

## BOOKS DO FURNISH A ROOM: LAWRENCE WEINER ON ARTISTS' BOOKS

Recently, Lawrence Weiner presented his own thoughts about artists' books in 1989 at a symposium on Artists' Books sponsored by the Dia Foundation and Printed Matter in New York City on 18 November:

"My reason for turning to books, the essential reason for any person turning to books, is content in search of context. The thing that differentiates artists from other people is not their insight, not their central poetics, or not their inbred pathos; it really is essentially that artists are unemployed. They must be. And one of the definitions of an artist is a person who does something useful for society, who does have something to present to society but must at all costs remain unemployed.

Reading is a leisure-time activity in the United States. Growing up in New York, one is confronted by the fact that there is a leisure-time activity that can be done only by people who are successful enough to have leisure time or are unemployed. Your audience is certainly not the people who are filling out grant forms, who have people to see and things to do; and places to be; it's the person who does his job, has time to sit down and read and is willing to look at what somebody else has to say, or the person who just happens to have a lot of time.

I had opportunities to show in the 1960s, happily, and the universities fund things, and the only reason you make something is that it is "political." Now I don't understand what the word "political" means.. You make something because, we hope if you are an artist, it doesn't exist before. It doesn't have a place. You're not happy with the way you see the world. You, as an artist, as a human being, as an activist, wake up and find that perhaps you have something to say that can bring about an inherent change. That doesn't make it "subversive." To have a special category of books that are called "Artists' Books, Political, Feminists Artists' Books, Decent Thoughts Artists' Books" makes no sense whatsoever in the context of artists' books.

If it is content in search of context with a book you have the possibility of building a stage set, a platform, that in your eyes contains enough dignity to stand for what the content of your book is. If the content of your book is the exclusion of certain cultures that help build the United States or help build the world as we know it, then the dignity of that content is carried over by the book that you make. If you are a professional artist, you have certain kinds of basic knowledge of how to present things--the theatrics. Books are just a theatrical performance that you can take to the toilet with you. There's no particular place that you cannot read a book. That's what attracted me when I started to try to make books.

The first book that I did make was called Statements (I mean the first book that ever got any place). It was what you see is what you get. A statement was what you got at the end of the line; if you ran up a bill any place, you got a statement. It was badly bound, to the point now that if anyone wants to look at it, they really have to destroy it to look at it, which was sort of funny. It was badly bound, and it was really badly printed. But it got out there. Other

artists have gotten books out there. Yet this context has developed into something that in order to control must be subsidized.

In the United States, books are very cheap. Anyone who wants to make a book should better be advised to spend their time figuring out what they have to say in it, how they want to present it and **not** bothering to fill out a grant form. The whole purpose of subsidizing books, the entire reason for this enormous industry that we have now in the United States called "How Wonderful the Artist's Book" is that by the time you finish filling out the form, by the time somebody who makes his living reading the form gets that form, the content that you're trying to get out on the street has already lost any significance it can conceivably have. It is a built-in time lag.

The artist's book was a means to allow artists to get out at that moment what they had to say in relation to the art context, in relation to the brutality of our society, or in relation to the ecology of our society. But what has come about in the last 15 years is this plethora of crap, it's contexts desperately advertising looking for content. It's changed around the whole thing of artist's books. It has taken away one of the great pleasure principles of an artist to be able to say: 'okay, to say what I have to say might not be popular, it might be wrong and it might not be useful, but with a minimum amount of intrusion into society, I will make a finished package that is made by means of professional printers, professional people who know how to buy books, and get that package out into the world in the great hopes that like any kid in this audience who grew up in any place in the world where their parents were not avid readers or could not read at all, found a book one day, read it, and walked away. It changes a life' and that's what books are all about.

And what constitutes an artist's book really doesn't matter. To use Joe McCarthy's line again, 'if it walks like a duck and it talks like a duck, it's a duck.' If you can pick it up, and if you can read it, it doesn't matter if it's on newsprint, it doesn't matter if it has spikes coming through it, or anything else. I'd like to see a resurgence of a need for artists' books. Maybe we've outlived the need of what an artist's book is. Now we have just books published by artists, or on artists, or for artists, and the only purpose it has is keeping this industry of artists' books now going.

I'm happy that someone can walk into Printed Matter and buy a book of mine. I'm delighted that Franklin Furnace has put together such an incredibly beautiful archive of books. I believe in the history of the accomplishments of human beings. And books constitute one of the histories of the accomplishments of human beings. But at the same time, I'm looking at it from the point of view of being an artist: an artist is not involved in history, an artist is involved in dealing with society at that particular moment and figuring out one way to present things without having to impose them. A book is something we in the West can publish anytime we want. It just means eating eggs and beans for a couple of months to pay for your own book. That's all I have to say."