Centuries of Black Artists’ Books

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ONE

For all African American literature’s and Black print culture studies’ thick, connective scholarship — work that demonstrates how printed matter problematizes conventional notions of publishing and readership, reflecting the creativity and independence of those laboring to publish, manufacture, and circulate these materials, and how Black aesthetics and literature contribute to activist cultures — there are forms that remain marooned from scholarly analysis; especially that of the artists’ book. Conceptually, artists’ books are a zone of activity where artists raise questions about what constitutes the book-as-form, working in concert with artists’ creative and intellectual visions, with a political economy of independent production and circulation of books, political
and activist work on the part of artists, exhibition spaces, and audiences; all in the name of bending and stretching the very idea of the book as a cultural object. Johanna Drucker’s seminal definition of artists’ books frames the form as, “at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas - rather than at their limits.” In other words, the definition of an artists’ book is not a rigid typology of format or genre but constitutes a materially and socially flexible literary and artistic object. Indeed I hope that my talk today inspires others to take on scholarly projects examining Black artists creating books as an activist practice, as well as works that address the range of Black political and cultural themes through the various forms of the artists’ book. It may even be possible to trace a history of Black artists’ books, perhaps by connecting aesthetic and functional forms of Amy Matilda Cassey and Martina and Mary Anne Dickerson’s friendship

albums⁴ with Clarissa Sligh’s⁵ or Krista Franklin’s⁶ extant artist’s books. Indeed, there are hints at these very connections in Ellen Gruber Garvey’s intertwined scholarly projects,⁷ yet specific tracings and theorization of Black artists’ books remain underdeveloped.

TWO

As a form of intermedia - artistic activities which intentionally cross genre boundaries⁸ - the artists’ book is well positioned, at least in theory, to emerge from the range of Black interdisciplinary aesthetic and activist communities. The publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival of artists’ books fall well within the interests of book

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historians,\textsuperscript{9} including those working broadly in African American print culture. Thus one rightly sees the promise in criticism and scholarship that highlights the work of Black artists who create artists’ books, book artists who address themes of identity, social justice, and anti-racism, indeed any questions relevant to Blackness in all its varieties, through their interrogation of the of books themselves; as well as in the recovery, amplification, and appreciation of Black print culture within the particular form of the artists’ book.

Yet the intersection of the scholarship of artists’ books, book history and print culture, and African American literary studies is visually impaired, if not outright blind to the range of work that exists in the field of Black artists’ books. These absences likely result from the obscuring effects of the racialization of museum and print cultures and the concealing consequences of discipline-specific scholarship. However, the more immediate concern is that these academic foreclosures and erasures - a blindness to Black artists’ books - should no longer occur in the face of the broad range and deep practice of creating and circulating these unique cultural objects by artists, curators, and consumers at workshops, collections, and retailers that reflects decades of affective and material labor. Consequently, I propose thinking about a series of signposts and reflective tools which can work to correct our visual impairments to Black artist’s books and point towards

scholarly approaches that address the form for all its richness and complexity.

THREE

Johanna Drucker’s claim that “It would be hard to find an art movement in the 20th century which does not have some component of the artist’s book attached to it,” is simultaneously an engaging and a problematic speculation for scholars working in the fields of Black Studies and Print Culture. The conceptual flexibility of the artists’ book as a form of literary and aesthetic expression does not necessarily address the cultural structures that constrained Black artists from participating in cultural production and circulation of artist’s books. There is substantial recent scholarship which highlights both the history of structural racism embedded in American museum culture during the 20th century, as well as Black artists’ response to and circumvention of these discriminatory cultural practices. For example, Black artists’ work, including perhaps that of artists’ books, was rarely

exhibited, often poorly represented, or were otherwise situated in ways that limited the depth and diversity of their work. Adding insult to injury, major theoretical perspectives and anthologies of artists’ books generally fail to include work by Black artists or those artists working in and around African American aesthetics, experiences, or literature. Searches of leading scholarly journals dedicated to artists’ books, as well as those focused more broadly on contemporary art, reveal equally scant critical coverage of Black artists’ books which address broadly-Black cultural themes. In other words, and as an oblique rejoinder to Drucker’s claims, it may very well be hard to locate an arts movement in the 20th and 21st centuries (Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts, Black Feminist, AfroFuturism) that has a component of an artists’ book attached to it, as the balance of museum culture and scholarly criticism related to artists’ books have obscured the totality of the structures and practices of the various African American movements in the 20th and 21st century. A second, and perhaps more troubling response to Drucker’s claim may be that there may be few if any Black artists’ books before the 1980s. Such a claim would reflect years of curatorial and archival research, but the resulting

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absences of Black artists’ books in the modernist and early post-modernist periods could work to wholly deconstruct the artists’ books field as simply epiphenomenal of structural whiteness present at the nexus of artistic production and scholarly critique. In either circumstance, that we are failing to look for presences of Black artists who produce artists’ books, or we are failing to acknowledge structural racist practices that produce an absence of Black artists’ books, we should no longer consider the cultural production, exhibition, or scholarly analysis of artists’ books without recognizing the historical and cultural implications that have guided the field up to this point.

FOUR

Consequently, I suggest that it is well past time to call out the structures that inhibit(ed?) Black artists from producing and exhibiting artists’ books, and at the same time, encourage scholars who focus on artists’ books, and by extension fine press and rare editions, to think critically about the bookwork they are researching. Does the scholarly community need another reading or recitation on well-covered artists and movements instead of Ben Blount, Krista Franklin, or Clarissa Sligh? At the same time, scholars working with artists’ books need to do the work, not just (re)covering Black artists’ books from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, but also the necessary cultural and historical labor to read these works in context. In other words, scholars should attend to the calls from
Christian,\textsuperscript{15} duCille,\textsuperscript{14} Foreman,\textsuperscript{15} and McKay\textsuperscript{16} before simply trying to apply theoretical positions and historical accounts from Bright,\textsuperscript{17} Drucker, or Shaw\textsuperscript{18} in an analysis of Black artists’ books and the material and cultural circumstances that mediate the production, circulation, consumption, and survival of these objects.

I’ll close by suggesting that the examples\textsuperscript{19} of Amy Matilda Cassey’s \textit{Friendship Album} (1833-1856), Alexander Gumby’s early C20 scrapbooks, including \textit{Negro in Bondage}, the vast range of Clarissa Sligh’s books, from \textit{What’s Happening with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}P. Gabriele Foreman, “A Riff, A Call, and A Response: Reframing the Problem Th at Led to Our Being Tokens in Ethnic and Gender Studies; or, Where Are We Going Anyway and with Whom Will We Travel?” \textit{Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers} 30, no. 2 (2013): 306-322.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Nellie Y. McKay, “Naming the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?%; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?” \textit{PMLA} 113, no. 3 (1998): 359–69.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Betty Bright, \textit{No Longer Innocent: Book Art In America 1960-1980} (New York: Granary Books, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{18}Tate Shaw, \textit{Blurred Library: Essays on Artist’s Books} (Austin: Cuneiform Press, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{19}Author’s note: images of these works were presented to the audience at the conference and the basis for the discussion session following the panel reading.
\end{itemize}
Momma? (1988) to Transforming Hate (2016), all of the works by Emma Amos, Faith Ringold, and other women who exhibited their work in “Coast to Coast: Women Artists of Color” (1988-1990), Amos Paul Kennedy Jr’s Burnt Churches, Krista Franklin’s A Natural History of My Drapetomania (2010), Ben Blount’s Racial Coloring Book (2018) and Atta Kwami’s Grace Kwami Sculpture (1993) represent only a small sampling of the centuries of Black artists’ books worthy of our scholarly scrutiny, museum exhibition, and patronage for these artists’ work.