

Ulrike Stoltz *Individuality* ^{or:} *How One-of-a-kind Artists' Books may come into being*

There are many things that influence the process of making an artist's book. Sometimes it starts with just a vague idea, sometimes it is a story that wants to be told, sometimes it starts with a text, sometimes the drawings made show a tendency as if they want to be a book, sometimes it is our delight just to start a process of collaboration and watch it develop — and maybe end up as a book. Some books start as a sketch and end up as a work of their own right; some books remain unfinished for a long time, until they finally find the last ingredient needed. Also, the techniques vary: We like to use everything that is at hand and seems appropriate, from hand writing to stamps or computer type-setting, from drawing with pen or brush to collage and digital imaging. Everything is possible — which also means: nothing is predictable. This is one of the reasons why some books turn out to be one-of-a-kind: It just would not make much sense to repeat them, or make a facsimile thereof. The spontaneous gesture has a value of its own; the printing experiment may not be repeated; the contents demand a certain kind of uniqueness. Another way of describing the situation: Making an artist's book can be compared to playing music: improvised jazz. Some takes are recorded (that would be the edition); some takes just happen spontaneously (that is the one-off). *The tradition* One may, of course, argue that this is against the “nature” of the book as a medium. Was it not since its earliest days that the book is to be more than just one “copy”? The library of Alexandria contained thousands of hand-written books, many or maybe even most of them being copies of other books. There was a copying industry long before Gutenberg. *The contents* of a book were something addressing many people, but its form was usually meant for individual use. Thus the medium was born with a kind of inner necessity of existing in numbers. *But why* do we never ask the

same question in front of a painting or drawing? (Even though there were copies of paintings circulating as prints (copper etchings) to spread the fame of the original.) But a painting may be perceived by many at the same moment (unlike a book). And the drawing always had the connotation of being a study for a painting rather than being a work of art in its own right—repeating a drawing would alter it, try out a different version, to make sure to find the best solution for the painting to be made. There was no need for “copies”. *Today* things have changed. Whoever wants to spread information around will most likely not print a book but use the internet. Print is still an industrial means of reproduction, but it no longer plays the key role. This might be regarded as a loss (which it clearly is), but it also opens up a door toward a freedom unknown to the book before. The technique of printing is interesting not just as such, but especially when it is used in an experimental way—which might mean that the result of a print run is unreproducible.

Artists' books between prints and drawings In the collection of every “Kupferstichkabinett” we find the prints (which are almost always and by definition editions) side by side with the drawings (which are always originals and one-of-a-kind). These are the companions of the artist's book. With the drawings, the one-of-a-kind books share a spontaneity; with the prints they share their interest in the technical process of making, which may be a help and support as well as something that needs to be fought with and conquered. *Photographs* Photographs are not drawings.

If the photograph is not shown on a digital screen, you will look at a “print”. The process of printing a photograph (in a darkroom) used to be different from printing letters, whereas photographs printed in a book together with text used to be reproductions of the fine-print version of the photograph (which could be an edition itself). *Print*

While writing this text, I realized that the words I used served to describe the various aspects of the process of making a book, which

don't seem valid any more. What is an "original"? What is a "print"? A "printer" was generally a man working in a printshop and running the printing press, now it is a box close to my computer, and what I get from it is a "print-out". The term signifies the difference: The printed page used to be regarded an "end-product" (final product), something that could be regarded as finished, at least for the moment. (There was, of course, always the possibility of a 2nd edition, a revised or expanded edition, and so on.) A printed page seemed to be a fact, a fixed point in the river of time. Now the print-out is just a snapshot of something that might be changed within the next second. So one could say: The one-of-a-kind book is a snapshot of an artist's idea. But then: How labour intensive is the one-off? Or, on the other hand, how spontaneous? *Perhaps* all those changes in technique and industry are mirrored in the one-of-a-kind artists' book: Traditionally, it does not make sense. But in the light of the freedom that the digital development gives to the analogue techniques, it seems only consequent that the artists don't care about taking the effort of making an edition. And why should they? As long as the book is regarded a work of art like a painting it does not need to be reproduced. *The concept* But all books are conceptual, the one-off is no exception. The book as a concept is absolutely independent of printing techniques or the number of copies. While working, you need "to think book" (as Helen Douglas once said), and that means certainly more than just thinking in sequences (although this is a good start). This thinking may be beyond words, beyond what we call rational. You will experience it when you turn the pages of a book. *Perception* So far, I have been writing from the maker's point of view. But what about perception? Do we read a book that is a one-off in a different way than we read a book that is made in an edition? Well, let's leave the mass-produced pocket book out of the discussion. Just thinking of artists' books, I don't think it makes a big difference. Perhaps you

would handle the one-off with a little more care? *But* the accessibility makes a point. If the book ends up in a private collection, it is gone and away and out of reach for the public. With paintings, it is the same, and we don't care too much (there are reproductions as well as there is a culture of lending them for exhibitions). Only when we hear that Bill Gates possesses a handwritten book by Leonardo da Vinci, and we know this is a one-off, we think: Should this not be in a museum or library? *Apart from* these thoughts, a new tendency becomes visible: Sometimes it seems to me that making a book is more important than reading it! You can watch it when you teach, no matter if it is in a university or an evening class for everyone. The hand-made book is a kind of “low-tech” thing (as long as you don't go into the precious binding). Because of its pages, it offers other possibilities than a painting; a “story” can be developed, thinking in series and sequences is essential. It has the recto and the verso of a piece of paper, with all the special possibilities as a result (like mirroring, equivalents, contradictions, etc.). The book combines texts and pictures in a “normal” way – this being so self evident that you hardly even think about it. And it has a haptic aspect, the touch of paper and binding, its weight, the smell of the printing ink. The book also offers the possibility to integrate various different materials (not just paper, but also leather, metal, wood, cloth, ...). All this shows that the book gains a certain interest when it is regarded and made not in the traditional way – thus leading directly to the one-off. The one-of-a-kind book is an intersection between various disciplines, materials and techniques. That's why we make them.