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What the Artist's Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory : Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski ; traduction française inédite en annexe

Hubert Renard, Leszek Brogowski

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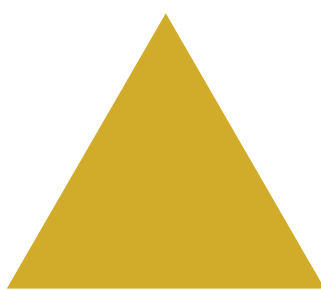
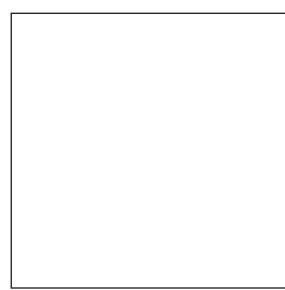
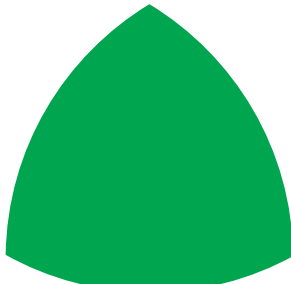
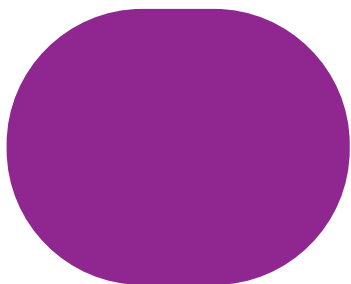
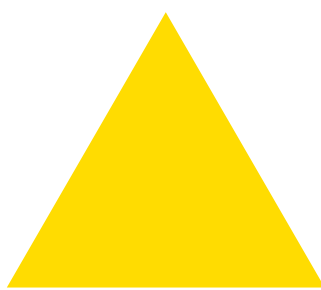
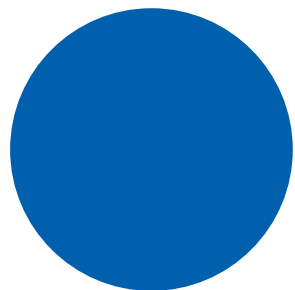
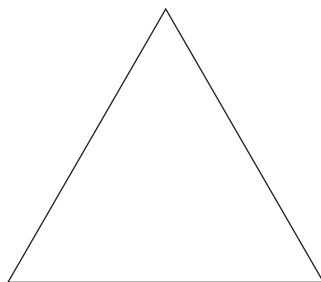
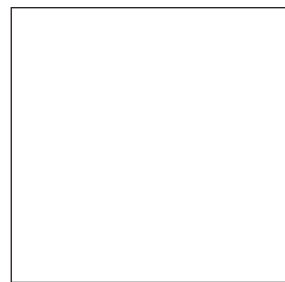
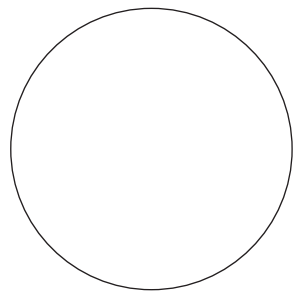
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What the Artist's Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory

Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski



TEAMWORK

Paul Cézanne : Reducing nature to sphere, cube, cone (1904).

Wassily Kandinsky : Blue circle, red square and yellow triangle (1925).

Johannes Itten : An ellipse for purple, a trapezoid for orange, a spherical triangle for green (1961).

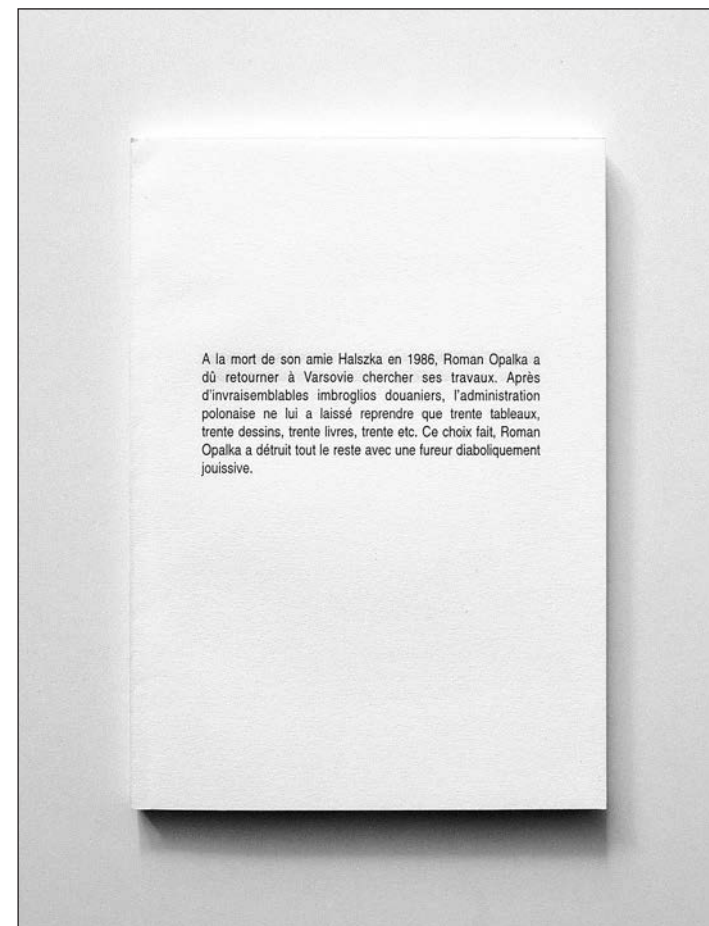
Pascal Le Coq : A black dot for printing, a white pixel for digital, a golden triangle for museums (2008).

WHAT THE ARTIST'S BOOK MAKES US RETHINK ABOUT ESTHETIC THEORY

Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski

HUBERT RENARD: *Les Éditions Incertain Sens* (Uncertain Sense Publishing) was born in the year 2000 with the *Inventory of Destructions* by Eric Watier; the *Cabinet du livre d'artistes* (the Artist's Book Reading Room) opened its doors in 2006 at the University library in Rennes; the first issue of *Sans niveau ni mètre*,¹ the free journal of the *Cabinet du livre d'artiste* appeared in November 2007; while the *Collection grise* ('gray collection') dedicated to writings about artist's books has just published its first opus, *The Artist's Book: ideas for the future of Art?*, papers from a symposium of the same name at the University of Rennes in 2010. Over fifteen years, that's a publishing house, an archive and exhibition center, a magazine, and scholarly papers, all dedicated to artist's books, all under your responsibility. I'd like to know how you think of these four entities: are they completely independent and equally indispensable for you, or is there in fact a hierarchy among them? Do you have any preference or 'little weakness' for any one of these activities?

LESZEK BROGOWSKI: These four 'entities' are organically linked, of course. Rather than being in a hierarchy, each one fulfils a specific function. I work at a University, as a researcher in Art, and each of these activities is linked to the University. Having written my Philosophy thesis on Wilhelm Dilthey, the first theoretician who worked on epistemology in the humanities, I had no need to go through the laborious process which a sociologist would follow to discover that research in the social sciences implies taking into account values (a little like Max Weber, who was greatly inspired by Dilthey). If you carry out research into Art without taking values into consideration, it's immediately suspect; in general, it's not consciously thought out, it's an ideological position which is adopted unconsciously or cynically. This often happens in the case of artist's books: not respecting the values which inspire and orient the works of the artists involved is the root cause of those well-known and endless controversies about the definition of what an Artist's Book constitutes. I'm sure we'll be coming back to that point. Respect for those values thus guides the choice of practices in art publications, which are the ones which guide our activities (books published and archived, artistic and editorial collaborations, research problems and so on); this respect allows us to not simply stay at the level of abstract approaches to our definitions. On this matter, I consider myself as an art critic who defends a certain vision of art, and who considers art to be above all a carrier of values, which are, by the way, just as much artistic as political. Hence, that whole sphere of activities which you call 'an archive and exhibition center'. I'd rather speak here of library resources which make up the *Cabinet du livre d'artiste*, and rather as archives than an art collection. Anyway, the magazine *Sans niveau ni mètre* is a kind of manifesto which was written as we went along, issue by issue, which expresses for both Aurélie Noury and myself a theoretical position and our choice of values. In fact, the way art operates in a network where the main means of circulation is printed matter (from the tract to the book, taking in brochures and postcards on the way) makes it clear that the artist, the publisher, the researcher, the viewer, and so on, through all nodes in the network, nevertheless keep their distinct prerogatives and roles, but they are all actors – that is, at the same time active and passive – in the phenomenon of art which, itself, cannot be reduced to a 'collection of works'. There is – and there has been – a lot of confusion on this point. I am a publisher and a



Éric Watier, *L'Inventaire des destructions*, [2000] 2011

researcher, and obviously also a reader/consumer of art, and I never consider myself to be an artist or a collector: yet the magazine of the *Cabinet du livre d'artiste* gives rise to the production of works, just as *les Éditions Incertain Sens* sometimes proposes the realization of, or even the ideas for artists' books. A 'little weakness'? At heart, I am still a philosopher. My greatest satisfaction therefore is when I realize in my work as a researcher all that these efforts of artist's publications – which I follow avidly and to which I contribute as an editor/publisher and critic – oblige us to rethink in esthetic theory.

H.R. But doesn't the work of a publisher or the person in charge of a documentary resource imply choices and certainly, in consequence, value judgments; whereas researchers have to maintain a position as a kind of disinterested observer? How do *les Éditions Incertain Sens* and the *Cabinet du livre d'artiste* go about making these choices?

L.B. Your question, Hubert, is a common one, that is, the common-sense view about scientific objectivity: in this way of looking at things, the scientist finds himself in front of his object of research, to which he should remain 'detached' as an 'observer'. But that's a model from the natural sciences, and already rather old-fashioned, because in those sciences also referred to as 'pure Sciences', nature 'replies' to 'questions' (new theories, possible experiments, interpretation of data, etc) *formulated by the researcher*. But in the

humanities and social sciences, the position of the researcher is much more complex. Take the historian, for instance. The famous book from 1974, “Making History” ², heralded a new epistemological conscience: it is the historian who makes History, because the objects he studies (historical events, social phenomena, epochs, daily life, etc.) are the result of a cutting into historical continuity – a construction – a cutting out which may not be arbitrary, but where the researcher is not a simple observer. He contributes to the production of historical reality by conferring meaning on the various remains of the past, and on documents. The procedures which lead to these decisions are sometimes extremely complex and laborious. This complexity goes over the heads of those who demand criteria to judge contemporary art. Well, you can’t naively believe that a left-wing historian and a right-wing historian will write the same history of the French Revolution, or that an art dealer and an art critic will necessarily write the same history of the Artist’s Book. Yet, that’s no reason to complain about their lack of objectivity... especially as among the premises of their method, their political bias will come out one way or another.

But to answer your question, I’ll come back to what we spoke of at the beginning, which is the meaning and the importance of the complementarity of our four ‘entities’. We work in the context of university research. If you read the editorials of Sans niveau ni mètre or our theoretical publications; if you analyze the exhibitions put on at the *Cabinet du livre d’artiste*; if you examine the catalog of our permanent collection and our publications; if finally, which happens to be your case, you take part in our panel discussions, seminars and/or study days, you will know very well how our choices are made.

H.R. Some publishers have a very clear editorial line, and build a kind of (virtuous? we can pose the question) circle: authors do everything they can to be published there, commentators have a part of their work already done for them, and readers see a kind of guarantee of quality. It seems to me that *les Éditions Incertain Sens* functions as a laboratory, not as a brand, avoiding a little of that reputation-based economy. Is this a desired and planned effect in the very project of *les Éditions Incertain Sens*?

L.B. As it is deliberate, I hope we do avoid ‘being labeled’. For sure, there are a few ‘famous’ artists in our catalogue like Robert Barry, herman de vries, Maurizio Nannucci, Peter Downsbrough, Jean Le Gac, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Jessica Stockholder and Ernest T. (without mentioning the re-prints of works by Dieter Roth or Ben Patterson). But there are also former students like Mathieu Tremblin or Jean-Benoît Lallemant, as well as artists whose first book we published, such as Jean-Baptiste Ganne, Estelle Frédet and Véronique Hubert. But there are also books made by artist-researchers, to cite a few names: Denis Briand, Christophe Viart, Yann Toma, Gilbert Dupuis as well as Roberto Martinez & Antonio Gallego, or by art critics as is the case of Stephen Wright or Alain Farfall. There’s even one book which is completely encrypted, whose author is consequently anonymous.

But among all these categories in the *les Éditions Incertain Sens* catalog, there is one kind of author particularly close to my heart, those excellent artists whose institutional reputation is not established, and whose economic reputation probably never will be due to the nature of their work. Almost all of them have published several works through *les Éditions Incertain Sens*, among them are Lefevre Jean Claude (3 books), Éric Watier (3), Laurent Marissal (3), Matthieu Saladin (2), Pascal Le Coq, Peter Downsbrough (2), Bruno Di Rosa (3), Stéphane Le Mercier (2), Bernard Villers, and Taroop & Glabel. I include yourself on this list of course, with 4 publications. I tell myself that I have had the incredible luck to meet and work with these people, because over and above the honor and the pleasure of having published them, or having had the chance to write about these artists, I have the conviction that something very important is

happening in Art which has come within the gravitational field which has grown around *les Éditions Incertain Sens*. And you know how demanding I can be on that subject! I dream of getting everyone together one day for a conference, or an outdoor meeting, like in the good old days when artists went to great lengths to keep one step ahead of art institutions, to bring everyone together to talk, to bring each other up-to-date about what was going on in the network woven together through these contacts. These artists all work against the grain, they all have a truly critical *modus operandi* each with their own methods and ‘Tao’. In a time when institutions, with ample resources, are struggling with artists to take the initiative in their field, where artists no longer write manifestos, in a time when there is a general fragmentation of society, maybe a new, trans-generational type of artistic phenomenon is crystallizing here... what do you think?

One day, actually, I realized the cultural (rather than commercial) value of our back catalogue which covers several generations, perhaps four in all, of artists, from deceased artists like Roth or Letaris; artists in their eighties like de vries or Patterson; in their seventies like Nannucci or Downsbrough; in their sixties like Lefevre or Ernest T.; fifty year olds such as Watier and Le Mercier; those in their forties like yourself or Ganne; and those in their thirties like Saladin and Tremblin. I think that the uniqueness of our editorial project is at once the breadth of this generational atmosphere (as a continuity in the choice of values) and a rigor as much artistic (the self-interest/attention appropriate for each project) as ethical (being true to oneself through time), in consequence of which, *les Éditions Incertain Sens* does not have an ‘ecumenical’ aim, because we are radically attached to producing *books* and not unique or rare art objects which may take the form of a book. You mentioned that this is a laboratory. I also like the idea of a construction site: a random plot of land where workmen carry out work, full of equipment, a place of disorder, under construction, and so on. I think it’s this totality of things which protects us from having a reputation as a brand.

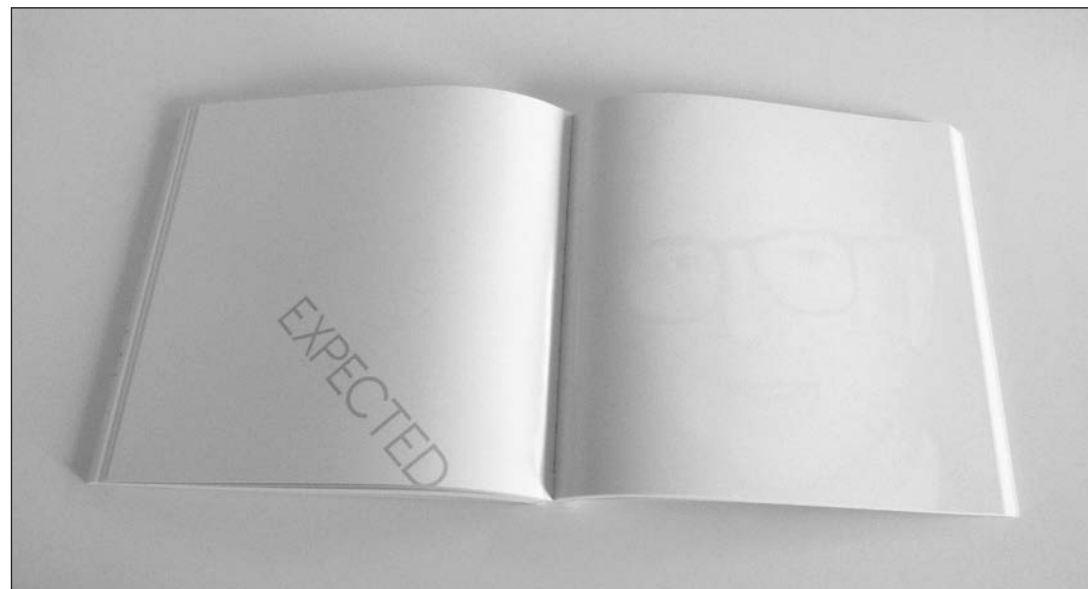
H.R. I can already hear the wise-guys saying that a publisher like a construction site is the perfect description of *les Éditions Incertain Sens*!

Sign me up for the outdoor meetings, they sound a lot of fun! I agree with you, it seems to me that what draws all these things toward *les Éditions Incertain Sens*, namely this way of working on art, with a critical attitude, on the margins or quietly in a corner, clandestine, on the lookout for other ways to be seen than in galleries and museums, is not a question of the times or a generation. And the artist’s book occupies a key position in this way of working, because it is in and of itself a way of working through these questions, because what makes it special is in a way identical to what makes this way of working special. My question is stupid, it’s the chicken and the egg: do you think looking at the artist’s book has opened up a specific field in art; or has a certain way of thinking about art found its perfect home in the artist’s book?

L.B. The easiest would be to reply with a hermeneutic circle: no starting point is absolute; each point of arrival is provisional. One’s way of thinking about art is never completely independent of one’s experience, for instance from this encounter with the book. But I like to take clear-cut positions: I think it is precisely the values that artists have been forced to defend which have made possible the artistic use of the book in what we call between ourselves ‘an artist’s book’: a book printed in a run which is *in principle* unlimited, free of decorative ambitions, at an accessible price, in a functional form, not being the reproduction of any other work of art but itself, unsigned and unnumbered, unique due to its intrinsic interest, surprising through its ideas and the editorial solutions it proposes, as simple as a book, standing alone as a work. You have to read and re-read Anne Mœglin-Delcroix, who’s a good friend of *les Éditions Incertain Sens*.

H.R. That’s what interests me about *les Éditions Incertain Sens* and your colleagues: people see it as an attempt to define the artist’s book, a conservatory, an orthodoxy, whereas I see it as a way of understanding and bringing to life an artistic phenomenon of which the ‘artist’s book’ the way we envisage it is not the frame but rather a sign (this kind of thing doesn’t only apply to artist’s books, by the way). The current fashion of editorial design, as put forward in art schools today, the object of fairs and exhibitions, tends to confuse many different practices, and consequently the artist’s book might lose some of its quality to reveal the critical attitudes we are speaking about. What do you think?

L.B. I’ve spoken about this more than once with Anne. It’s true that there’s much to be disturbed about with all these tendencies you mentioned which have appropriated the name ‘artist’s book’: why should bibliophile editions, deluxe books with limited print runs, signed and numbered, or books of graphic design, need to be called ‘artist’s books’ in this day and age? It’s obviously suspect. But should we fight this phenomenon like Don Quixote tilting at windmills, which will keep turning anyway? There are no copyrights on language, so – for me – the answer is ‘no’. On the other hand, we must keep asking ourselves what this name means and covers, and so come back from time to time to the definition – first of a book – then of an artist’s book. We must fight for the definition of a book, to make it understood that a book doesn’t simply boil down to a form. It’s much more than a form: it’s usage and culture. To also fight for a historical consciousness: books appeared during the course of History and their definition comes from the historical process. Artists turned to the book as a vehicle for this culture and this history, of a practice and the values it implies, namely those of the democratization of all sorts of knowledge and content, both linguistic and visual. Including art. That’s why printed matter, including books, is an interesting support for art. But I completely agree with you that it would be narrow to only be interested in art through artist’s books. I’m interested in them because it seems to me that their critical possibilities are far from being exhausted since the 1960s; but there are other kinds of practice which are worthy of our attention for the same reasons: some of the research around the digital, certain urban practices, certain returns to older media such as painting, and so on. So, how would you define the artistic phenomenon that projects like *les Éditions Incertain Sens* allow to crystallize, if neither through an epoch, nor a generation, nor a common manifesto?



Robert Barry, *Autobiography*, 2006

H.R. I’m not the guardian of any temple: in the course of my work, the fact that I have had to put up with the system of the spectacle ³, which is authoritarian and productivity based, makes me turn naturally to the book. All through the 20th century, as the art world became professionalized, industrialized, trivialized, and monetized, and as its institutions became more profitable and efficient, a good number of artists have adopted contrary values: unobtrusive, clumsy, democratic, generous, and at no cost. These values are made flesh perfectly in the book, which is why many artists began making them. But there aren’t just two camps: those who are part of the system, and those who refuse to be. Some artists who are quite established in the art market or international networks (the art world) can also, on occasion, feel the need to produce ‘lighter’ works, which are critical or off the beaten track, or further, artists who started out by seeking unobtrusiveness, can turn to a form which is more commercial, requires greater means, and is more eye-catching. So, this isn’t about a movement or a genre, rather a way of approaching the creation of art, which has surely always existed, but which marks itself out as using fewer resources, being quieter, and less visible in reaction to the inflation of money, advertising and the static of institutional art.

In the categories of the authors in *les Éditions Incertain Sens* which you just outlined, you first focused on ‘well-known’ artists. Was their status as established artists important for their inclusion in the list? To take advantage of their fame? Because they all fall within the area of artistic research of *les Éditions Incertain Sens*? Or because in *les Éditions Incertain Sens* they were seeking a publisher with an established reputation in artist’s books?

L.B. Well, one is never wholly innocent. But when I spoke of their ‘reputation’, I wasn’t suggesting they were a part of the ‘star system’. For me, the argument was the constancy and interest of their artistic engagement: I believe that this is why large institutions and the specialized press, though not the art market, can no longer ignore them. Inside that ‘category’ we still managed to put out *Autobiography* by Barry, which is without doubt the most ‘beautiful’ book he ever made; *argumentstellen* by de vries, which nobody wanted to publish for almost forty years, and which I count among both the most radical and most philosophical of books; *NOW* by Downsbrough, a reprint of a book of which only three copies existed due to the political circumstances of its initial publication in Poland in 1983, etc. But it’s also in this ‘category’ that I experienced the biggest compromises in the catalog of *les Éditions Incertain Sens* (with the books of Jean le Gac and Jessica Stockholder, published in collaboration with the gallery Art & essai).

I still think that none of these artists either belong to, or would consider themselves part of, a value system that you so well characterized as spectacular, authoritarian, productivity based, professionalized, industrialized, and monetized... In one of my definitions of the artist's book, there's the specific question of de-territorializing the practice of art in book culture which remains... at least for the moment... a protected domain, with the fixed price ⁴ of a book (a radical anti-free-market policy), with borrowing from libraries (a practice which questions the relationship between private and public property), with the presence of books, at least potentially, in daily life and where it takes place, in bed, in the bathroom, in the subway, in public parks, at the table when you eat alone... that stands in contrast to art in its traditional forms... museums, galleries, the Hotel Drouot ⁵...

Personally, the choice of the book is also the possibility to work without only being concerned with the plastic form (even if the book like any other material object, also has its form, which isn't without importance). I think that the de-estheticization of art (a term I borrow from H. Rosenberg) is the most striking phenomenon, or tendency, of the last half century. What do you think?

H.R. I've never read Rosenberg and I don't know exactly what he means by 'de-estheticization'. The works I currently see in the museums and galleries are often so hyper-estheticized (kitsch?) that I can only imagine a de-estheticization with a huge sigh of relief! If, by that, you mean an approach to art not through the lens of beauty, or of the well-made object, or the impact of the image, but rather through the values of the tale told, sharing, of critical strength, of its power to discuss, to decode, to make the world real, then it is in that 'tendency' that I'd like to work. However, even the most extreme conceptual art isn't exempt from esthetics, quite the reverse. Archives, lists, emptiness, books, and texts too can give esthetic pleasure... the de-estheticization of art, should be a way of attempting to escape from the tyranny of form for form's sake. That's also why I believe that we should give up on exhibitions as soon as we can, as their character of being here and now almost always emphasizes the spectacular in the object.

A great number of works, even in their most 'classical' forms (photographs, documents, texts, as well as drawings) can find a place in a book, which is better adapted than an exhibition. There is also the digital, which has some interesting characteristics, such as multiplicity, speed, interactivity... what do you think of these digital art offerings, the ones you can look up on the internet, which can be shared, which are user-activated and change as connections increase?

L.B. Leaving aside the screen... the 'lens', or the 'tyranny' as you put it – of the form, you are left with a simple object or material, rooted in reality: documents (faxes, photos, etc), industrial materials, installations in the open air, and so on. For Rosenberg, de-estheticization is a way for art to achieve the real, or rather to allow the real a huge influx into art. To go so far as to imagine the status of works of art at the same level as ordinary things. Such as, for example, a book. For sure, we can interpret conceptual art as an 'administrative esthetic', as B. Buchloh does. But is there an esthetic to *les Éditions Incertain Sens*? Are you sure that's the most pertinent way to look at the role played by conceptual artists? You have to look back at the arguments which shook the art world at the time, which for me are a part of art as process (though not, of course, part of art as a collection of objects). In the current issue ⁶, Stéphane Le Mercier writes about the functioning of the library: unlike that of Kosuth, the libraries of Martha Rosler do not fall out of use. And the library is indeed an exciting alternative to the art gallery. The *Cabinet du livre d'artiste* is a library. Do you remember that paper by Jean Grave about salons ⁷?

"I find the works of art as it is understood by the carrion of capitalist society to be a little oafish. These paintings that clever

fellows hang on their walls in the same way they hang medals on their coats; these bronzes lined up on their shelves willy-nilly like so many turds standing to attention along the roadside... all of that is nothing more than vanity and hype! The day will come, by God, when art will be part of the lives of the Good Old Boys, as much as beefsteaks and cheap red wineg..." That was written in 1893! But we still haven't made our minds up: read and/or drink? Jean-Jacques Rousseau found one solution: "I devour alternately a page and a morsel: it's as if my book were dining with me" [Confessions, book IV]

As for the digital, that's a whole other question. If I stay within the field of the book, to keep it brief, I refuse to speak of a 'digital book', where we are clearly speaking of a computer screen (for example an iPad or Kindle, even digital 'paper'). If we go beyond the question of the book, to speak about reproducibility, the question for me is, on the one hand, does the advent of the digital radicalize, or not, the theses of Walter Benjamin: does the digital contribute to free art from its cultural origins and place it definitively in exposability, that is to say, *public* visibility? We know that industry on the one hand radicalizes reproducibility by the invention of new tools of reproduction, yet never ceases to limit the right to make copies, that is, the ability to make them accessible to everyone, therefore *public*. On the other hand, the revolutionary character of the new means of production (such as cinema) lies, according to Benjamin, in their collective reception which permits spontaneous adjustments, a sort of tacit collaboration between spectators (re)acting collectively. The digital annihilates this possibility. But at the same time, the internet opens the field to other experimentation which interests me, too, but which takes us away from questions about the book.

H.R. Let's get back to books, then. Since you set up *les Éditions Incertain Sens*, has your attitude to the artist's book developed a little or a lot? For instance, are there any books you regret having published, or would not publish today, and why? Or again, which projects or artists do you hope to bring in soon to the *les Éditions Incertain Sens* catalog?

L.B. As a rule, I don't like regrets. You make the decisions you can in a context which can, of course, change, which can cast past choices in a different light, and change our minds *after the fact*. It's a construction site, as we said. But we should still clearly state the way we use the definition of an artist's book as Aurélie and I see it. We don't have a 'thermometer' we can slide between the pages of a book to decide whether it is one or not; anyway, we wouldn't need one. Our definition covers a *creative* field of art which interests us because it happens within the field of values in which we believe, even if we are reaching for a Utopia. These values are linked to the culture of the book: we're so lucky to be able to practice and think about art within this field of values that allow us to renew the practice of art and our attitude toward art. That's what is precious. But anything which gets onto our list must above all surprise or enchant us, rather than, as others might imagine, correspond to any standard, above to any 'model from the 1960s', as people have sometimes said to me in all levity: should we bring ourselves in line with the standards of 2014 and be thinking ahead to the standards of 2015? As for upcoming titles, glance through JAB37...

H.R. All this talk of standards or models clearly shows the ambiguity of thought around the artist's book: we both agree that it's not (only) a question of form. In fact, I suggest we take advantage of these outdoor meetings and define standards for the artist's book for the next twenty years! That way, things will be clear...

On a more serious note, in what way can values operating around the artist's book be used to renew the practice of art and the way of looking at art? Is it because a book is a 'little museum', a small-scale exhibition space?



herman de vries, *Argumentstellen*, 2003

L.B. A 'little museum', for sure, but that has to be kept until the end. To see better who you are, you have to step out of the context where you blend into the background. The artist's book is art, but in the environment of the book. You can see its contours better. Changing the background, making art according to the customs of book culture, allows you to formulate a number of refreshing questions to get closer to what is really important in art practice, and which comes through despite the changed context, once we detach its practice from the institutions which support it and profit from it. Here are a few examples: why should a work of art be *materially* unique when it can be multiple, like a literary work? Why should an artist add his signature, when authors neither hand sign nor number their books? Why should the originality of a plastic work be judged by its non-reproducibility, while a literary work is judged by its intellectual and artistic values? And so forth... Is the essential thing in art its exhibition in a famous museum, or the exorbitant price it fetches, or something else, and if so, what? Listen, just today (August 8, 2014) I read two articles in *le Monde*: "Art hit by delusions of grandeur" and "The global art market shows unashamed health". Do you and I suffer from the same syndrome? In the latter article, they speak of the 'museum industry', and there, I agree, the artist's book is a 'little museum', as you say. It's a museum which guarantees art an independence relative to big institutions; these institutions have indeed changed over the past few decades, but by congealing their aims just like the cultural industry. Whereas the artist's book, without ever reaching the number of visitors of a MoMA, is set more in a popular tradition, as you say: unassuming, maybe clandestine (Laurent Marissal, Antoine Moreau...), which is the best guarantee of its independence and critical spirit.

H.R. These comments about breaking records or the 'numbers' of art (classifying artists according to their success, exhibitions according to the number of visitors, works according to their weight, or their price...) give me the impression of being a gardener on his little plot of land, listening to the analyses of agrobusiness engineers: it's not simply a question of scale, these are two quite different worlds. In that "delusions of grandeur" in the article, the problem is not 'grandeur' but 'delusions': to only look at the numbers at the risk of mediocrity. An artist's book isn't doomed to have a readership of just 200: but at half a million copies, its quality and critical reach would remain the same (or would they? suddenly I'm not so sure...)

A book is tricky to exhibit, difficult to reproduce and hardly 'spectacular': it's naturally reticent to the usages of modern art. On the other hand, when you exhibit and collect an artist's book as an object of worth, one removes its artistic potential: artist's books are fragile. Do you think it's in their nature to be excellent instruments of institutional criticism, though always a little 'off-center' a little uncertain? By the way, can you tell me where the title 'uncertain sense' comes from?

L.B. A book is tricky to exhibit, because it's already in itself an – unequalled – object of public exhibition. To show it other than on the shelf of a library, usually leads to losing that format to means of display which are from art exhibition (wall hanging, plinths, glass topped viewing cases, chains etc.). Then you run into the question of quantity, in this case, print runs. But, you have to realize that in any gallery exhibition space where you can show ten paintings, you can show several thousand books, with hundreds of thousands of images in them. I love the story which Jean Claude (Lefevre) told me. Last year, when he was showing some of his texts in Grandville, a young woman was flicking through them, jumping from one to the next. The artist leapt out of his 'hiding place' (like Apelles confronting the cobbler) to explain to the visitor that she should read all the texts, even if it took some time. "Oh, sure" she replied, "but I've never spent so much time in front of work in a gallery!" The mere quantity (length, print run, number of documents in the library's collection, the price, etc) can have a decisive importance, and even a critical value. The 'nature' of books evolves through history; I'd go so far as to say the critical value of a book as regards institutions and the practice of art depends on the use you make of it. We've discussed several possible uses in line with market forces...

Thanks for the question about *Incertain Sens*, that will allow me to 'render unto Caesar'... *les Éditions Incertain Sens* was suggested by Florence Ray, a student of mine in the 1990s, which I took with her permission. The title of an inter-university seminar 'Paper In Action' comes from a text by Stefan Themerson (with the kind permission of Jasia Reinhardt who is in charge of his archives). Sans niveau ni mètre is by Bruno Di Rosa who gave the name to our first piece of furniture in the *Cabinet du livre d'artiste* and who gave his permission to use it as the title of our journal.

H.R. Coming back to the artist's book, we often hear talk about ideas of networks and exchanges. Of course there is a library distribution,

which is rather poorly adapted to artist’s books, but in a wider sense, how does *les Éditions Incertain Sens* participate, or not, in the organization of exchange of information and the collaborative process?

L.B. Hmm... that’s a natural question to ask at this juncture, but I have just written an article on the subject which you have not yet seen, as it will appear in the upcoming JAB37. In it, I develop the idea of the network from its origins in the 1960s and 70s, leaning on the anthropological work of Maurice Godelier to criticize the occidental fascination with potlatch and underline the reciprocity and accessibility of the gift in exchanges of printed matter through the network.

H.R. I’ll be reading that with great interest. I’d like to get back to the idea of the book as a means of exhibition (the little museum). Do you think the artist’s book has the same status as a literary book, for example (or a cookery book, that could work just as well)? A literary (or culinary) text can be printed in any kind of book; it remains the same text, more or less, while an artist’s project takes shape in a book, then suddenly, the object itself forms an important part of the work. Do you think that the wish to free oneself from the fetishism of the unique and original *objet d’art* as in a museum is mainly utopian? (Artist’s books multiply in many copies, but they never quite leave behind their materiality.) Is the book *argumentstellen* by herman de vries, which you publish, absolutely the same if I photocopy it page by page, maybe adding a few black dots from a bad photocopier? This is the same question raised by the reprints of historical books, or those simply out of print: should we reprint them absolutely identically (which can be complicated) or re-issue them using contemporary techniques?

L.B. I like questions which make my life difficult; and here, I have no ready-made answer. But I remember about 15 years ago, when I was working with artists who used texts by Ludwig Wittgenstein to create their works, I wrote to herman de vries who, in 1974, had published *the wittgenstein papers*. And because that book was out-of-print, he made me a photocopy. I was delighted – proud, even – and I had no trouble working on that basis: for my work, reading his book to speak about it in an article [published in *Revue d’esthétique* #44 in 2003] was nothing more or less than the esthetic experience I had while reading it! The status of the book was therefore the same as a cookery book, even as a photocopy. But these anecdotes lead me deeper. In my library, I have a copy of *argumentstellen* which was given to me (in an exchange) by Anne Kerdraon, a friend, which she had used as a sketchbook. Actually, the book is printed on lovely paper, pretty thick, and she didn’t let herself be distracted by the little dots which are printed one per page. It’s like a Rembrandt used as an ironing table. It can be done. Why did we choose this ‘lovely’ paper? Because the project for this book, published in 2003, dated from 1968. We wanted to use run-of-the-mill paper and a cover in plain cardboard, a material in widespread use in the late 60s. But, in the intervening more than 35 years, paper-making technologies had completely changed, and you can only find ‘imitations’ of that ‘ordinary paper’ and ‘plain cardboard’ in a 1960s style, which are very ‘pretty’. Which is a roundabout way of replying to one of your questions: we have no choice but to comply with ‘contemporary techniques’. That’s what happens as a rule in many other technological fields, where so much global homogenization in this domain (as in others) reduces the technological diversity of the early days of the artist’s book. Does that mean that the status of *argumentstellen* is the same as a simple notepad? I think not, because the book is the very act of thought in its public expression; it’s different from a simple blank notebook, because in the book – be it an artist’s book – the thoughts are ‘slipped in’ between the pages. There are of course good books, and those not so good... and this status apart as an object is even recognized in the context of the unbridled capitalism of our day, as in the majority of European

countries the price of a book is set by its publisher and it is exempt from the free market. Perhaps the most important question which you asked, and also the most difficult, remains: (to borrow the phrase from Anne-Marie Mœglin-Delcroix) does the ‘being a work’ of the artist’s book, set it apart from other books? Personally, I hope not, that it’s more of a question of values: I respect a good book, whatever it is, and I take just as much care of it as I do of artist’s books, which I do enjoy. And I do like publishers who, with their own books, take as much care as if they were ‘works of art’. Here lies one of the interests of the artist’s book, I think, in relation to esthetic theory: they change one’s relationship with the esthetic, which ceases to have an absolute value and a central interest. As publishers of artist’s books, we do nothing more than any other self-respecting publisher; that is, we pay the closest attention that the editorial conception, typographical solutions, technological choices and material aspects, and so forth, of the book (as much as they are under the control of the publisher) best serve the project of the artist who is their author. That’s also the theme on which I hope to examine in a forthcoming article.

H.R. So, it’s a museum in miniature, but built with the utmost care? Or is it more complicated than that?

L.B. I think, honestly, it’s actually a bit more complicated than that. An artist’s book isn’t a museum in miniature, it’s not a new artistic language, it’s not a new artistic form... what’s radical about it is the fact that it calls into question art in all of its complexity. That’s its’ subversive character: to upset the established order to look more closely at the underlying principles (of art). That’s one way of defining revolution.

1. A complex pun on both the original anarchist maxim ‘Ni Dieu, ni Maître’, (neither Lord nor Master)’ and the homophones – in French - for ‘standards’, spirit-level and tape-measure, and an ironic comment on the haphazard construction of the first display table in the ‘Cabinet’. Trans.
2. Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora
3. In the sense of a ‘false and superficial system of values’ as described by Guy Debord in his book *La Société du spectacle*. For the rest of this article, the words ‘spectacle’ and ‘spectacular’ refer to this deliberate and dishonest ‘surface seeming’ of things.
4. A hard-fought cultural specificity of Europe, whose governments passed a law to prohibit ‘dumping’ or massive underselling of books by legally fixing their sale prices, thus somewhat restricting the economic power of larger, often non-specialized, stores and somewhat supporting smaller publishers and independent booksellers.
5. The reputable art auction house in Paris, the equivalent of a Christie’s or Sotheby’s.
6. JAB37
7. Annual collective art exhibitions in Paris started at the end of the 19th century.
8. *Le Père Peinard*, 9th April 1893, reprinted in Émile Pouget, *Le Père Peinard*, Éditions Galilée, 1976, p 315.

