Duality: Artists' Books Exploring Multiple Sides

Kathryn Schug

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Duality: Artists’ Books Exploring Multiple Sides curated by Book Arts Minor Kathryn Schug CSB ‘25 through an internship with the CSB+SJU Libraries. The exhibit features 16 artists’ books from the Clemens Library Artists’ Books Collection plus 2 copies of the book Schug made for ART 213: Introduction to Artists’ Books during the Fall 2023 semester (class offered again in Fall 2024).

Artists’ books use craft and content to communicate a message or idea. An ongoing debate within the Book Arts community and outside is how to help viewers understand artists’ books as both art and books. One definition of artists’ books that sums up this duality and dilemma comes from Betty Bright in her book, *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America: 1960-1980*, “Every aspect of the [artists’] book—from content to materials to format—must respond to the intent of the artist and cohere to a work that is set in motion with a reader’s touch” (3). The necessity of handling most artists’ books for full comprehension caused the curator of this exhibit to select works that can be summarized through didactics and the presentation of a couple of pages.

Additionally, this exhibit introduces (or re-introduces) viewers to artists’ books with a complex but important theme.

The displayed artists’ books use their approach to the page, binding, and tactile materials to explore multiple perspectives of concepts that interest the artists. This theme is meant to inspire and hopefully ignite further exploration of artists’ books and the social context they can encompass. *Reading Dick and Jane with Me* by Clarissa Sligh explores the idea that the *Dick and Jane* textbooks do not portray a universal childhood experience of the 1940s and 1950s, especially for Black children. Another concept covered is the destruction of books. *My Heart’s Page* commissioned by the organization Organik, uses the form of a traditional codex book to outline mass book-burning events from around the world. One of the examples is Bebelplatz (colloquially Opernplatz) in Berlin, Germany, where 25,000 books burned on May 10th, 1933. In memorial of this tragedy there is a copper plaque with German poet Heinrich Heine’s quote, “Those who will burn books, will in the end burn people.” This quote is the epigraph to Schug’s poem, “Burning Blooming Books.”

*Wild Girls Redux: An Operator’s Manual* by Ellen Knudson overlays images of pin-up girls on the *Missouri Department of Revenue Motorcycle Operator Manual*, whose words she satirically adapts to be about “operating” women. Philip Gallo controls both sides of the narrative in *Electric Tulips 5.1*. Writing under the pseudonym Alessandro S. Strega, a revered literary critic, Gallo authors the essay “Future Preterite” about his poem “Electric Tulips 5.1.” This artists’ book serves as an allusion to a similar move made by James Joyce in the Sylvia Beach Publication of 1929, where he praised his novel *Ulysses* under the pseudonym Vladimir Dixon.

Duality is present throughout life. Only viewing one side of a debate is how echo chambers begin. This hinders the dissemination of knowledge. The goal in choosing artists’ books whose themes fit duality is to display memorable books that invite conversation.

This exhibit will remain up from April through August 2024. Stacy Penk was the supervisor of this exhibit, and Rachel Melis provided research material.