



Susan Hensel Gallery

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A READER'S ART: A Book Artist's Vision Becomes A 10-Year Tradition

By Zach Pearl, Minneapolis, MN.



I Always Had Wings, Camille M. Boggs.

Something special happened in the book arts 10 years ago in Lansing, Michigan. In an experimental exhibition space known as the Art Apartment (quite literally a downtown apartment gone avant-garde gallery) opened A Reader's Art, the first show comprised solely of book artists to ever debut in Michigan. It was an unexpected concept that met with delightful reception, capturing the minds of local residents and seizing the headlines of local press. Although the *Art*

Apartment was run by a cooperative of three women/visionaries: Leslie Donaldson, Nancy McRay and Susan Hensel. It was the latter who recognized that the citizens of Michigan needed to experience the Book as something more than the conventional paperback romance or the illustrated nursery rhyme; they needed to experience the Book as a narrative object. Showcasing more than 50 artist books from around the Midwest, the first instance of *A Reader's Art* also offered a rare privilege to the viewer: the opportunity to touch the work! As visitors entered the space they were greeted by a large bowl of white cotton gloves, and a warm invitation to explore the individual pages of each work. It was a highly progressive notion for its place and its time; no plexi vitrines, no guards standing watch, no force-fields of tradition or prestige that separated the art from its audience.



(From left to right) *A Reader's Art 1*, in the Art Apartment, E. Lansing, MI; *A Reader's Art 9*, at Susan Hensel Gallery, Minneapolis, MN.

Fast forward a decade, and head West about six hundred miles. The Art Apartment (unfortunately) no longer exists, but *A Reader's Art* lives on inside the walls of the Susan Hensel Gallery. Now, in its tenth year, the scope of the exhibition has gone from regional to international, but the concept has remained the same. As the years have gone by, themes have been applied and focuses on particular media have come into play, such as the 'sculptural', 'the handmade', the 'miniature'. However, at the heart of it all is still a passionate and down-to-earth gallerist who wants to educate and inspire the members of her community.



LOST, Susan Hensel.

For many years, a prolific book artist herself, Hensel (whose works can be found in the Library at the Museum of Modern Art NY, Michigan State University and the Minnesota Center for Book Arts among others) has cited that the real impetus of *A Reader's Art* came from the desire to educate the general public about the potential of the Book as a time-based and interactive method of storytelling. "It's always been important to me that people are allowed the chance to touch artworks, and interact with them," says Hensel. "With artist books, in particular, touching the work can lead to a sense of personal interaction with the artist, and a deeper sense of meaning, versus standing across the room from a painting with your hands politely behind your back." In the first two years of *A Reader's Art*, while it was housed at the Art Apartment, the reaction was exactly this: a fascinating, somewhat perplexing and occasionally transcendental experience that left its visitors feeling differently about their relationship to Art, as a whole. The local media responded with equal enthusiasm, as articles about the show appeared in the Detroit Free Press, the Kalamazoo Gazette, and the State News.

When the Art Apartment closed in December of 2002, *A Reader's Art* found a home at the Lansing Art Gallery. Enjoying much the same level of success in its new location, the university asked if it could retain the concept and title of the exhibition when Hensel decided to move to Minnesota in 2004. Fully aware that she had struck conceptual-gold, Hensel politely refused to leave *A Reader's Art* behind and brought the show with her to the Twin Cities area. Since its arrival in her Minneapolis gallery space in 2005, Hensel has modified the concept to include aesthetic and contextual themes. For instance, in 2005, as George Bush announced he would be running for a consecutive presidential term, Hensel decided to add a political angle to the selected works. "Not everything in the show that year was political," she recalls, "But a majority of it was. It was important for me that the works resonated with a large number of people in a way that was current."

The physical space of the Susan Hensel Gallery reflects these values. A modest,

but cozy space, with hardwood floors and high tin ceilings, the gallery invites a relaxed and almost conversational viewing experience. These days, during *A Reader's Art*, there are multiple stations positioned throughout the exhibit that are fully-stocked with white gloves, and the show has gained a local reputation for its hands-on policy. The show has also become noted for its regular inclusion of emerging book artists, some of whom have even been shown 'in-depth' with multiple works or complete series present. "One joy of this show has been starting to work with more emerging artists, and showcasing them," says Hensel with a stewardly tone in her voice. "I enjoy taking a risk with this show, and allowing them to show in some depth. It's important to help build the trajectories of their careers." Hensel also points out that there is a parallel effect of giving exposure to new and upcoming artists: exposing art to fresh audiences (in many instances, the friends, relatives and colleagues of the emerging artists). This phenomenon can also be seen clearly at *A Reader's Art*, as the visual-journals of students at Hudson High School in Wisconsin are often displayed alongside the work of seasoned book arts veterans. Hensel began a partnership with Hudson High School in 2006 through the chance encounter of teaching one of its faculty. Laura Gajdostik, an English teacher, signed up for a workshop with Hensel on creating narrative through collage. Gajdostik was so inspired by the workshop that she introduced visual-journaling as a part of her curriculum for her upper-level students, and the project has remained a prominent feature of the exhibition in most years since. "The families and friends of the high school students have probably been the most exciting visitors that we get during this show," Hensel adds. "Some of them have never been to a gallery before, let alone one about the Book Arts."



A Reader's Art 9, gallery visitors investigate last year's miniature-themed exhibition.

In anticipation of its tenth year, Hensel knew that she had to do something

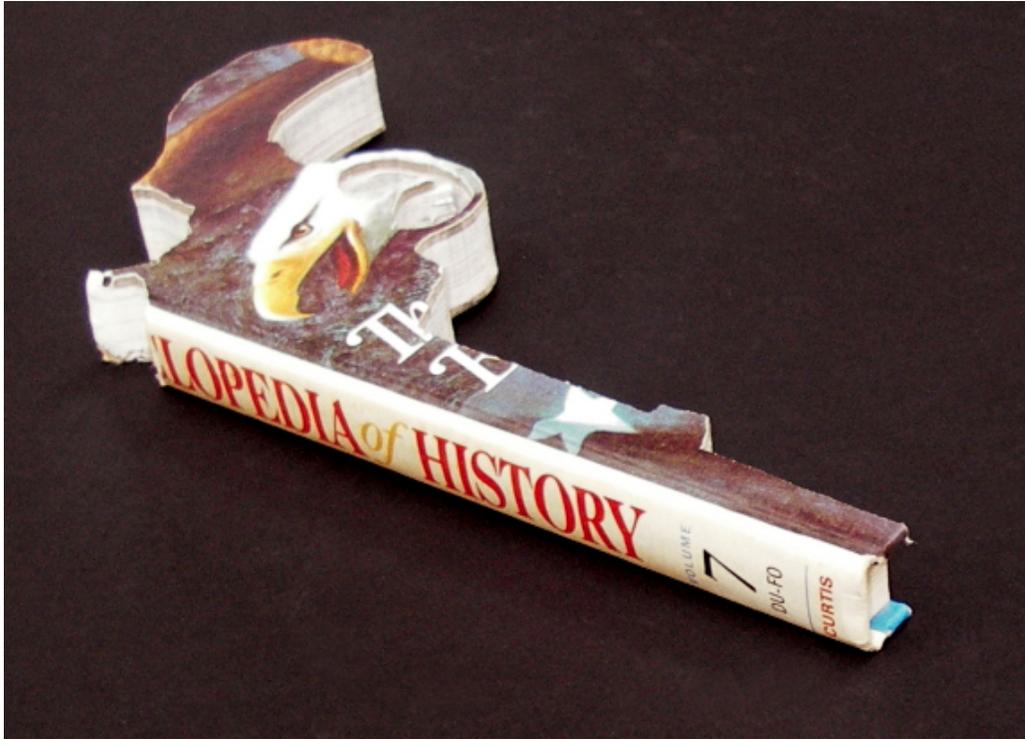
different; something more than just a variation on media or scale. She also knew that she had an obligation to continue increasing the exhibition's scope. In April 2009, Hensel got her solution when longtime friend and fellow artist Jon Coffelt came to the gallery with a unique and inspiring exhibition entitled *Communion*. Comprised of dozens of intricate, hand-sewn miniature pieces of clothing that memorialized their original wearers, *Communion* was greeted with awe-filled faces and eager hearts by all its viewers. Over the period of the install and the show's opening, Coffelt stayed with Hensel. They bantered about fantasy-exhibitions and ideals of gallery administration; leading up to Hensel's decision to commemorate the birth of her book arts brainchild by inviting Coffelt to guest-curate.

Coffelt was happy to oblige, as he had organized many a book arts show when his career took a 'gallery-centric' turn in 1993. Along with his longtime partner Shawn Boley, and friend Janet Hughes, Coffelt opened a progressive gallery space called Agnes. Located in Birmingham, Alabama, Agnes focused foremost on contemporary photography, but it regularly featured exhibitions by book artists and film artists as well. Active until 2001, Agnes gained national recognition for its mission to raise awareness about critical issues such as AIDS, homelessness, racism, imprisonment, etc. through visual art. Agnes worked frequently with the Video Data Bank in Chicago to show short film/video artists, and presented a key exhibition just after its founding entitled, *World Without Art* in conjunction with Visual AIDS to commemorate World AIDS Day. The gallery's forward-thinking, however, did not always gain support from its Birmingham patrons, who occasionally picketed its openings. One such incident earned Agnes an article in a December 1994 issue of USA Today. Coffelt ultimately decided to close the gallery in order to concentrate on his studio-art practice, and relocated to New York City. However, he couldn't stay away from curating for very long. In 2009, Coffelt played an instrumental role in organizing the first two exhibitions at Central Booking, a two-section gallery space in Brooklyn, NYC that allocates one gallery specifically for the book arts and an adjacent gallery to showcase work by book artists in other mediums.

With this year's *A Reader's Art*, Coffelt set out to make the selection of artists reach from the traditional to the conceptual, stating early on in the selection process, "You could say that I'm using this exhibition as a kind of survey of what's going on in the world of artist's books right now. I'm interested in artists utilizing every possible form of the book, from fine type-set handmade books to altered books to limited edition to out-of-the-book vernacular." And, Coffelt accomplished just that. His call-for-art caught the eye of hundreds of artists ranging from internationally renowned to locally emerging; their work spanning an equal spectrum in form and content.

Among the 51 artists selected, highlights include works by: Sara Garden

Armstrong, Beatrice Coron, Joan Lyons, Esther Smith, Florida-based and previous Susan Hensel Gallery exhibitor Claire Jeanine Satin, Doug Beube, Janet Hassinger and Miriam Schaer.



Encyclopedia of History 7, Janet Hassinger.

Janet Hassinger produces works that are immediate, metaphorical and political in their message. Perhaps, best known for her ongoing series of 'gun-books' (found codex texts on subjects such as civil rights and American history that have been carved into the shapes of hand guns), she is also a skilled watercolorist and curator. In addition to a small gallery that she operates in Houston, she and Jon Coffelt co-curated *The Book 'ever after'* for College of the Mainland Fine Arts Gallery in 2007.

The work of Miriam Schaer is a testament to the sculptural potential of the Book as well as the progressive notion of using multimedia to achieve a unique aesthetic and voice. Exploring issues of the Feminine in society, Schaer utilizes bustiers, brassieres, gloves, aprons and more as sculptural enclosures for her books. They are often accompanied by tiny collections of symbolic objects such as shredded letters, coins, pills and antique keys that are nested inside. Of her larger series, Schaer's 'girdle books' are particularly powerful and visually engrossing for their textures. Many of them feature heart-shaped accordion books that must be pulled out of the sculpture's chest cavity in order to be read.



(From left to right) *One Heart*, Miriam Schaer; *Ledger Domain*, Harriet Bart.

Also showing in *A Reader's Art* is Harriet Bart, a widely recognized and accomplished Minneapolis book artist who is mostly known for her large-scale sculpture and installation works. Bart's bookwork capitalizes on the study of iconography and the beauty of simple forms. Her bindings speak to her love for sculptural materials, with covers and cases of metal and wood that are characterized by a refined and almost puritanical design sense. However, once opened, Bart's book works reveal playful and striking juxtapositions of text and graphics that allude to the transformative nature of language.

Other noteworthy local artists included in this year's show are Jody Williams, Nora Lee McGillivray, Chip Schilling (who was recently named 2010 Minnesota Book Artist of the Year by the Minnesota Center for Book Arts), and Georgia Greeley who will also host an evening of poetry at the gallery on April 16th with members of the Laurel Poetry Collective.

As the opening steadily approaches, and the boxes and the envelopes trickle in from their respective destinations, Hensel looks back over a decade of *A Reader's Art*. The dog-eared postcards, the laminated pages of newspaper clippings and even the occasional sleeve of slides. The effect is overwhelming, and at the same time satisfying. What began as a simple but determined gesture, a single artist's endeavor to push the book arts into the radar of her immediate community, has become a tangible catalog of what's going on in the contemporary world of book arts and a decade-long tradition.

A Reader's Art 10 runs March 12th to April 23rd, 2009. There will be an opening reception at Susan Hensel Gallery on Friday March 12th, from 7 to 9 p.m. A full list of the exhibitors can be found online at susanhenselgallery.com

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