

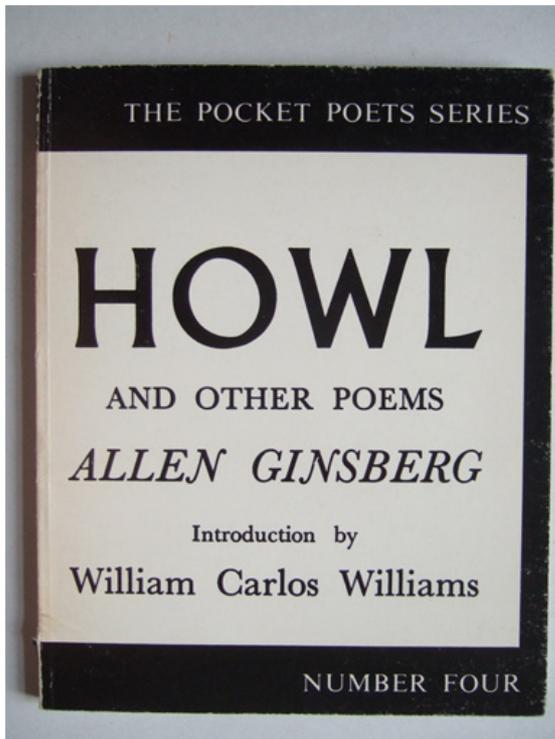
Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, 1956



Mikhail Karasik, *Erzählung von einem großen Sammler* (Tale of a Great Collector), 2000

'... friendships and deep insights into his time ...'  
*On some Presentation Copies from my Collection*

Reinhard Grüner



1) The pop poet's transformation: Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, 1956

On 7 July 1976, Allen Ginsberg's 80-year-old father Louis died. Ginsberg, one of the main representatives of the American 'Beat Generation' of the 1950s, wrote 'Father Death Blues' during his flight from Colorado to New York on the occasion of his father's funeral. In the second half of the year of 1976, I meet Allen Ginsberg at a reading in Munich – he is 50 years old, I am 25. I ask him to sign his books, among them the volume of poems *Howl*, and to write down a sentence that is especially important to him at this moment. These are his words:

'Death is a letter that was never sent' – (Ignu)<sup>1</sup>

In 1956, the long poem *Howl* caused a scandal due to its manifest criticism of society in a language considered drastic or even obscene in those days and was temporarily prohibited. I grew up in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1960s and – like many others – questioned political structures, social values and maximisation of profit. The poem *Howl* of the 50s appeared to me as if my feelings and dreams had been condensed into it. The last sentence of William Carlos Williams's preface to the book made us shiver:

Hold back the edges of your gowns,  
Ladies, we are going through hell.<sup>2</sup>

20 years later, the poet has freed himself from his almost self-destructing attitude, in which he celebrated even death in his poem *Howl*. In 1974, after a journey to Asia, he founded a school influenced by Zen Buddhism (the 'School of Disembodied Poetics') and developed from an artistic revolutionary into a meditative philosopher. This is how I met him.

I was moved by the fact that a line of an 18-year-old poem from wild times, together with a flower drawn by Ginsberg onto the book, becomes - in a new context - a symbol of acceptance of life.



2) A homage: Mikhail Karasik, *Erzählung von einem großen Sammler* (Tale of a Great Collector), 2000

I hope the readers of this article will allow me to use the term 'presentation copy' in a broader sense: not merely for a book with a handwritten dedication, but also for a book as a whole. An example of the latter is this one-of-a-kind book *Erzählung von einem großen Sammler* by the St. Petersburg artist Mikhail Karasik, whose work is held now in all large public and private collections in Europe and America. The six-part accordion fold book of 2000 with text handwritten by the artist in bright colours is painted on both sides and represents the artist's homage to his collector.

I have known Mikhail Karasik and his wife Marina since his exhibition of 1993 in the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz. In 1995, he was one of eight artists contributing to the first co-production by Russian or Ukrainian and German artists, the collaborative book 'Waggon' (Railway Car) which I edited with 'Edition Augenweide' (Edition Feast for the Eyes). On my 50th birthday, Karasik presented me with the above-mentioned one-of-a-kind book, commenting in a loving and ironic way on my passion for collecting:



Mikhail Karasik, *Erzählung von einem großen Sammler* (Tale of a Great Collector), 2000



Zbigniew Jez, *-Buchobjekt ohne Titel-* (book object without title), 2005

After some years, Reinhard got enthusiastic about the Russian artist's book. He became the sole collector of these incomprehensible books in Germany and even in Europe. He sacrificed his time and his money to them because he thought that this was real eroticism.

'endangered books',



3) The destroyed book: Zbigniew Jez, *-Buchobjekt ohne Titel-* (book object without title), 2005

In 1977, 'documenta 6', the so-called 'Media Documenta', also presented artists' books to the public. In his catalogue article 'Metamorphosen des Buches' (Metamorphoses of the Book), the collector Rolf Dittmar commented as follows:

In the mid-60s, however, something new is happening. Artists are beginning to question the medium 'book' as a means of conveying factual information. Artists no longer use their means of artistic design on the book, but use the technical possibilities of the book as a means of artistic expression.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the books shown at 'documenta 6' are book objects (called 'metamorphoses of the book' by Rolf Dittmar) and conceptual books. The book objects are mainly destroyed books: torn, cut, worked on with branding irons or wax, burnt, with a cavity in the book block and objects attached. By these alienations / obscurations / obfuscations they become independent works of art and raise the mass product 'book' onto a completely new level of significance.

In 2005, I received a book object from the Polish-born artist Zbigniew Jez. The book he 'destroyed' during his artistic activity was Dominique Moldehn's 'Buchwerke 1960-1994.

Künstlerbücher und Buchobjekte' (Book Works 1960-1994. Artist's Books and Book Objects), Nuremberg 1996. In this readable book Moldehn deals among other things with 'burning books',

‘accessible books’, and the ‘book as a grave’. Jez takes this typology up: he makes an expressively painted massive wooden slipcase, which is closed on one side only, but can take merely half the book. He puts this slipcase down with the closed edge at the bottom, pushes the book into it with the fore edge ahead, and connects the book and the slipcase with two massive bolts. On the spine, author and title can be read completely, on the front board, only the letters ‘Buchwer’ are discernible (‘Buchwer’ can be read as ‘Buch wer’ – meaning ‘book who’).

The book as such has lost its functionality completely, it is no longer legible, but by becoming “... a symbol of an attack on the culture of script and on the religion of the printed book ...”<sup>24</sup>

it gains a new dimension beyond the printed work. On a poster for an exhibition (18 June – 25 July 1982) of Jez’s work in the Stadtschloss Fulda (Town Palace Fulda, North Hesse), you can read the words: ‘Jedes Buch ist ein Fragebuch’ (Every book is a book of questions). The answers to the questions raised by the book, however, have to be found by each person for himself.

On a cardboard tag, fastened to the wooden slipcase with a piece of string, the following explanations can be read:

Zbigniew Jez / → 12,22,02,05,2005 (front)  
Buchobjekt 2005 / für Reinhard Grüner (reverse)  
(Book Object 2005 / for Reinhard Grüner)

The only information given to us by the artist is the time of completion (12:22 hours) and the exact date (02/05/2005).

#### 4) A world of wood and lead: Hans Limmer, *Bleibuch* (Lead Book), 2009

Hans Limmer signs his book objects with the letters ‘HL’ under a stylised roof. The latter stands for his alpine hut in the Tyrolian Mountains (Austria) where he creates his book objects and sculptures during the summer months, partly in collaboration with his wife Nelly. The ‘book block’ of Limmer’s *Bleibuch* consists of a chunk of 300-year-old dead sycamore wood. A triangular and two rectangular lead plates, which are mounted on the front of the ‘book block’, bear the following inscription:

BLEI           (lead)  
BUCH          (book)  
MUSS          (must)  
SCHWERER    (heavier)  
SEIN    (be) => a lead book must be heavier



Hans Limmer, *Bleibbuch*  
(Lead Book), 2009



ANFANG (beginning, start)

HL 5/2009/0.0

'0.0' signifies the book number –  
*Bleibuch* is Limmer's first book object of all.



The text is inscribed on two large lead plates inserted into the body of the book. Page 1 bears the letters of the alphabet and the numbers 1 to 10, each column concluded by a horizontal eight, the symbol for infinity. Page 2 shows nine nouns with four letters each in a long column one below the other:

LAUT WORT SATZ TEXT BUCH HOLZ  
BLEI ERDE WELT<sup>5</sup>

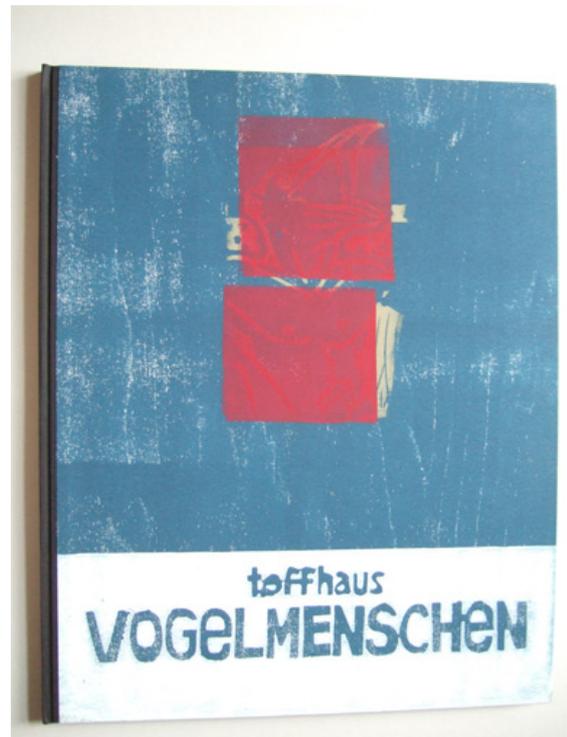
(sound – word – sentence – text – book – wood –  
lead – earth – world)

The reduction to key terms links the contrasting pair 'culture' – 'nature' and thus creates a unity which is transferred by the artist into the book so that content and form correspond to each other. The natural symbolism is intensified by moss which lives in some cracks of the dead, worm-eaten wood and which – as the artist recommends – should be moistened every couple of weeks. This book does not depict the world, it is rather a world of its own, which came into being by an extremely laborious creative process: as there is no electricity in Limmer's alpine hut the wood has to be worked without machines and every single letter had to be punched by hand. On the fore edge, there are more words, carved into the wood with a burin and only shadowily legible, as if they were disappearing into the book:

BLEIBUCH / NR. 0.0 / FUER / R. / GRUENER  
/ ANFANG

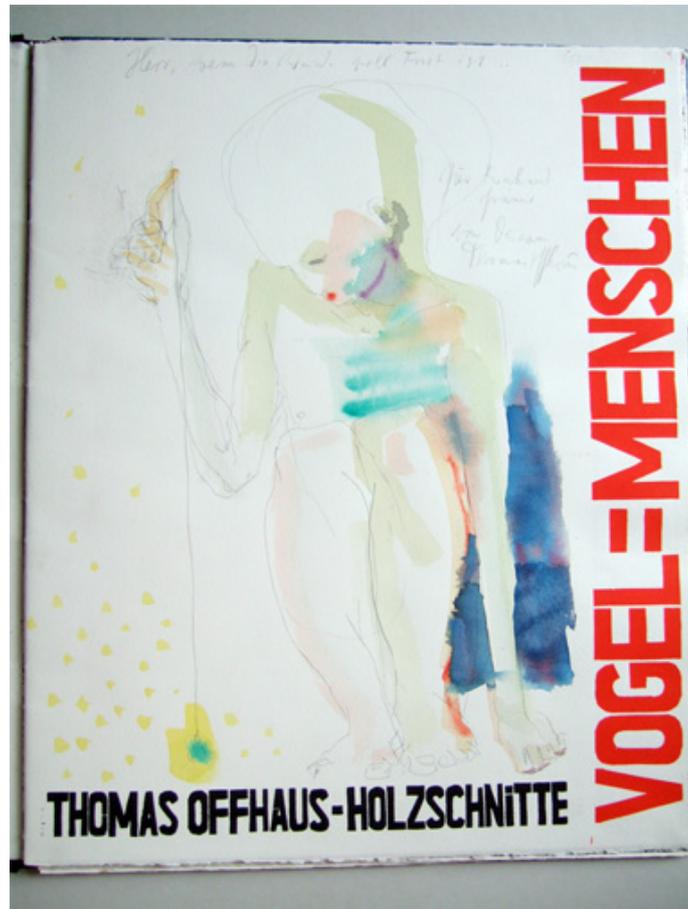
(lead book / nr. 0.0 / for / R. / Grüner / beginning)

During a conversation, Hans Limmer told me in a general sense that, owing to his advanced age, he wanted to make 'weighty' books as 'monuments', so to speak. Indeed, this object conveys such a blend of congealed time and worldly wisdom. The stimulus for Hans Limmer's first object book was a private presentation of artists' books from my collection – like many other art lovers he and his wife, too, succumbed to the magic of works of art in the form of books.



5) Rimbaud's birds of death: Thomas Offhaus,  
*Vogelmenschen* (Bird People), 1999

SCHWÄRMT AUS  
swarm out  
RAUFT EUCH ZUSAMMEN  
get it all together  
ZU TAUSENDEN  
by the thousands  
ÜBER FRANKREICHS FELDERN  
over the fields of France  
WO DIE TOTEN  
where the dead  
VON VORGESTERN SCHLAFEN  
of the day before yesterday sleep  
KURVT, MIT VERLAUB  
circle, with respect  
DEN GANZEN WINTER LANG  
all winter long



Thomas Offhaus, *Vogelmenschen* (Bird People), 1999



Thomas Offhaus, *Vogelmenschen* (Bird People), 1999

BIS AUCH DER  
LETZTE until even the  
last WANDERER  
STUTZT wanderer stops  
short

This verse from a poem by Arthur Rimbaud can be read in the artist's book *Vogelmenschen* (Bird People), a book with large-format expressive woodcuts by Thomas Offhaus, published by 'Atelier Buchkunst' (Studio Bookart) of 'Edition Balance' in 1999, in an edition of only seven copies. The artist had moved from Gotha (Thuringia) to Munich for a while and so we were able to meet one evening. Thomas Offhaus showed me the proof prints for the painter's book *Vogelmenschen* he was currently working on and I was quite enthusiastic about his pictorial expression. But another reason for the purchase of this book was the real situation of my dying mother in a nursing home - a situation superimposing itself onto the pictures in the book. The 'bird of death' (Rimbaud) lived for weeks in the park beside the nursing home - he and his fellow species produced noise and filth and blackened the sky in front of the window. And it is this bird that can be found as a part of human existence, as 'schwarzer Vogel Totengräber'<sup>6</sup> (black bird gravedigger), in Thomas Offhaus' pictures. The artist dedicated the book to me with a line from the poem:

'Herr, wenn die Weide voll Frost ist...'/  
für Reinhard / Grüner / von Deinem / Thomas  
Offhaus  
(Lord, when the pasture is full of frost...  
for R. G. - Yours, T. O.)

This dedication on the title page is accompanied by a pencil drawing and watercolour painting showing a human figure squatting and pensively watching a pendulum. Some time later, I received the woodcut 'Der Vogelmensch' (The Birdman) (no. 3/7) with a long dedication from the artist on the reverse, dated 17/07/2000:

Ich / habe mich wirklich sehr / darüber gefreut,  
denn es ist / das größte für einen Bilder- /  
suchenden, wenn sie von / anderen wieder-  
gefunden / werden.  
(I was really very glad about it (= letter from R.  
Grüner), for it is the most important thing for a  
person in search of images, when these are found  
again by others.)

Indeed, I found in Thomas Offhaus' pictures exactly that, what I couldn't understand at first, that which made it easier for me to deal with death in my private world.

Presentation copies which signify my quite personal connection with artists and writers are stations on my way through life; they accompany and describe it. Eva von Seckendorff commented on this with regard to my collection: "...all the books always gave him those friendships and deep insights into his time – and perhaps this was the most important thing about collecting."<sup>7</sup>

Reinhard Grüner  
www.buchkunst.info

German to English translation by Cornelia Göbel

#### Notes

1. This line is – as Ginsberg states himself – from the poem 'Igny' (1958), in: *Reality Sandwiches: Europe! Europe!*
2. William Carlos Williams, Howl for Carl Solomon, in: Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*. 1974, 27th printing, p8
3. documenta 6 kassel. Catalogue vol. 3: *handzeichnungen, utopisches design, bücher*. Kassel 1977, p296
4. Artur Brall, *Künstlerbücher, Artists' Books, Book as Art*. Frankfurt 1986, p81
5. To save space, the words here are placed alongside each other and not one below the other.
6. German translation: Eric Boerner
7. Eva von Seckendorff, *Künstlerbücher. Die Sammlung Reinhard Grüner*, Vernissage 11/04, p45