

Sharing the Artists' Book Experience Remotely

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Abstract:

One of the best parts of my job is sharing artists' books with students. Before March 13, 2020 we always showed artists' books in-person. During the pandemic I found myself trying to find a way forward to preserve the artists' book classes that had not been canceled after our campus was closed and we were fully remote. What can I do with a lack of access to our collection? What can I do remotely? At the time we had a small collection of scanned Artist's Books. I searched my house for books that could be considered artists' books, I reused a wire bookshelf and made a set up with my iPad and cutting mat. This allowed an overview of the items and gave me hands free operation. I began teaching shortened sessions focusing on a handful of titles and also spent some time on how the books were made. I focused on making simple structures that anyone could make with items easily found in their dorm room or home.

Keywords: artists' books, instruction, online, creativity, pandemic.

Rhode Island School of Design and Artists' Books

Rhode Island School of Design or RISD (pronounced "RIZ-dee") is an art school of about 2,500 students located in Providence, Rhode Island, United States offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of fields including fine art, design, and architecture. The Fleet Library at RISD has over 100,000 volumes which includes Special Collections (21,000+) and our artists' book collection.

The definition of artists' books is often nebulous and fluid. Our definition of artists' books is broad - they are a work of art - a book work made by an artist. We have over 2,500 artists' books dating from the 1960s forward. They range from conceptual to handmade, from photography to altered, from letterpress to riso, from one of a kind to editioned, from perfect bound to coptic stitch, from accordion to instant book and more. We are a teaching collection therefore we collect a little bit of everything (our only limitations being budget and sometimes size). We are always looking for artists we don't have in our collection and we

have a focus on BIPOC artists and books exploring current issues. We do have artists' books in other languages but most of our books are in English. While RISD does not have a book arts program, many majors including Graphic Design and Printmaking assign book projects and make use of the Artists' Book Collection.

The Pandemic and Artists' Books

One of the best parts of my job is sharing artists' books with students. Before March 13, 2020 we always showed artists' books in-person. That spring, I found myself trying to find a way forward to preserve the artists' book classes that had not been canceled after our campus was closed and we were fully remote. What can I do with a lack of access to our collection? What can I do remotely? At the time we had a small collection of scanned Artist's Books. I searched my house for books that could be considered artists' books - children's pop-ups, McSweeney's magazines, zines, and some mass produced artists' books like *Aunt Sallie's Lament*.

I reused a wire bookshelf and made a set up with my iPad and cutting mat. This allowed an overview of the items and gave me hands free operation. I could also position my laptop behind the shelf to give a side view of the item.

I began teaching shortened sessions focusing on a handful of titles and also spent some time on how the books were made. This led to creating a how-to guide - a list of books about making books and several how-to videos of making basic structures like a maze book. I added this content, our scans, and Internet Archive links to class lists. These lists are available before, during, and after classes for a point of reference for students.

Often I start the class asking the students what is an artists' book and use their points as questions after we look at the book together. Then I would read the book to them - the whole book or choose selections. As I turned pages or moved parts of the books, I made sure not to talk so the movement of the pages could be heard. I also describe how the papers, and materials feel to touch.

After reading we would refer back to their definitions. For example "handmade" is often a word used to describe artists' books. Is this book handmade or does it have handmade features? Is this still an artists' book? Why or why not? We would also look at its structure together and often I would do a quick demonstration on how it was made. Example - for an accordion book how to properly fold an accordion using a standard piece of copier paper.

I encourage questions and comments at all times. And ask the students to critique the book and ask specific, not broad questions. What works well (the story, the format, etc) and what could be improved? Our students are interested in not only the story, but how the object was made and of what materials. Asking them to be honest but kind and constructive is part of the critique culture at RISD where we strive to have open and inclusive conversations about art.

Things that happened - we connected over books, feedback has been positive especially from faculty, students made virtual appointments, and students started sharing their own books! Many felt it was better than being in-person due to the fact they were not jockeying at the table and they all had a front seat view. One faculty member described the experience as the "overhead camera made the students and I feel as if we were leafing through the books ourselves. Seeing the pages turn in her hands gave order to the narrative. Hearing the swoosh

or crack of the binding gave weight to the substance. Listening to her description or to her reading of the text puts us in the circle of a classroom instead of the grid of the screen.” I felt relieved that I didn’t have to worry about people handling items, I just demonstrated proper handling.

The biggest negative was not being able to give everyone the opportunity to interact one on one with a book tacitly or even olfactory in the Reading Room.

Moving forward to July 2020 when I began to have onsite access to the collection I added a book light aka ring light to my set up and tried several document cameras (IPEVO and HoverCam) but found the best combo for us was Jstand Tall iPad stand and an iPad. I continue to advocate for showing less items and work with the faculty to choose under 10 items and schedule sessions for an hour to an hour and 15 minutes. Once staff had limited access to our collection, we focused on scanning more items used in instruction. All classes were online for Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. And I continued to use the same methods I had developed in S Spring 2020. We were also able to open for individual appointments during this time period.

More things happened - feedback even with limited hands-on was still positive. After every virtual class we see a surge of in-person mini appointments, as students come in to handle the books.

An important book I shared with many classes during this time was Clarissa Sligh’s *Transforming Hate*. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests, Clarissa’s book offered a way to meditate and make something out of racist hate. Clarissa is a black female artist who explored transforming hate literature into origami peace cranes in her book. We would listen to a recording of Clarissa reading her book or read the book aloud on Zoom together. While we listened we also made cranes. And followed her directions of “cutting, folding, crease...”. Some students made cranes, but others explored the power of paper.

*At this point I would like to take a minute and ask for audience participation. Perhaps right now you have access to a piece of paper. What can you do with that piece of paper? Perhaps you fold it into a book and write a note or make a drawing, maybe you make a origami crane, what will you do? Please explore the power of paper while I finish giving my paper and hopefully we will have a minute to share them or you can share with your neighbor.

One student in a virtual artists’ book class continued to explore artists’ books and entered his work into our annual student artists’ book contest This event was held completely virtually - students made videos of books they had created, the juror reviewed the films, we did a virtual exhibit and a Zoom awards presentation. The Grand Prize went to a student who was attending RISD completely virtually and created a set of hand embroidered masks poetically expressing his pandemic experience - *If We Could Make It Out Alive*.

Since 2020 and to today, as we began small steps to the “return to normal”, I have been incorporating feedback from students and faculty to continue to offer remote sessions with opportunities for hands-on mini appointments. We do have in-person classes now as well as group appointments in-person now. What I carry forward is less is more. We explore less artists’ books together and spend more time with them individually. We still have

conversations about what students are experiencing in our Reading Room. And we continue to do demos of how to make an accordion or a simple pop up.

Successes have all been coupled with failures as I have constantly had to change how I do instruction due to COVID restrictions. However, this pandemic allowed me to be creative and form new ways to share our most popular collection, artists' books. My biggest lessons are; listen (enjoy the silence!), be flexible/agile - thinking on your feet, and always be able to laugh! Through it all, I have been striving to create meaningful authentic learning experiences and connect people with our collection thus creating and expanding our Special Collections community.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family.

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