bag and about a month's worth of inspiration.



Figure 1: Lawrence Alloway et al. *This is Tomorrow*. London, England: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956. In Jason Fulford's hand at the Marcus Campbell Art Books booth. Photograph by Jason Fulford.

Next to *This is Tomorrow* sat a copy of Marcel Broodthaers's book *A Voyage on the North Sea*. The book was made in 1973 to accompany a four-minute 16mm film with the same name. In a familiar theme for Broodthaers, he juxtaposes the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are two images in the book: a black-and-white photograph depicting a modern pleasure boat, sailing on a calm sea, and a late-nineteenth-century amateur color painting of a European ship on choppy seas. The images are repeated throughout the book in various arrangements and croppings.

In the beginning of the thirty-eight-page, French-bound book, Broodthaers warns the reader:

Before cutting the pages the reader had better beware of the knife he will be wielding for the purpose. Sooner than make such a gesture I would prefer him to hold back that weapon, dagger, piece of office equipment, which, swift as lightning, might turn into an indefinite sky. It is up to the attentive reader to find out what devilish motive inspired this book's publication. To that end he may make use, if need be, of



Figure 2: Lawrence Alloway et al. *This is Tomorrow*. London, England: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956. On a shelf at the Sims Reed Bookshop booth. Photograph by Jason Fulford.

select readings from today's prolific output. These pages must not be cut.

As Broodthaers predicted, many art historians, from Rosalind Krauss² to Thomas McEvilley³, have attempted to explain this work. The work is open enough to interpretation since each essay picks up on a different theme.

A few tables down, at Banana Books, sat another Broodthaers gem—a set of five self-published open letters from 1968–69. One letter included a stamp from his Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles,⁴ and was addressed to “Mon cher Kasper” (Kasper König, now director of the Museum Ludwig Cologne).

There were several vintage Hans-Peter Feldmann items for sale. *Specific Object*, run by Printed Matter's previous director David Platzker, displayed a framed set of Feldmann's *Sonntagsbilder* (Sunday Images). These are found images of “beauty,” including a girl holding a puppy, a couple silhouetted in front of a sunset, a kitten, two doves, and a landscape. The images are reproductions from other sources, silk-screened in black ink onto newsprint. Platzker's venture, “*Specific Object*,” also the name that Donald Judd gave to art objects which fall somewhere between the categories of painting and sculpture, “is an attempt to isolate distinct works of value—historically, monetarily and/or personally valuable—and show them in an isolated context without the artifice of visual confusion or clutter in hopes of allowing these works, or objects, their own place, space and time.”⁵

In 1968, Feldmann produced a set of *Bilder* booklets in an unsigned edition of 1,000 copies. The booklets are a few inches square and simply bound with staples. The titles, such as *11 Bilder*, are rubber-stamped in purple ink onto the cardboard covers. The pages contain black-and-white offset reproductions of photographic images, with no commentary. Each book has a theme, such as airplanes, views of women's knees, football players, or rubber animals on oriental carpets. The images were selected from Feldmann's own picture archive in which he categorizes appropriated images alongside his own pictures. Originally these *Bilder* booklets hung from a string in a gallery exhibition. Feldmann's work, in general, is about taking things out of their original context, and putting them into a new one, where they acquire a new meaning. Here, Feldmann's own

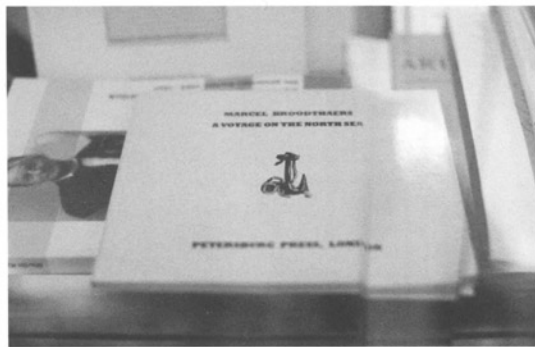


Figure 3: Marcel Broodthaers. *A Voyage on the North Sea*. London, England: Petersburg Press, 1974. At the Marcus Campbell Art Books booth. Photograph by Jason Fulford.

work is re-contextualized, sitting among Martin Kippenberger books and anonymous 1960s ephemera. Steven Leiber Basement was offering a few of the *Bilder* booklets. Leiber's own newsprint catalog is an art object in itself, titled *images*. Leiber says the catalog was inspired by Feldmann.

On the subject of re-contextualizing photographs, Berlin-based artist Michalis Pichler was sitting at his booth reading *Photoanalysis*, a self-described “structuralist play” written by Michael Kirby in 1976. Kirby's aim, which he achieves in a similar spirit to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*,⁶ is to challenge the reader to “read” photographs.

Re-Issues

The point is to make something new, something that doesn't even remotely remind you of culture.

From How To Make a Happening by Allan Kaprow

Perhaps because of the rising prices for vintage art books and ephemera, or maybe because many readers are more interested in older books for their content than for their value as artifacts, there is a trend for reproducing vintage material in new editions.

New-York-City-based publisher Primary Information, with the cooperation of the Estate of Allan Kaprow and the Getty Research Institute, has re-mastered and re-released in CD format Allan Kaprow's famous LP recording *How to Make a Happening*. In a beatnik-meets-professor tone, the founder of the Happening movement explains the rules that govern what can and cannot be considered a happening:

Forget all the standard art forms—don't paint pictures, don't make poetry, don't build architecture, don't arrange dances, don't write plays, don't compose music, don't make movies, and above all don't think you'll get a happening by putting all these together.

According to the publisher, “one of the more astonishing values to this recording is that it reflects and informs on a movement that fifty years on has come to be seen as a seminal shift in postwar contemporary art and performance, yet is discussed by its founder without this hindsight—it lacks sentimentality and most of all it lacks a sense of its relevance within this history.”

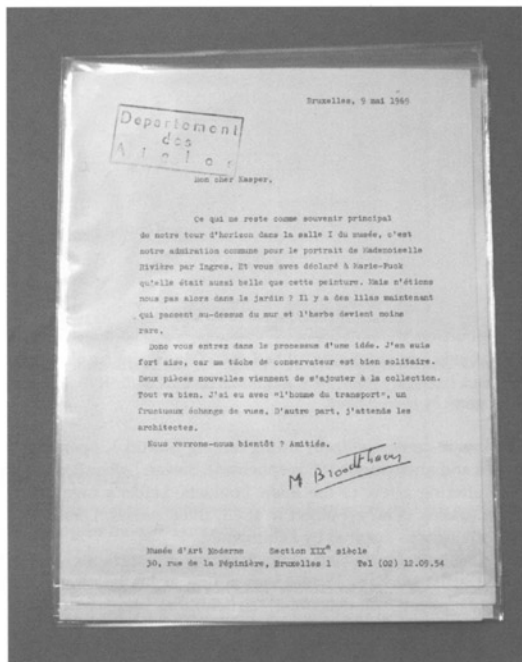


Figure 4: Marcel Broodthaers. Set of self-published open letters. At the Banana Books booth. Photograph by Jason Fulford.

The LP was originally released in 1966 by Mass Art, which went bankrupt shortly thereafter. In 1968, Alison Knowles of Something Else Press acquired the inventory and began to distribute the record again. Knowles silk-screened the title onto the record cover to mark the new Something Else edition. Primary Information's 2008 edition artfully pays homage to both of the previous publishers/distributors. Each CD jewel case has been silk-screened with Knowles type design, and a reproduction of the original Mass Art artwork is tucked inside.

Another reproduction of vintage material was found at the White Columns booth. Director Matthew Higgins has re-released some long-buried texts by art historian and author Vince Aletti. From 1974-78, Aletti wrote a weekly column called *Disco File* for *Record World* magazine. The column covered disco trends and included Top Ten playlists each week from various DJs. Aletti saved all of the original articles, which have now been photocopied onto 400 pages of white 8 1/2 x 11" paper and bound in a no-frills, white three-ring binder. The new edition, titled *Disco Files*, is limited to one hundred signed copies but may be reprinted for larger distribution at a later time.

Independent publisher Free Association has re-released, in English, Werner Herzog's famous diary *Of Walking in Ice*. In 1974, Herzog was told that his friend Lotte Eisner was on her deathbed in Paris. He became convinced that if he traveled on foot from Berlin to see her, that she would not die. And so, with a new pair of boots, a duffel bag and a compass, he set off. His

writings from the journey were published by Carl Hanser Verlag in 1978. At the time, Herzog remarked, "what I wrote along the way was not intended for readers. Now, four years later, upon looking at the little notebook once again, I have been strangely touched, and the desire to show this text to others unknown to me outweighs the dread."⁷

According to the new publisher, "Our aim is to develop an invaluable series of unique titles and projects that emanate conceptual and physical merit. Each edition represents both the intended vision of its author as well as a facet of our own belief system." Free Association was started in 2007 and produces books, films, objects, and recordings.

Running parallel to the NY Art Book Fair was the ARLIS/NY Conference on Contemporary Artists' Books. For the conference, publisher Dexter Sinister produced a special printed edition of texts that had previously been available in the library section of their Web site (<http://www.dextersinister.org>). The texts all relate to the idea of "library" in one way or another, through themes of distribution, copyright, and publication. Some of the texts included are an essay on "Benjamin Franklin the Postmaster" by David Reinfurt, *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar



Figure 5: Hans-Peter Feldmann. *Sonntagsbilder* (Sunday Images). Sixteen of an original set of twenty-one. At the Specific Object booth. Photograph by Jason Fulford.



Figure 9: Asha Schechter. Young Women Holding Koalas. Image used with permission of artist. <http://www.specifichings.com>.



Figure 10: A view of the fair. Photograph by Jason Fulford.

The fair represents a cross-section of what you'll find at Printed Matter on a regular day. The big difference is that bodies are attached to the books at the fair. These bodies speak and relate the contexts of the books that have been made and the ideas that are being floated for future books.

I particularly like to hear of future books, books that remain to be printed, bound—but still are discussed and described. In the past, the shape of the [MoMA] artists' book collection took its direct form from the type of material being distributed by Printed Matter since the mid-seventies. These types of materials collected at that time have become a central feature of the library's holdings. This also serves as a lesson that informs our collecting at the moment. Books by artists like Christian Boltanski, Richard Long, Annette Messager, Hanne Darboven for example—they were all little books when they were published, small gestures that have expanded in time to become large in their import. In reference to the fair, one is able to see many fascinating little books with small prices and earnest creators. The process of collecting these materials affirms not only the objects them-

selves, but also the general mode of attempting to distribute ideas, images, writings in an accessible and mobile format. Other things decide over time what small books turn into big books. It seems more important however to support the practices, the methods that will work towards future books.⁸

While I was obsessed with the many amazing vintage books on display, David was looking ahead. I'm looking forward to next year's fair.

Notes

1. Lawrence Alloway, introduction to *This is Tomorrow* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956).
2. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
3. Thomas McEvilley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 84.
4. "Marcel Broodthaers's Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles was a conceptual museum created in Brussels in 1968. It had neither permanent collection nor permanent location, and manifested itself in 'sections' appearing at various locations between 1968 and 1971. These sections typically consisted of reproductions of works of art, fine-art crates, wall inscriptions, and film elements. ... Broodthaers's museum represents a pioneering effort to dispute traditional museum practices by appropriating and altering them." (http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/1999/muse/artists_pages/broodthaers_museum.html).
5. <http://www.specifichings.com/about.cfm>.
6. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; New York: Penguin, 1972). The book was based on the BBC television series with John Berger.
7. Werner Herzog, foreword to *Of Walking in Ice: Munich-Paris, 11/23 to 12/14, 1974* (New York: Free Association, 2007).
8. David Senior, e-mail to author, November 2008.

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