

REINHARD GRÜNER

“ ... a Dim Reflection of Art”

Memories of a (West) German Collector

“I take some pride in stating, at the very outset of these Memoirs, that throughout the whole course of my life I have been my own master, and a free agent.” This is what Giacomo Casanova confesses in his Memoirs.

No sooner than almost 30 years after my first contact with book art in the form of the English private press edition *A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig*, printed in 1975 by the Shoestring Press on paper of the legendary Chiswick Press, I started accounting to myself why my own free will had finally led to a bibliomaniac’s life among thousands of books. The cause for this account was my exhibition *KünstlerBücher - Artists/Books*, which was presented by the Municipal Museum of Fürstentfeldbruck near Munich in 2004. Searching for a coherent concept, I realized astonishingly quickly – although with a delay of 30 years – that almost every book in my collection forms a symbiotic relationship with my life, describes, explains, gets to the heart of certain chapters of my life. So, in cooperation with the curator Eva von Seckendorff, the exhibition took the shape of a journey through a man’s life, consisting of eleven chapters named after book titles: *Von Riesen und Göttern - About Giants and Gods* (picture books, children’s books), *Manegenwesen - Circus Creatures* (playing games, irony), *ABC-Drucksachen - ABC Printed Papers* (learning), ... *bin ich gelaufen - I have been walking* (travel), *Abschied von den Wiesenblumen - Farewell to Meadow Flowers* (animals, nature), *Salute Barbaren - Hail Barbarians* (contemporary history), *froid et chaud - cold and hot* (sensuality, erotics), *Der Schatten der Dinge - Shadow of Things* (memories), *Apokalypse* (holocaust, war), *Das Paradies ist eine immense Bibliothek - Paradise is an Immense Library* (spirituality) and *Hommage an die Kunst - Homage to Art*. This was a modern eleven-stage version of Shakespeare’s “Seven Ages of Man”, filled with some 150 books of 70 presses, mainly from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the main emphasis on East Germany and Eastern Europe. Thus decades of book-collecting could be explained in retrospect – from the start in 1976 at Whitstable, an East English coastal town, through important events of world history: the upheaval phases of the sixties, of German reunification, of the downfall of the Soviet Empire till the beginning of the new millenium.

I absorbed this chaotic variety of cultural, political and economic events, this immense flood of images, but in the end I did not understand their deeper meaning before they had been filtered by literature and art and been condensed to the shape of a book. Interestingly, the reason for adding a book to my

collection was in most cases a crisis in terms of social policy or of a personal nature. This was accompanied by a regionalization of certain focal themes, above all my turn towards book art from East Germany and new Russia. In both cases the coordinates that had given a certain measure of security had vanished: Young wild artists from the GDR such as Thomas Günther, Helge Leiberg, Ulrich Tarlatt, and Uwe Warnke who, in the second half of the eighties, questioned the rotten GDR system by using the strikingly aesthetic appearance of the silk-screen print “WortBilder” (“WordPictures”) as a weapon were light years away from the weak position of West Germany’s art world which usually revolved around itself and mainly indulged in abstract reflections without fulfilling personal or social functions. The fact that in West Germany this playing with formalisms and abandoning figurative traditions has been left behind by the return of figurative art since the mid-nineties is somewhat ironic. For example, suddenly everybody is talking about the “Neue Leipziger Schule” (“New Leipzig School”). Book art that saw the light of day during the perestroika era is part of this tradition. The work of Oleg Dergatchev, Mikhail Karasik, Julia Kissina, Aleksandr Roitburd, and Sergei Yakunin, to name but a few, sparkles with vitality and lets us feel the creative potential of this awakening society. Artist’s books are not only a yardstick of societal fractures, but reflect one’s gaze into the turmoil of one’s inner self. This is why some books which discuss or even break taboos are part of the collection, e.g. *Mein Zahn riesengroß – erotische Träume von Männern - My Giant Tooth – Men’s Erotic Dreams* by Ulrich Tarlatt and Jörg Kowalski (1987), *In meinen Augen die Liebe - Love in my Eyes* by Gerhard Multerer (2001) or Ekaterina Mikhailovskiy’s artist’s book about Casanova (1997) featuring Stefan Zweig’s text *Philosophie der Oberflächlichkeit - Philosophy of Superficiality*.

This personal relation to my books is often reflected in their purchase or even in their “genesis”. My passion for the artist’s books of the former GDR was aroused by contacts to Jens Henkel (burgart-presse) and Henry Günther (Edition Balance), who presented their work at West German fairs as early as 1990/91, and to Ulrich Tarlatt (Edition Augenweide), who came to see me personally in May 1990. These contacts enabled me to acquire classics such as *Common Sense 1989* (Edition Augenweide) – a wonderful book still in the tradition of GDR artists’ books but at the same time already surpassing it – and one of the 25 copies of the special edition of *Das Gleichmaß der Unruhe - The Balance of Restlessness* (Edition Balance, 1991) with numerous original graphic prints, signed by Kerstin Hensel, Sarah Kirsch, Karl Mickel, Gabriele Wohmann, and eleven other authors. It is easy to understand that there are hardly any of these unique early documents of the mental state in both Germanies left on the market. Guillermo Deisler’s last book *Herbstwind. Konkrete Poesie und Bilder - Autumn Wind. Concrete Poetry and Pictures* (1994) is also among these classics. The artist painted 15 watercolours for this work during the last months of his life while suffering from terminal cancer. During this time, I talked to him

on the phone once in a while and made him very happy by finding buyers for two of the nine copies of his book. Deisler, born in Santiago de Chile in 1940, a resident of Halle/Saale (East Germany) since 1986, died in 1995, having stimulated his generation of artists and writers by his civil courage. Their work from the second half of the eighties documented the state of the existing system, prophesied its gradual downfall and played a part in the political change.

In 1994, I met the Bavarian artist Gerhard Multerer from Freilassing at a lecture evening with the topic *Art in the former GDR*. Discontented with the ensuing discussion, I took – in a somewhat provocative manner – sides for the so-called “state artists” of the GDR, who at least – in a word – knew their craft. This led to a conversation with Gerhard Multerer, then attending the police academy in Fürstfeldbruck. He claimed to make artist’s books, too, besides his painting. Some weeks later, I was allowed to see the first of these works, consisting of original paintings and drawings, combined under a certain subject and bound as books, that is to say, not artist’s books in the literal sense. For hours, Multerer looked at the books of my collection, and from that time on, he has almost exclusively been making artist’s books, mainly with his own texts, trying to come to terms with his emotional world. This process gave birth to books such as *Rote Tränen - Red Tears* (1997), describing his hunt for the Russian Mafia as a policeman, or *Petrarca. roses are still roses* (1998), taking Petrarca’s literary letter about the ascent of the Mount Ventoux (1336) as an opportunity to individually reflect on life. The first of these books were given to me on condition that they were to become part of my collection and thus prevent their being destroyed by the chronically self-critical artist. Many of the books were mailed to me – simply with an address label on the book cover.

In the early nineties I came into contact with the book art of the crumbling Soviet Empire. Up to this day, it is often not possible to find those archaic works but by personal contacts. Being acquainted with a curator from St. Petersburg, I learned about the work of the artist Sergei Yakunin from Moscow. After more than six months of intensive sales talks, during which the object of my desire had been presented to me again and again, I finally gained possession of the one-of-a-kind book *Smert Lyubov - Death Love* (ca. 1992) – after a long night with a bottle of Moskovskaya wodka. In 1995, I published the artists’ book *Waggon* (Edition Augenweide) and thus established contact with Mikhail Karasik, who was among the contributors to the book. Meanwhile he is the most renowned book artist of new Russia; his work is part of all the large private and public collections in Europe and America. *Buran - Snowstorm* (1995) features a plastic bottle with text written on a zig-zag fold inside, legible only when the bottle top has been opened. When exported, the work aroused suspicion at the customs and the officers opened all the 35 bottles to make sure they did not contain alcohol.

Acquiring artist's books is more than merely purchasing. The artist's and the collector's life and thought are connected, influence each other, a network is forming and you get in touch with other passionate collectors, i.e. Wulf D. von Lucius, Wilfried Onzea, Peter Zitzmann, with disseminators of book art, i.e. Heinz Stefan und Wibke Bartkowiak (forum book art/BuchDruckKunst e.V. Hamburg), Sarah Bodman (University of the West of England/Bristol), the Pirckheimer-Gesellschaft (Pirckheimer Society), with artists like Wolf Spies, with whom I have been corresponding for a long time, his every letter turning into a piece of art.

It is difficult to say which of my numerous artist's books are the most impressive, they all being parts of the mosaic of my life. Walasse Ting's *1 Cent Life* (1964) had occupied my thoughts for a long time before I bought it. Its 62 original lithographs, by Jim Dine, Sam Francis, Asger Jorn, Roy Lichtenstein, Mel Ramos, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann and others, mix aggressive, colourful Pop Art with abstract tendencies of European art. Texts by the Chinese painter and poet Walasse Ting using his very own rhythm paint a fascinating picture of the spirit of awakening in the early sixties – full of hope and impudence, but also of despair. So this voluminous book probably became one of the most exciting artists' books of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The work of Ukrainian-born Julia Kissina (now Berlin) also breathes the spirit of change – the change of the eighties and nineties. Her one-of-a-kind books, such as *Kniga o kastratsyonniy kompleks Olle Lukoye - Book of the Castration Complex of Olle Lukoye* (ca. 1989), assemble fragments of texts on painted, irregularly cut, foldable pages with surreal, absurd drawings, paintings, collages and pop-ups. It is the process of leafing through the book that gradually and playfully reveals its 'space', which can be changed again and again by turning and unfolding the pages. A meal with Kissina resulted in a mineral water bottle and a menu of a pizza delivery service mutating into book objects (*Überkinger. Roman - Überkinger [brand of mineral water]. Novel; Pizza-Express. Roman - Pizza Delivery Service. Novel*, both mid-nineties). The text of the 'novels' mingled with personal memories of a convivial evening.

The artist Mikhail Karasik from St. Petersburg is a regular commuter between Europe and America. His work resumes early 20<sup>th</sup> century futurism or the tradition of French "livres d'artiste" and gives telling evidence how fast new Russia opened up to the West. The tapering form of Karasik's book *Minaret* (1999) reminds of a minaret pointing skywards. Written on the stone in laterally reversed script, the text evokes life in and around a mosque in the words of a Russian Jew, who never saw geographic and denominational borders as obstacles between people.

The effort of remembering history is made by the artists' book *The Prophetic Book/Księga Proroctw* by Krzysztof Wawrzyniak and Craig Raine, published in 1989 by the Polish press Correspondence des Arts II. The reason for my buying it was the sentence "I give you this prophetic book, / this sampler of life / which will take you a lifetime to read." Indeed, the book, which amongst other things deals with the Holocaust, is an infinite book. Another subject is the self-restoration of a destroyed order in the course of the book, congenially translated into linocuts by the artist.

I am an avid collector of all books published in small editions by Henry and Marion Günther's Edition Balance. This press works in the tradition of the classic German presses and publishes mainly contemporary authors, e.g. John Ashbery, Volker Braun, Friederike Mayröcker, Christa Wolf. An exception to this rule is represented by the book *Rabenmenschen - Raven People* (1999) with a text by Arthur Rimbaud and 16 woodcuts by Thomas Offhaus. When the book was in the making, my mother was a terminally ill patient in a nursing home. This was the real reason for me to acquire this artist's book: the "raven people" of the book, these metaphors of transience and dying, the real ravens which each spring filled the park in front of my mother's window with their shrill cawing – one explains the other, fiction became real, reality became fiction. My mother's manuscript *Mein Leben! - My Life!* (1995-2000) is also part of my collection. Coping with life is a work of art and both nearing perfection and failing are immanent.

Hundreds of these artist's books as well as thousands of books bought in bookshops and antiquarian books inhabit my universe. It is not always the bibliophilic highlight that is most important for my journey through life. Quiet books, too, may provide me with touching insights. Edition Mariannenpresse and Nora Handpresse, for example, are worth mentioning for their reasonably priced, good value books. I'd also like to point out the ICHverlag from Nuremberg, whose uncompromising computer-generated picture books combine the most up-to-date technology with the Age of Romanticism and E.T.A. Hoffmann's Gothic novels.

Occupying myself with the traces of the past always seemed important to me – also as far as books are concerned. The great modern works have equally great forerunners, dating back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A detailed description would go beyond the scope of this essay, but I do consider some roughly sketched remarks to be essential.

Already as a student at the romantic little town of Canterbury I came to experience the immense attraction of illustrated English books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although I could not afford them at that time. Later, I purchased volume I of *The Antiquarian Itinerary* (1815) with numerous copperplate engravings

which did not only portray the sights of England, but, in a miraculous way, conveyed a pastoral idyll, a soothing inner peace. In his three-volume work with numerous coloured aquatint engravings, *The Tour of Doctor Syntax* (1819-21), the cartoonist Thomas Rowlandson treated that idyll with irony. These images were engraved in my mind because they communicated a reality that was already about to become utopic due to the Industrial Revolution. „A la recherche du temps perdu“ (In search of lost time), as Marcel Proust would have called it.

The sensuality of French private press prints was revealed to me by Colette's *L'Envers du Music-Hall* (1937) in the form of an artist's copy with numerous coloured engravings and an engraved plate by Edouard Chimot. The violation of taboos his lascivious Art Deco ladies constituted at that time is a pioneering deed for the history of erotic illustration, the latter always being a yardstick of an era's tolerance in cultural matters. Another look at secret passions is provided by Stefan Eggeler's demonic engravings for Hanns Heinz Ewers' story *Die Herzen der Könige - Hearts of Kings* (1922). The horror that was to come true 20 years later is here already pointed out impressively.

Carl Maria Seyppel destroyed the opinion on what a book should be like as early as the 1880s. His "mummy prints" such as *Das geheime Tagebuch von Christoph Columbus - The Secret Diary of Christopher Columbus* (1890) or his "excavated books" e.g. the "Humoresken im altägyptischen Stil" - "Humorous Stories in Old Egyptian Style" (1882 ff.) were decorated with objects and artificial traces of ageing were applied (sand, shells, seaweed, damaged and weathered parts). Some parts of the stories were told in a comic-like form – astonishing at that time.

These few examples demonstrate that modern book art is based on solid centuries-old foundations. Art styles and literary fashions may have changed, but this special art form is still characterized by the desire to grasp human existence with word and image and to understand it in the end. I here agree with Arnulf Rainer's praise of art: "Life is a dim reflection of art."

Translated by Cornelia Göbel

For more information on this collection please see [www.buchkunst.info](http://www.buchkunst.info)