Discuss the role of the book as a content carrier and as a physical object. How do these roles complement and/or conflict with each other in terms of the use, care and the definition of the book?
Discuss the role of the book as a content carrier and as physical object. How do these roles complement and/or conflict with each other in terms of the use, care and the definition of the book?

It could be argued that the importance of the book as physical object is generally seen as secondary to its role as a content carrier. Thomas A. Vogler states that there is an ‘established sense of the book as a physical object that exists only, or primarily, to be a 'container' of a therefore separable text’ (Vogler, 2000, p. 448) Holland Cotter agrees, suggesting that the mass produced object of the book is a 'secondary, rather than primary object' where 'content matters more than form' (Cotter, 2004, p.xi). The book, in its traditional codex format has performed this container role for centuries, however over the last decade, as technology has improved and become more affordable, eReaders such as the kindle are challenging the dominance of the physical form of the book as the ideal content carrier for information (Vogler, 2000, p.450). In contrast, when it comes to the format of artists' books, their roles as content carrier and physical object are arguably much more complexly interlinked, and this essay will consider this.

The roles of the artists' book as content carrier, and as physical object are central to their definition. Stephen Bury states they are:

“Books or book-like objects, over the final appearance of which an artist has a high degree of control, where the book is intended as a work of art in itself.” (Bury, 1995, p.1)

Clive Phillpot is more specific:

“Books or booklets produced by the artist using mass-produced methods, and in(theoretically) unlimited numbers, in which the artist documents or realises art ideas or artworks.” (Phillpot cited by Grandal-Montero p.37, 2012)

Bury's definition is much broader than Phillpot's very specific one, but both make clear definitions regarding its physical form. This is one of the elements where the artist's book differs from the conventional book, and is an important in terms of it's role as a physical object. Artists' books range from straightforward codex based works to book-objects that stretch the definition of the book,
such as ‘On The Slates’, by Flockophobic Press, which consists of a brown brogue shoe, in which is placed leaves of paper containing poetry, rolled up like a scroll in a facsimile $1 bill (Flockophobic, 1992). For these book-objects, the properties of the conventional book as a physical object that make it such an excellent content carrier, such as it's portability, and relative cheapness to produce (Lippard, 1983, p.49), do not always apply. The artists' book, regardless of the form it takes should function as a work of art in it's own right, so concerns of practicality that are important to the function of the conventional book outlined in the introduction of this essay are often disregarded.

Bury and Phillpot's definitions are less prescriptive about the content of artists' books. We often think of the book as a 'warehouse for words' (Smith, 2005, p.119), and this view reinforces the idea of content being more important than form. In comparison, artist's books often contain a much wider range of content. Artist Dick Higgins believed this was one of features of the book that made it so attractive to artists and described the book as a kind of 'intermedia', where many techniques and materials could be contained in one format (Drucker, 2004, p.70). Unlike the traditional book, where there is a delineation between the physical object, and it's content, form and content often overlap considerably when it comes to artists' books. Indeed, for some artists the physical form of the book, and conventions associated with the form become the content of their work. Take for example the work of Dieter Roth, whom Johanna Drucker names as the “first artist to make books the major focus of his work and engage with the book as an art work- not as a publication or vehicle for literary or visual expression, but as a form in itself.” (Drucker, 2004, p.75).

Roth used actions associated with the codex form of the book, such as turning the page, to create works which were structural investigations of the book as a physical object. Roth's '2 Bilderbücher' consists of two books, one spiral bound, one a ring binder, featuring pages made from coloured card, and acetate, respectively, with shapes cut from each page. As you turn the page and progress through the book, the appearance of the book is constantly changing, as new layers and cut outs create different colours, patterns and forms (Appendix 1).
Artists have also experimented with making works that go against the conventions of page layout, and reading that have developed from the physical form of the book. Instead of creating work that features evenly sized and spaced text, to be read from left to right, top to bottom of page, from front cover to back (Bury, 1995, p.2), publications by the Russian Futurists, and Dadaists experimented with typography, in an attempt to reflect the radical ideas they were trying to convey (Drucker, 2004, p.49-59). Lawrence Weiner's dual texts at the top and bottom of each page in his book 'Green As Well As Blue As Well As Red' require the reader to consider the text in a different way, that when compared to the fluidity with which standard lines of text that fill a page can usually be read, feel jarring (Appendix 2). Artists' books have also challenged the sequential narrative traditionally associated with reading with the idea of the 'open work', in which the reader determines how to read the book themselves. Evolving from the Tristan Tzara proposal for a Dada poem, where he advised interested parties to cut an article from the paper, cut each letter in the article out, place them in a bag, shake them up, and then take each one out after the other to create a poem (Bury, 1995, p.17), this proved a popular technique with Fluxus publications in the 1960's. (Bury, 1995, p.17).

Production of the artists' book also has implications for the role of the book as content carrier, and as physical object. Traditionally the production of the book, and of content are seen as two separate activities, generally controlled by the author and publisher respectively (Vogler, 2000, p.449). In his manifesto 'The Art of Making New Books', artist Ulises Carrion confirms this the 'writer should be responsible for the whole process' of creating the book, rather than just the content (Carrion, 1975, p.32), and this sentiment is echoed by Bury's definition (Bury, 1995, p.1). Drucker believes control of production is important for the book as a content carrier, and as physical object, as allows a greater range of voices to be heard and visions to be realised than would be possible if artists tried to seek commercial publishers for their work, where the profit motive generally defines, and constricts, the content of the book, and the physical form that it takes (Drucker, 2004, p.7). The book 'Giving Fear A Name: Detroit' by Susan kae Grant (Appendix 3) is a
good example of this. Made in a limited edition of fifteen, bound between the pink covers, with a miniature popgun bookmark each double page of handmade paper contains texts detailing Grant's experiences of living in Detroit, and collaged illustrations featuring items such as pins, human teeth and barbed wire. Although this book is a multiple (albeit in a small print run), it features lavish binding, hand made paper for all pages, and carefully printed text, and although each edition would have featured the same photographs as the basis for the illustrations, due to the collage work Grant adds to them, they will all be unique. This level of detail in terms of both content and form would be time consuming, not suited to large print runs, and so would be overlooked by many commercial publishers.

Although at odds to the production of book-works and book-objects, such as the one just discussed, which are often made in small limited editions, or as one-offs, Phillpot was of the opinion that artists should employ methods of mass production to create books (Phillpot, 1985, p.97) and some artists have harnessed these conventional methods to situate unconventional artistic ideas and works outside of the traditional gallery space (Lippard, 1976, p.45). With the rise of conceptual art in the 1960's and 70's, the belief that art was primarily about ideas rather than process, and that art was everywhere and part of everyday life was a popular tenet of many art movements and artists began to look for alternatives to traditional mediums such as sculpture and paintings (Drucker, 2004, p.70). The book, which could be produced easily, sold cheaply, and distributed widely (Drucker, 2004, p.77), became, in the words of Lucy R. Lippard, 'the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience'. (Lippard, 1976, p.45). Books produced in this period often took the form of slim pamphlets, with simple covers, where the focus was on the content within (Phillpot, 1985, p.114). The artist's book also offered an affordable alternative to an original piece of artwork. Books like this have become known as 'democratic multiples' as a result (Drucker, 2004, p.69).

Ed Ruscha's 'Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations' is probably the most well known example of this kind. The title is printed in large stark red/orange capitals on the cover, and the content inside is as
exactly described- twenty six black and white photographs of petrol stations, with location details (Appendix 4). For the first edition, Ruscha printed 400 copies of the book, and sold them in a wide range of places (Phillpot, 1985, p.97). The prints in the book could have had been large format, and hung on a gallery wall, and then reproduced in a lavish but expensive monograph at a later date, but instead Ruscha chose the book as an attempt to disseminate his work more widely. This is especially worth considering in a pre internet age, where images of new artworks would have circulated much more slowly through traditional routes such as art magazines.

Another reason that the book as a physical form, and thus content carrier, proved so popular with conceptual artists during this period was due to the fact that much of the work that was created was ephemeral in nature, for example Richard Long's walking pieces, where the walk itself was the work of art. Of course, this could make the work hard to sell (Bury, 1995, p.21). Artists began to self publish books to sell alongside their shows, sometimes as documentation of work in the exhibition, and as art objects in their own right (Bury, 1995, p.21). Often these books would contain content that mirrored the work the artist created in other mediums, for example Sol LeWitt's 'Five Cubes On Twenty-Five Squares' - photographs of five cubes arranged in a number of different formations on a twenty five square grid, echoed the angular, minimalist sculptures he showed in galleries (Appendix 5). Due to their affordable nature, the books often sold well, and allowed the artist to make some profit. LeWitt realised the potential of creating and selling his own books, and went on to co-found Printed Matter, a not-profit collective for the sale and distribution of artist's books, which is still active today (Bury, 1995, p.21).

However, the idea of the 'democratic multiple' can be problematic. In 1970, Lucy Lippard, an early advocate of the artist's book and co-founder of 'Printed Matter' wrote a critical piece about artist's books outlining some of the issues she saw with the form (Lippard, 1983, p.49). She worried the distinction between 'high' art that was to be found in artist's books, and the kind of material that was found in conventional books was getting harder to make (Lippard, 1983, p.50-1), and that the artist's book was becoming little more than a novelty for the art world (Lippard, 1983, p.50). Lippard
also questioned how successful they were at reaching a wider audience, pointing out the disjunction between the 'democratic' physical form that the book took, which would initially draw in curious 'non-art world' readers, who would then see the distinctly 'high art' content and decide against purchasing the book. (Lippard, 1983, p50).

In the present day, there are also some elements of this form of artist's book that can be seen as being contradictory to their original intent. Many artist's books from this period are now seen as important historical objects, which feature in Museum and Library Collections, and can only be viewed under invigilated conditions, which seems at odds to their original role as disseminators of content, away from the usual structures of the art world. It is also interesting to consider their monetary value. Originally sold for around $10 (or £2.65 in the case of the copy of 'Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations' that I looked at at Chelsea College of Art, see Appendix 4), they now sell for large amounts of money due to their scarcity, and association with famous artists - a first edition of 'Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations' is currently for sale on Abe books priced at £5576.61 (Abebooks, 2013).

In terms of the care of the book, this is where some of the greatest conflicts between the artists' book as content carrier and physical object can be found. Early artists' books and some democratic multiples were generally printed cheaply, without longevity in mind, and now the copies that have survived are often very fragile and risk damage every time they are handled. The large forms that some book-objects take can cause issues. For example, 'Daniil Kharms- liubov’ i smert' by Sergei Yakunin consists of a large book object, with multiple movable parts, and hinged 'pages', housed in a larger silver chest, constructed from silver corrugated cardboard (Appendix 6). It requires its own special cupboard for storage at the National Art Library, and as storage space is often at a premium in Libraries and Museums, this is not ideal. The unconventional materials that artists' books are often constructed from also be problematic- Yakunin's book is over twenty years old now, and every time the book is removed from the cardboard casing there is potential for damage. In time this could lead to the book being too fragile to remove, which seems against the principle of
this book being something that requires interaction on the part of the viewer to fulfil it's function as a book and an art object. Some artists' books have the potential to cause damage to other material in a collection- Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's 'Mémoires' (Appendix 7) was bound in sandpaper, with the original intent to destroy the books it sat next to on the shelf by abrading them each time it was taken out and put back in. Obviously this is less than ideal, so the copy in the National Art Library Collection is wrapped in brown paper, and kept in a conservation envelope.

This essay is not exhaustive, but the range of issues covered allow conclusions about the role of the artists' book as content carrier and as physical object to be drawn. When thinking about the artists' book, it is important to try and move away from the traditional definitions of book as content carrier/physical object. Although it can be easy to look at a book-object and instantly see it's purpose as a physical object, or look at a democratic multiple type of artist's book and assume that content is the main focus, so the physical form of the book is less important, it is reductive to think in this manner. For book-objects, such as the aforementioned 'Daniil Kharms- liubov' i smert', or works by Dieter Roth, drawing the line between the content of the book and it's main role as a physical object, acting as a carrier for that content, is difficult when the content seems to form part of the fabric of the book itself. Equally, although an artist's book such as Ruscha's 'Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations' uses a simple codex as physical format, and the focus seems to be on content, it would be missing the purpose of the publication to not consider the ideological reason for choosing that particular physical format for the work.

Although the many and varied definitions of the artist's book can seem to give conflicting messages about the role of the artist's book as content carrier and as physical object, Drucker believes that one of the reasons that almost every major art movement of the twentieth century have incorporated artist's books into their bodies of work is due to the flexibility that the book form offers (Drucker, 2004, p.1), and generally the relationship between form and content in artists books is more complementary than conflicting. Ulises Carrion stated that the elements of a book would work as
“a totality, that transmitted the authors intention.” (Carrion, 1985, p.40)

and I think this is key to considering the artist's book as content carrier and physical object- rather than being about one role being more important than the other, and content and physical form being separate, the role of the artist's book both as content carrier and physical object is to work together so that the book as a whole can function as work of art in it's own right.
Appendix


In the Artist's book collection at Chelsea College of Art.

In the Artist's book collection at Chelsea College of Art.
COLOPHON

This book was printed, bound and collaged during the summer of 1984 by Susan Kue Grant. I would like to express a special thank-you to Anthony Liggett and Corky Stuckenbruck for their knowledge and support. The photographs were reprinted from "Portrait Of An Artist And Her Mother". The text is Palatino Roman printed on paper made by Blake Alexander. The boxes were constructed by Brad Metcalf. In a limited edition of fifteen this is number 11.

In the Artist's Book collection at Chelsea College of Art.
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Books


Web Resources

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Libraries/Collections visited

Artists’ Book Collection, Chelsea College of Art Library, 16 John Rislip Street, London SW1P 4JU.
National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London, SW7 2RL.