

THE
ROCKET
FOUR





History of *The Rocket Four*

In August, 1997 Gunnar Kaldewey organized a week long artist book workshop at his estate, in Poestenkill, New York. Four publishers of artist books and several people closely associated with artist books—librarians, conservators and collectors—were invited to make individual presentations of their work which subsequently led to extended, fruitful discussions about the different philosophies of each press. The relaxed, harmonious meeting offered a wealth of information and personal experiences to each of the participants. At the culmination of this gathering the four publishers agreed to organize a tour of exhibitions on four continents and to produce a photographic catalogue with a complete bibliography for each press at the time of publication in 1999. These exhibitions of *The Rocket Four* are intended to increase the visibility of artist books beyond those efforts and activities of each press on its own. The somewhat obscure name is indebted to Luis Angel Parra (of Arte Dos Gráfico), who uses a rocket gesture as a symbol of activity, optimism and zest for life.

The following statements from each press give a brief, willfully personal perspective on the practice of making artist books and are in no way meant to provide a broad or balanced survey of this art form. One observation, which came up in most of these statements, is that making artist books, particularly when contemporary texts are part of the project, is not only the result of a long and intensive dialogue between author, artist and publisher; but that these productions require a collaborative way of working between couples, teachers and students or by the members of a complex workshop to achieve the final technical realization that is the finished book.



Gunnar Kaldewey
Edition Kaldewey/Kaldewey Press
New York, NY/Poestenkill, NY

We all now live in a global system of trade and cultural exchanges defined by new techniques of communication like fax and the internet. The flow of information is overwhelming and it is only one speed—fast.

This information revolution is creating a consciousness of world citizenship and also creating new forms in art and books. Traditional bookmaking processes and materials like handmade paper and leather have been replaced by computer typesetting, offset printing, xerox and binding in plastic and recycled materials. Access to inexpensive printing techniques, familiarity with contemporary, non-fine art materials opens up a flow of production and innovative creativity on all levels.

Artists are now concerned with a global approach and are dealing with universal responsibility, human rights and the environment. Artist books are used as an exchange of information and expression in the artistic community. They stimulate our imagination and curiosity towards foreign languages, cultures and thoughts. They are documents of the awareness of today's world, and often are beautiful because of their spontaneity and the ideas they express. As a consequence, the number of artist book exhibitions in galleries, bookstores, libraries and museums is growing.

Artist books do not need a purpose. They are made out of the human desire for beauty. The book as an object will always be desirable—harmonious proportions, interacting of materials, perfection of execution. There is, of course, something more important: the "spiritual beauty" of a book, incorporating a powerful message or the development of an original idea.

To make artist books today is challenging. The ideas of the artist and writer merge with my own and a fermentation shapes the execution. Each of us offers our experience; the visual, the literary, the technical. Through the back and forth, the book slowly gains its final shape. At this stage I like to be the artisan—papermaker or printer. It gives a mutual feeling to the project—no competition—and in a joint venture we try to raise the quality as much as we can. The stronger the personalities, the more original the ideas, the more unconventional the book will be. A "new aesthetic" appears, something which was not there before.

During the demanding, yet inspiring collaborations with my artist friends I learn and see again and again the endless possibilities of making art. Some day we will have a "global book," a lively and beautiful object that can be viewed and appreciated by people of very different cultural and aesthetic backgrounds.



Hank Hine
Limestone Press
San Francisco, CA / Tampa, FL

The world, as we sense it, is an apparatus of great complexity and our experience within it, an amalgam of sense and recollection and dream, does not yield to a comprehensive inquiry or description. Sometimes vivid entrance to the world is delivered only by a scent in the wind or the sound of a motor starting, sudden experiences that pierce its continuous fabric and give us access. An artist book, composed of its complex elements, is an object like the world is, full of movement and sight and sound. But this small world can be returned to again and again in its unchanging state, can be held in the hand; this smaller world can be apprehended. This is why we make books; to see them and comprehend what they are a part of.

One of Max Planck's theorems dictates that the observer cannot avoid an influence on the observed. The French linguists have described the same problem with their combination of positivism and despair. This influence is certainly at work in the making of an artist's book. One can offer the conception of a book in the purest way to the invited artist but the air of the workshop, our way of setting type and wiping plates, our own temperament of uprightness or lassitude will inform the disposition of the work in the profoundest way. I find the type of book made by a publisher who operates a print shop to be distinct from those of a freelance publisher. The voice of the workshop can always be heard to some degree and for me there is more pleasure in the clarity and amplitude of that voice.

I studied typography at Rhode Island School of Design and observed the working press of Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, my teachers at Brown. The Waldrops have been an inspiration to two generations of students. They demonstrated simply and fully

that it was possible to own a press, to do so without any particular skill with any other machinery, and in the context of writing, teaching and intense and long-lived relationships, to find joy in the production of books and of other people's work.

After more than two decades engagement in the making and publishing of artist books my passions remain contradictory and ungovernable. This process of making a book, this extreme synthetic exercise, ties up the simple, useful, incipient materials—paper, ink, cloth, board—into perhaps the most specialized production imaginable. The artist book gathers precious materials into a state of complexity and refinement and removes them utterly and finally from any other possible use.

I was motivated to make contemporary books by the books of the past before I was aware that wonderful books were being made in our era. I am grateful to come to know my colleagues and feel, as well as see, their generosity in action. A widespread awareness of other books is the single most productive condition for the making of artist books. I feel it is most important that contemporary artist books be made, seen and studied in an international context.

What image rises in the mind as a new book begins to seem possible? At Limestone Press it was the promise of finality, or if not finality, then of some comprehensiveness, some total disposition of elements, an exhaustion of the unmade, a completeness. With each book I dreamed anew of a final book. It is a hope that springs from the form itself, its enclosures, palpability, and its unity, its singleness: the desire for a final view and a last word



Luis Angel Parra / Maria Eugenia Niño
Arte Dos Gráfico
Bogotá, Colombia

In one of his most vehement sermons, Bossuet prayed for the return of violent times, of civil strife, of bloodthirsty, power-crazed emperors, claiming that such epochs of turmoil were fertile grounds for spiritual and artistic accomplishments. And indeed, the hard-line 17th century French bishop's words come to mind when one observes the history of modern Colombia, which, although torn asunder by mind-boggling savagery and political chaos, is inhabited by a people remarkable for their sense of humor against all odds, effusive generosity and creative effervescence in all realms of art.

In the late 1970's, when convulsive conflict in rural areas drove ever increasing hordes of campesinos to the relative security of large urban centers, Luis Angel Parra and his companion Maria Eugenia Niño, along with a group of youths who would later become eminent artists and intellectuals, founded Arte Dos Gráfico. At the time, all were students at the Universidad Nacional, a hotbed of extreme-left activity: the first efforts of the fledgling graphic shop, based in its early days on the campus grounds, focused on militant propaganda, with the customary output of posters and T-shirts. But the climate of instability at the university soon forced Luis Angel and Maria Eugenia to seek a new place of business in a neutral zone, at their home in the El Lago district of Bogotá.

From the hack jobs of academe and the clandestine production of Maoist T-shirts and glaring posters inspired by social realism, emerged the present workshop: a meeting place for artists, writers, scientists, historians and stimulating weirdoes, with facilities for

a broad spectrum of techniques, from bookbinding to typography, paper and ink manufacture, silkscreen, etching, photolithography, to mention but a few The workshop—which includes Maria Eugenia's SEXTANTE, a graphic works center and exhibition space—has endeavored not only to raise a physical infrastructure, but also to train a team of printing craftsmen and assistants who, together with artists, can achieve the most exacting projects in the field.

Hence, it was only natural that autochthonous artist books, portfolios, and engravings by artists emerged from such a versatile melting pot, unique not only in Colombia but on the Latin American continent, and indeed perhaps the world Ironically, it was unwittingly at first that Luis Angel and his team produced their works In their spontaneous enthusiasm and prolific inventiveness, only later did it dawn upon them that they were creating a concept that had been known abroad for decades as *livre d'artiste* or artist book. This explains the unmistakable Latin American essence that permeates their output.



Harry Reese / Sandra Liddell Reese
Turkey Press / Edition Reese
Isla Vista, CA



Our primary creative work of the past three decades has centered on the imaginative possibilities of the book as a container of thought, emotion, communication and beauty. Our experience in making books can be traced to significant relationships, both with the people we publish and with each other:

Harry Reese began publishing under the imprint of Turkey Press in 1974 as a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at Brown University. He entered into the world of making books principally through writing poetry and studying the collection of printed poetry in the John Hay Library. After taking a typography class at Rhode Island School of Design he taught himself to print. The books he produced in that two year period were an extension of his friendship with other poets and his growing respect for the tradition of the book made by hand. The epigram beginning his book of poems, *Unknown Friends*, printed in 1976 by David D. Cooper, reflects the attitude of the press that has continued over the years: "No matter how isolated you are, or how lonely you feel, if you do your own work diligently and conscientiously, unknown friends will come to you and seek you out."

In 1977 Harry Reese and Sandra Liddell moved to Isla Vista where they were married and established their present home/studio for Turkey Press. Since that time they have been responsible for the selection, design, typesetting, printing, papermaking and binding of over 50 titles in collaboration with poets, writers, visual artists and thinkers. Harry began teaching in the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1978 in which he established a Book Arts emphasis in 1988. He continues to teach a range of print & book art classes in the Department of Art at UCSB.

Our attraction to artist books can be explained in many different ways, but certainly one of them has to do with a longing for tactility. Tactility primarily involves the sense of touch, but it is the common-sense meeting place of all the senses. Each sense creates its space. We learn through the fingers and hands in ways we cannot investigate otherwise. Constant touch, however, is not tactile. Tactility is the space of the resonant interval, what is touched and let go. When we touch books we bring together materials and ideas. We find a way to touch words, visual impressions and feelings. Language is our primary medium for describing both our experiences of the world and our refusal to accept its terms. The artist book provides a format for exploring visual ideas in combination with text that needs the added dimension of time and intimacy. The sequential nature of a book requires that it cannot be seen all at once. It demands close scrutiny at a short distance. Traditional relief printing and contemporary digital media merge on the tactile page. Through various forms of portable sculpture, private picture planes, tactile resonance and the complexities of reading images and text, artist books link the senses together.

There is a distinct pattern we can follow in human information technologies as they have evolved and developed over time: the new technology turns the old technology into an art form. Book art breaks down divisions between information and storytelling, between high and low conceptions of art, between art and life and exposes the raw nerve of beauty, utility, function and purpose that turns archetypes into clichés and back again. Artist books remind us that while the book as an object presents a visible form and specific structure, the experience of the book is always determined by the reader or viewer. The content of the book is



not only what is written or pictured within the book, but also what the reader creates as a result of the encounter with the work as a whole.

Artists who use the book form are creating an anti-environment in the midst of the electronic wind of the information society and its consumer culture. Because art is so easily transformed by the electronic environment, artists need to be aware of the world they are living in. We live in a world that is becoming more visual. It is a man-made environment which at one extreme threatens to isolate the senses. At the other extreme, electronic media offers a future promise of uniting speech, vision, knowledge and touch in a new perception of tactility. With the leading edge of technology providing a seductive and interactive blur of light, color and sound, the artists who work in the trailing edge book forms today intuitively sense the need to touch their own work, and for it to be touched by others.

Most of the writing in this book can be found in a slightly different form in *Making Artist Books Today: A Workshop in Poestenkill, New York, August 18th-23rd, 1997*, edited by Wulf D. von Lucius and Gunnar A. Kaldewey, published by Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart, Germany, 1998.

The catalogue, *The Rocket Four: Making Artist Books Today. A Traveling Exhibition for the New Millennium*, with an introduction by Gunnar A. Kaldewey and an essay by Wulf D. von Lucius was printed by Cantz in Stuttgart in 1999. Catalogues may be purchased from the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum and Turkey Press, 6746 Sueño Road, Isla Vista, CA 93117. \$20

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