



INTERVIEW WITH CLIVE PHILLPOT

by David Maroto

Held between 30 April–28 May 2016

ENTREVISTA CON CLIVE PHILLPOT

RESUMEN: Clive Phillpot es un comisario de exposiciones, escritor y bibliotecario inglés. Entre 1977 y 1994 fue Director de la Biblioteca del Museo de Arte Moderno (MoMA) en Nueva York, donde fundó y comisarió la Colección de Libros de Artista. Anteriormente fue el bibliotecario de la Chelsea School of Art, en Londres. Ha escrito y editado numerosos artículos y libros relacionados con el libro de artista, cuyo concepto Phillpot ha contribuido decisivamente a definir. En los años sesenta y setenta el libro de artista emergió como un medio artístico accesible, al ser barato, portátil y distribuido masivamente. En esta entrevista intento comprender si aquellas expectativas han sobrevivido, actualizadas y transformadas en el fenómeno contemporáneo de la novela de artista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Novela de artista, libro de artista, accesibilidad, colección, fantasía.

ABSTRACT: Clive Phillpot is an English curator, writer, and librarian. Between 1977 and 1994 he was the Director of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where he founded and curated the Artist Books Collection. Previously, he was the librarian at the Chelsea School of Art in London. He has written and edited numerous articles and books on the topic of the artist's book,¹ whose concept he decisively contributed to define. In the 1960s and 1970s the artist's book emerged as an accessible art medium by being cheap, portable, and mass distributed. In this interview I tried to learn whether those expectations have survived, updated and transformed in the contemporary phenomenon of the artist's novel.

KEYWORDS: Artist's novel, artist's book, accessibility, collection, fantasy

¹ In this interview, Clive Phillpot uses 'artist book' and 'artist novel', whereas I use 'artist's book' and 'artist's novel' in order to keep consistency with these terms as they appear throughout my research.



[David Maroto:] I understand that one of your missions when you took the position as head of the library of the MoMA in New York in 1977 was to create a collection of artists' books. What was your ultimate goal by creating such collection? Was the legitimization of an incipient artistic medium one of your motivations?

[Clive Phillpot:] I should say that I did not go to MoMA with a mission. I went instead as an explorer, not a missionary. It so happened that early in 1977 when I went there for my interview, their exhibition *Bookworks* (1977) was on display, which coincided nicely with my interests. This also gave me the opportunity to talk about my experience with artist books. The result was that I felt there was an open door to proceed with making a collection. I should also say that by this time I considered that any library wishing to document contemporary art could not ignore artist books as a constituent element of the collection, thus 'legitimation' was not an issue. It was just good practice.

How does the artists' books collection sit in MoMA? Is it part of the library or is it part of the museum's art collection, along with paintings and sculptures? Also, I was wondering how a visitor would access the artists' books collection. Did you enable some sort of reading room considering the specific conditions of readership that such works would demand?

When I was beginning to discover artist books at the art school library where I worked, before MoMA, I thought it made sense to integrate them in the broader library collection, where appropriate as artist monographs. Thus facilitating chance encounters.

Having arrived at MoMA, with its closed access library, I then thought that collocating such books would have a value in facilitating comparisons within this expanding field, as well as grouping them for care and conservation, given that they were often published in small editions. But I proposed the suppression of cataloguing records that designated them as 'artist books' so that they might be considered as relevant as artist monographs in regard to their utility for research; as well, in a sense, to camouflage their identity as artist books, so that they might therefore be experienced without expectations. There is a very good account of the history of artist books at MoMA in Barbara Bader's *Modernism and The Order of Things: A Museography of Books by Artists* (Bader, 2010).

The current situation is that the library collects the relatively inexpensive books that I would nominate as 'artist books' while the Drawings and Prints Department collects those more expensive books that often utilize autographic print media, sometimes called 'livres deluxe'.

I asked about your experience with creating and managing the collection of artists' books because it resonates with the artists' novels collection that I am creating for another museum, M HKA in Antwerp. In this case, I took it as a 'mission' (probably a too grandiloquent word) to help to generate the perception of the artist's novel as a legitimate medium in the visual arts.

My propagandising for artist books was more of a solo effort. In an institution like MoMA I took the museum's needs and history into consideration, and became a 'missionary' in my own time and my own writing. So maybe our situations are different?

In one of the texts included in *Booktrek* (Phillpot, 2013:160), when talking about the fate of the artist's book from a present perspective, you state that:

The dreams of many for accessible art were rudely shattered. But some ingredients of this dream had never been very realistic. The dream that artists' books could be sold cheaply at

supermarket checkout points, for example, disregarded the arcane content of most existing artists' books.

At which point did you realise that the aspirations for the artist's book to be a 'democratic art form' were a dream rather than an effective reality?

This piece of writing was one of my attempts to burst the uncritical bubbles that were repeated over and over again in magazines and exhibition catalogues. However, it was still my belief that artist books could be, and often were, accessible – even expendable – art forms. In recent years another generation has been winnowing artist publications and choosing to reprint earlier works that originally appeared in small editions. This is the key to accessibility. Reprinting!

I would say that there are two ways of understanding (increased) accessibility. One implies that the artist's book is cheap, portable, and mass distributed. The other one affects the contents, which should be comprehensible to non-art related audiences. Would the confusion between these two be the reason why the 'supermarket fantasy' was never realised?

Well, David, I have criticised artist books as often having 'arcane content' but that objection was rather overdone in order to attack the various clichés that were in the air. However, to paint with such a broad brush in a calmer more balanced discussion such as this one, is not appropriate. For in reality, for me at least, it is often arcane content that draws me in to a book in the first place. So perhaps I would here pull back from the idea that artist books 'should be comprehensible to non-art related audiences', and say simply that artists might reflect on the potential audience for their publications when they are packaging their ideas.

If artist books were not relatively 'cheap', 'portable', and ideally capable of being 'mass distributed' I would lose interest in the medium. The price, the affordability, tells us about the aspirations of the artist/author.

I am interested in understanding the fantasy of the novel, which is the imaginary scenario that drives the artists' desire to write novels in the first place. Such fantasy, I believe, is mainly about increased accessibility. Thus, I wanted to discuss the artist's book from the same perspective, rather than from our art-world point of view. For us, to confront arcane contents might be exciting. But when one wants to distribute one's artists' books in a train station, it might be necessary to think differently if one wishes to reach a different audience.

Another way of connecting artist books with trains, and with a public, has been for the artists, or their helpers, to simply leave books randomly on the seats of trains for commuters to take away should they be sufficiently intrigued. But if the train station is your distribution site then connecting with an audience is not so simple. In fact this specific launch pad seems to me to have no advantage over a bookstore, except for the fact that the artist books get much closer to their potential audience in the cramped surroundings of a station, and that commuters often have time on their hands.

Connecting an artist book with a reader depends upon several factors. Perhaps I can simplify the situation by listing just three: the content of the book, the look of the book, and the cost of the book. Perhaps the content of the book is less of an issue when the look and the cost are both attractive? Excellent visual presentation of difficult content might be very significant in helping such ideas to travel.

Do you think that the artist's novel, insofar as it claims to be a readable work of narrative fiction, could potentially fulfil the second kind of accessibility? After all, we are all trained in understanding narratives (through narrative empathy, for ins-

tance) and, in principle, no one needs a specialised knowledge to comprehend the contents of a novel.

Actually, it seems to me that the artist novel, in so far as I understand this kind of artist publication, exists in an exactly parallel situation to artist books in general, in that there seems to be no reason why it should not be cheap and portable, and manifest content either arcane or easily comprehensible.

Most of the artists' novels I know have been published as books, in paperback editions, instead of making use of digital publishing technologies. A digital version (website, eBook, Kindle, etc.) seems to fulfil the aspirations of the artwork to be cheap, portable, and mass distributed much more accomplishedly than a physical book. Why do you think that artists are so attached to the book format exactly at the time when its obsolescence appears to be irredeemable?

I think that the idea 'that artists are so attached to the book format' is debatable. The increasing use of the phrase 'artists' publications' to embrace artist books, artist magazines, even artist novels and other forms, including those that are digital, seems to me to suggest that the specificity of artist books within this broader category, might now be in decline. It is possible, however, that they could metamorphose into more complex entities.

Do you see an element of fetishism in the production of artists' books that would make it the preferred option over digital editions? After all, books can be possessed and collected, and retain a sensuous component that its electronic counterpart has not.

Fetishism of aspects of the traditional book was what was being fought against in the 1970s and 1980s. This happened in parallel with the rise of cheap paperback art at that time, and probably as a reaction to it. There was an increase in the exposure of books made by artists that featured highly conspicuous materials or bindings (and feeble content), made even more precious when the edition comprised only one copy. Such overblown and expensive books veered into becoming mute book objects. But you might be right in suggesting that there is an element of fetishism in the very act of producing artist books today or, if not fetishism, then nostalgia, given the apparently irresistible rise of the digital.

But then again, in the face of your assertion that the book's 'obsolescence appears to be irredeemable', I feel that I must re-emphasise what an efficient device is the codex book and, beyond this, the contemporary paperback. The codex has been around for centuries, and most such books, such devices, are very efficient. (Do I need to repeat that they do not require batteries?) Their common features are also remarkable for facilitating and articulating narratives, whether verbal, visual or verbi-visual. So I reckon that there is a lot of life left in the old dog yet. You also mention that they can possess a certain sensuousness! Yes, indeed!

Would there be a correlation between the creation of the MoMA collection (and the legitimization of the medium that it entailed) and artists' books becoming commodified like any other artwork?

Surely artist books were always a commodity? Most artist books exist, however precariously, in the world of publishing and distribution?

I was meaning commodified in the sense that an artist's book, which originally cost, for instance, \$2, would now cost \$2,000 because its status in the art world has changed. I was wondering what factors played a part in causing such change and consequently such increase in value.

I understood what you were getting at, but wanted to stress first that these publications have to exist in the same economy that other publications have to negotiate. But I think that we can talk of two criteria that affect the commodification to which you refer. The first is the size of the edition, the second is the intellectual or aesthetic value. Small editions equal rare books! But a book can be rare and still have no financial value if the intellectual or aesthetic value is nil. It is when this second attribute is both significant and is coupled with rarity that the market price shoots into the stratosphere. And, of course, sustained aesthetic value is almost unpredictable as well as being the product of many sensibilities.

In your text *Books by Artists and Books as Art* (Phillpot, 1998:38), you enumerate a series of categories derived from the artist's book:

Among the many categories in this spectrum are these: magazine issues and magazines; assemblages and anthologies; writings, diaries, statements, and manifestos; visual poetry and wordworks; scores; documentation; reproductions and sketchbooks; albums and inventories; graphic works; comic books; illustrated books; page art, pageworks, and mail art; and book art and bookworks.

It caught my attention that you did not mention the artist's novel. I wonder why it has been disregarded by the art world for so long.

You are right David, I did not include artist novels in my artist books spectrum. First of all I should say that my categories were not meant to be exclusive or complete, and that artist books are mongrels. I was just trying to indicate the wealth of material that might be embraced by the term 'artist book'. (A secondary motivation was an attempt to incorporate 'illustrated books' in this terrain.)

As for 'artist novels' I did not think about such a category, and in the same way neither did I think about poets' novels or even accountants' novels. To me the novel is a specific literary form that can be utilised by any group of practitioners. In addition most of the time even 'experimental' novels, for example, are literary, whereas by contrast artist books can question every aspect of the book, and are frequently visual or verbi-visual entities in any case.

Now you are much more aware of the range of material that constitutes 'artist novels', so I hope to learn from you in what way the inclusion of artist novels in my 'spectrum' would make sense?

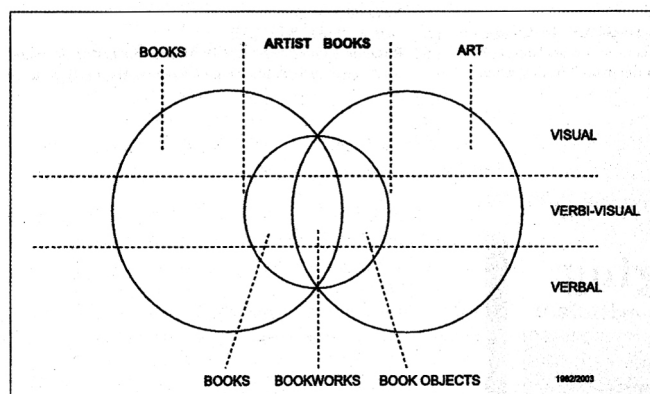


Figure 1: Clive Phillpot: Diagram (2003). In: Nordgren, S. and Phillpot, C. (Eds.) *Outside of a Dog*. Gateshead: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, p. 4.

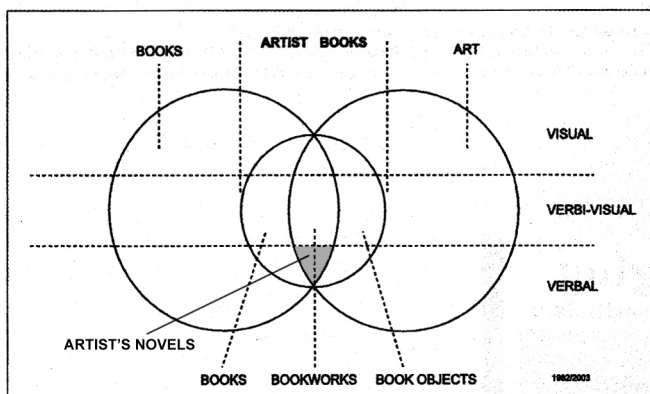


Figure 2: Altered diagram showing the insertion of the artist's novel.

I agree that the novel is a literary genre that can be practiced by anyone. Thus, in principle, a novel written by a visual artist would not have to be a different object than a novel written by an accountant, a sailor or a professional writer. These, in fact, constitute the larger portion of the novels written by visual artists that I have found.

However, within those 440 titles,² there is a smaller group that I call specifically 'artists' novels'. These are employed by the artists in their projects in exactly the same way that they employ, for instance, video or installation. One is free to read an artist's novel solely as a work of literature, but then one would miss most of the contents of the work. These lie not only in the text printed on its pages, but also, and primarily, in the process of creation. From this point of view, an artist's novel is an artwork that appropriates the structure and conventions of a novel.

For example, an artist's novel such as *Headless* (Goldin+Senneby, 2015) claims to be a mystery novel. But, actually, it is one of the works created throughout a seven-year-long art project. *Headless* addresses artistic issues by means of literary devices such as narrative and fiction. It was produced within the art world and it should be read within this context if one is to appreciate the actual implications of the work.

Something that I find surprising is the lack of literature on novels written by artists, let alone the artist's novel. This is not the case with poetry. Surrealist poetry, Visual poetry, Concrete poetry and, more recently, Uncreative writing, they are all well-known hybrids between poetry and the visual arts. I would like to know your opinion about the difference in the interest historically stirred in the art world by these two literary genres.



Figure 3: Goldin+Senneby: *Headless: Each Thing Seen Is the Parody of Another or Is the Same Thing in a Deceptive Form* (sound installation, 2010). Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Photo: Albin Dahlström.

² This number corresponds to the data on 10 May 2016.

I guess that I have already suggested that my own awareness of the artist novel has been slight. And perhaps there are many others who have not been aware of the existence or substance of this category either. So if there is this gap in the secondary literature it seems to me that someone like you, with your knowledge and zeal, is ideally equipped to fill this void?

Alternatively, perhaps the artist novel is not such a natural bedfellow in among other artists' media? It would help me if I could read what you have to say about the distinguishing features of the artist novel that really position it clearly in the armoury of the visual artist, rather than among the conglomerate authorship of novels in general. How does the artist twist the novel form into a visual art statement?

I must say that my research is concerned not so much with what the artist's novel is as with what the artist's novel does to the visual arts. We all know what a urinal is. It is exactly the same object when in a public toilet and when on a pedestal. But what it does on a pedestal in an art exhibition is very different. So much so, that it becomes a new medium in the visual arts and it is then called ready-made. My approach to the artist's novel is similar.

Perhaps some of the experiments carried out by artists with their novels were done by writers before. However, I am not discussing the novel from a literary point of view, but artistic. Thus, notions that could be conventional (if not conservative) in the literary world can open a vast field of action in art practice. The artist's novel functions as a vehicle to introduce notions such as narrative, fiction, identification, and imagination in an artist's work, both in the artist's novel itself and in the body of work associated to it (for instance, in a cycle of episodic, narrative performances that incites the audience's imagination by means of storytelling).

Similarly, for a writer it is obvious that reading a novel takes time. From an artistic point of view, it can be a tool to decelerate the artistic experience. Spending days or weeks in contact with the work requires a protracted engagement from the audience, which is at odds with the time we usually spend in front of an artwork.

It all comes to a matter of readability. The artists aspire to produce a work that is able to engage through reading pleasure. But then again, I am not saying this is the reality of the work, but part of the artist's fantasy of the novel. However, it is fantasy which motivates artists to search for innovative means to accomplish it. Do you think that this account of the fantasy of the novel would resonate, at least partially, with a previous 'fantasy of the artist's book'?

Yes, I would think so. A word that jumped out at me from your preceding paragraph was 'pleasure'. Surely pleasure, though infrequently referred to, is an essential element of reading both artist books and artist novels ('reading' being understood in its widest sense). Your listing of the artist novel's functions suggests that they can be appreciated in very similar ways to other publications.

The artist's novel poses two major challenges: how to be read? How to be exhibited? Is one expected to read a whole artist's novel in a museum? Should it be read in connection with the artistic context where it comes from? Earlier, my question about the way you facilitated the reading of artists' books in the MoMA collection (and whether that was done by means of a dedicated reading room) was pointing in this direction.

Well, artist books and artist novels can – should – be read in a comfortable setting, such as a domestic one. But library users are also well accustomed to long periods of reading in institutions, so places such as libraries can also be appropriate for reading sessions. Beyond this there is the park bench, the long grass, etc. One might say that the museum environment is the least appropriate one for reading.

Exhibiting books that normally exist as mobile hand-held devices, as one-opening-objects under glass, is clearly problematic. Perhaps, ideally, one should acquire at least two copies of every publication represented in a collection? This would ensure that one copy could remain closed (or be open at only one place) for long periods of time, while the other copy can be allowed to deteriorate through frequent use.

The users of the MoMA Library were given the opportunity to handle most publications in the collection, including artist books, within the confines of the reading room. Of course, safeguards were in place to protect fragile works, but this arrangement still does not compare with the ease of consultation in one's own home.

If it is not possible to safely present fragile works for handling in museum settings, there are one or two alternatives to fall back on. In particular a video might be made to record a single initial engagement with a book which can thereafter be played again and again at no further risk to the original volume. Other kinds of facsimiles might also be presented.

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