



Johanna Drucker, Doru Basim, Judith Hoffberg, Erin Vignea and other audience participants  
photography by Stephen DeSart

If future generations are becoming increasingly fluent with electronic media and approaches that circumvent disciplinary boundaries, can we maintain a definition of the book that is founded upon essential elements? Will book arts survive for its contrasting emphasis on physical structure and craft, or be incorporated into a more ambiguous approach to art-making?

As an artist who works in sculpture and installation, Kelly Kaczynski perceived that structure is an element that is part of every artistic form, and that the other three elements can be selectively incorporated into a piece of work. She was very interested in the way that the four elements converge in the book form, only to be stretched out and utilized elsewhere. Kelly gave the example of a graduate student who was working in photography, a medium in which the appearance of the four elements is contingent upon the artist's choices regarding content and presentation. For his thesis project the artist decided to create a book because it allowed him to investigate these four elements simultaneously. From Kaczynski's perspective the four elements provide a vehicle both into and out of the book arts field.

Does an individual artist's practice determine the function of these four elements in any particular medium? Do the four elements allow us to stretch the book into broader arena? Does the fluid application of these elements give new meaning to the book?

We came to the Action/Interaction conference with a series of questions. By considering the book in terms of our own practices we were able to develop questions that would shape a discussion about the relationship of books to contemporary art. Many of our questions were addressed

during the discussion, but they were not necessarily answered. What we have discovered is that there is a tension in the field, and in our own way of thinking, between what the book is and has been, and what we want the book to be. But this tension is a good thing, capable of generating ideas and discussion. It indicates that the discourse is, in fact, progressing. It allows new questions to emerge; questions that reflect the diversity of perspectives that constitute our field, and the intimate relationship between our individual practices and contemporary art and culture. It is our obligation, as those who are dedicated

to the book, to continue to pose, discuss, and debate the questions that give shape to our field.

*Katie Marken teaches in the Foundation department at Tyler School of Art. She is interested in the relationship of narrative book structures to installed environments and she recently explored these ideas through a site-specific installation at The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia.*

*Lindsey Mears is a printmaker and writer. Using a digital camera and 19th-century photographic processes, including gum-bichromate and daguerreotype, she creates narrative artist's books and prints in small editions. She recently relocated to Virginia to pursue studio and garden design work.*

*Katie Baldwin is currently working on a series of walking maps based on her neighborhood in West Philadelphia, a project funded through an Independence Foundation Grant. She teaches at Drexel University and Moore College of Art and Design.*

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Jeff Rattner of MCBA examines artist's books at the exhibition.  
photography by Stephen DeSart



## ACTION/INTERACTION: BOOK/ARTS - KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

Each day's events at the conference were led off by an engaging keynote address by well-established artists in the field. The topics ranged from Audrey Niffenegger's reflections on her own path to becoming an artist to Marshall Weber's call to action for those just entering the field. Johanna Drucker's observations on why and how she makes books was given extemporaneously and so cannot be represented here in written form, but can be heard on the CD which accompanies this issue.

### An Unsentimental Education

Audrey Niffenegger

My birthday happens to be next Wednesday. I'm going to be forty-four, which once seemed to me an unimaginable age, the kind of thing one would need some extra-obscure physics to measure. But being almost forty-four has its advantages, and one of them is that I remember the rapidly receding, early days of book arts education. Because many of you are students, I thought it might amuse you to hear about the pre-modern era, when we didn't have the Internet, when there were no Keith Smith binding manuals, when, if you wanted to make rice paste, you had to begin by rubbing sticks together to make fire. There were a few book arts centers; one or two colleges taught letterpress. You had to patch it together. Book arts was not the world-dominating, paradigm-shifting Movement we know today. It was difficult to get an education, because book arts was not yet a discipline.

Book arts was a fetish. To practice this fetish you needed special equipment. At parties, people gave you weird looks when you tried to explain what it was exactly that you did for a living. These same people quickly went off to get a drink and never came back. After a while, I learned to say that I was a picture framer. People will happily talk about pictures they need framed, sometimes for hours. Then I would wander off to get a drink and never come back.

I used to make books when I was a child. My parents hoped I would grow out of it. They understood that few people want to read tiny handmade books scrawled in red ball-point pen in which ghouls terrorize small children. The market for autobiographies by six-year-olds is minute, indeed.

When I was a freshman in high school, about two weeks into the beginning of the year when I still wasn't sure whether I was going to continue going to school or kill myself, I got an

earache. I used to get these all the time. It was like having a root canal performed inside your ear. I spent two weeks laying on the living room couch with a heating pad clutched to my head. My mother went to the library and brought me a stack of books. One of them was Brian Reade's book on Aubrey Beardsley.

Aubrey Beardsley was an English illustrator who died in 1898 at the age of twenty-five. He was one of art's original bad boys, famed for his grotesque, taboo-flouting work. He was rumored to have had an affair with his sister, and was side-swiped by the scandal that sent Oscar Wilde to jail.

Beardsley died of tuberculosis. I immediately understood that he was a rock star, though his star was in a galaxy far, far away, so far that its light had taken almost a hundred years to reach me. But having been illuminated, I set out to emulate.

Beardsley's art was based on literary sources. He was also a writer, mostly of erotica. He worked in black ink on paper, and his work was reproduced by photo-engraving, which was new at the time. He had an amazing sense of line, an

almost Japanese feeling for composition. I didn't understand, at age fourteen, that it was weird to apprentice myself to this artist. No one told me that I would have been better off slavishly imitating Marcel Duchamp. Because of this, from the very beginning of my art education, I was off the beaten track. I am very grateful that it was so.

In high school I made a number of books using shirt cardboard and rubber cement. They are very interesting to look at today, as they are all quite brown and crunchy. By this time I had made a number of pen-and-ink drawings in my best Beardsliesque style. A friend saw them and said, "You should go see Mr. Wimmer. He'll teach you how to etch." I had never met Mr. Wimmer but I went and knocked on the door of the Art Department Office. A tall man with thick glasses opened it. I said, "Hi. Becky Heydeman said you would teach me etching." And he did.



Audrey Niffenegger  
"He Read Her Mind" from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*

