

Artist Books and Art Zines: Past and Present

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Abstract

The paper is a study of art zines, related ephemera and artist books as well as their historical and conceptual relevance in the study of art. The aim is to look into the precursors and influences to the same and how zines, especially art zine and artists' books evolved to their contemporary state. Zines are magazine/ books like, though more content-specific, primarily self-published and are produced in limited editions. On the other hand, artists' books can be self-published or gallery/ patron sponsored with limited or sometimes no copies to maintain the exclusivity. The paper will look into similar examples from art history, before the contemporary terms were formulated, in order to understand their origin, conceptual and contextual relevance in the history of visual art.

Keywords -zines, art zines, Artists Books, Livre d' artists, fem-zines.

Introduction

Artists' books and Art Zines are primarily a 21st century phenomenon that first gained popularity in Europe and America. Though two separate terms, they share many common elements and characteristics, one of them is their overlapping history and influence. It is also an equally arduous task to define them both. As Johanna Drucker (1995) says in her book *The Century of Artists Book*, "a single definition of the term " artists' book" continues to be highly elusive in spite of its general currency and the proliferation of work which goes by this name. The increased popularity of artists' books can probably be attributed to the flexibility and variation of the book form, rather than to any single-aesthetic or material factor." (Drucker, 1995)

Attempts to define Art Zines too have resulted in an open and broad ended definition.

What are Zines and art zines

There is a fine line between Artist books and Art Zines, and the border becomes even more porous when it comes to zines and Art zines. All Zines emphasize on individual expression and creativity (2) and usually feature illustration/ drawings, photographs, typography, graphic design along with poetry, writings, prose and essays, to communicate their message. However, there are few zines, especially those created by Artist, Art students, Designers, Architects and so on which use these visual tools quite liberally and can qualify as Art zines. (Thomas, 2009) In simple words, Art zines are a subcategory of zines or fanzines.

What are zines

To understand what art zines are and what do they stand for, one needs to study the idea of zine and zine culture and how a handmade cut and paste personal booklet with minimal circulation can generate so much interest and can travel continents.

Zines are independent/ self-created, self-published and self-marketed/distributed booklets or magazines which are non-commercial in nature. Usually created by an individual or a group of enthusiasts, zines have a small circulation and a niche audience. The history of zine making, according to artist Janet Zweig (1998) will “always include dada, Sci-fi fanzines, the underground political presses”. The first zines can be traced back to 1930s in the U.S.A, the hand-drawn/ hand written science fiction fanzine started by fan clubs, that then gradually spread beyond the country. Zines were being made on different themes- music zines, sports zines, television and film zines, political zines- these may be subdivided again according to more or less traditional categories such as Anarchist, Socialist, fascist, feminist queer and so on, Fringe culture zines, health zines, sex zines, travel zines, comix literary, Art Zines. Art Zines according to Stephen Duncombe - contain print media, collages, photographs, drawings and mail art which create a network of artists and floating virtual gallery (Duncombe, 1997, 2008)

It is this second half of Duncombe's definition which talks zines about being 'floating virtual gallery' and a catalyst in bringing together a network of artists what connects it with Artists books as we will see later in the paper.

Created by individuals or groups of enthusiasts', zines provide the most personalized view of a selected theme. Consciously following no rules of Graphic designing, these self-edited homemade booklets are copied using xerox/photocopying or any other inexpensive printing method. (Mimeography was used before the advent of Xerox technology.

These usually stapled booklets are circulated through zine exchange meetings, mails, pop up zine bazaars, or sold/ traded at events within a closed community of zine makers and zine readers. They are a very few dedicated spaces to zine exchange places-Very rarely do the zine makers are able to breakeven the printing cost, most of the time they incur losses.

"But it this disregard of professional design, market factors, and their limited audience which has helped the zines to maintain their personal and radial content intended." (Zweig,1998)

Zines in America and Europe got vast popularity boost during the 1970s because of the rapidly evolving photocopying technology, the charged social and political climate. Though never a mass medium, zines were successful in creating a counter-culture in these continents by sitting on the fringes. One such unlikely 'influencer' from the zine culture became the feminist Zines of the 1990s. Feminist Zines or 'Femzines' started as a response against the sexist and male-dominated Punk music concerts, women punk bands, and fans. Riot Grrrl and Bikini kill are two of the most popular 'Femzines' of the decade.

Riot Grrrl was perhaps one of the longest-running zine, an amalgamation of writings, poetry, lyrics, drawings, posters, found by Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman Jen Smith. "Riot Grrrl was the collective brainstorm of a small group of smart, angry women that eventually became a national news story and influenced an entire generation of girls." (Lisa Darms, 2013)

With their fierce stand against patriarchy, fem zines highlighted sexual violence against women and creating a discourse around sexual expression, body/self-image of women. Fem Zines like Riot Grrrl developed a new visual language of "loopy curves, hearts, stars, photo-booth portraits, and kitsch images (of housewives, superheroes, schoolgirls, and cheerleaders) to set off

type or handwritten communique, cultural criticism, fiction, and philosophy.” ((Lisa Darms, 2013)) regularly published these fem zines were shared or exchanged amongst women punk music fans connecting several women over personal experiences. Gradually ‘femzines’ spread beyond the punk music scene.

Art zines carry forward the non-commercial legacy of zines, though can be extremely personal and/or counter culture, they “do not set out to please their viewers they bring out stories and narratives, which the galleries would never see or care for.” (Chappell, *Topologizing the Artist's Book*, 2003) Taking more creative liberties, artists tend to explore the different elements of the zine more creatively. Playing with a variety of Printing and other execution methods like silkscreen, lithography, risograph, photomontage, they also explore different formats and folding techniques and binding techniques too- accordion fold, flipbooks, flip flop, pop up and so on.

Zines in India

There are some incredibly innovative Zines examples to be seen in down-home in India too. Zines in India like their western counterparts, sit on the fringes of the mainstream art world and though a new affair, they are already carving a space for themselves amongst the younger/ early- career artists, designers, and art students. Hence, by the definition stated by Stephen Duncombe (mentioned above), one can say that most of these zines created in India are Art Zines.

Bombay Underground by Himanshu S and Aqvi Thami is one of the first zine creators in India, since 1999. They organize the Bombay Zine Fest (since 2017) as well as house a zine library. Over the years collaborating with different zine makers, artist initiatives and, art galleries, they have published number of zines and initiated zine sharing events in different cities.

There are professionally designed Zines from design houses/ collectives – Saree Zine from Studio Kohl, Kadak Collective, Gaysi Zine from Gaysi collective; as well as typical hand drawn, stapled, photocopied Zines by young artists including Renuka Rajiv, Karthik KG to name a few. Themes ranging from personal to political, social to every day, educational, gender discourse, so on have been explored in these young artists. Few intriguing examples, based on the theme of anarchy, *An Idiot's Guide to Swear Words* by Delhi based Anarya Dodes, feminist zines on menstrual health/hygiene, PCOS and related issues like *Her-Sutism* by A.P. Payal, motherhood, to comics exploring every day in our changing society, or narratives borrowed from literature or artworks and the strong themes of gender identity, caste struggles (*Ambedkar Max* by Bakarmax), changing social structures and more. Zines in India are far more personal, evocative, thought-provoking and not to miss the fun, than their counterparts Artists books. Conceptual, narrative, comic book style, extensively textual, poetry, fantastic, digital and so on. They come in all shape sizes, black and white side stapled, booklet format and sometimes in elaborate folding techniques, coloured, small, one-pagers, A5, A4 and sometimes really small and even digital, usually always nominally priced. However, if it is a product of a design studio then it is almost priced like a professionally designed book, with an ISBN , but self-funded or crowd-funded always.

These Zines are circulated personally, through artists organized Zine bazaars (by Gaysi), Bombay Zine Fest (Bombay Underground), Indie Comix fest (held at various cities around the country yearly) and zine fairs, etc. being organized by artists independent of any gallery system or institutional interference.

Though art zines are still not very common or popular in India, they are one of the more democratic, non-commercial, free and everyday platforms for sharing art with viewer/ reader.due

to lack of dedicated spaces promoting and marketing pose a huge challenge for the artist Opening up new narratives and dialogues for the artist and the viewer.

Dada journals

However, Artists using books and magazines, to disseminate their artworks and ideology has its precedents in history. The closest examples to the zine culture are the Dada periodicals and publications. The art and literary movement which started in the shadows of World War One Used Journals, magazines, posters, and other ephemera, share and promote their ideology and artworks. For the censored and isolated artists living with travel restrictions, no exhibition opportunities these publications became a means to communicate, exchange and disseminate. Containing visual and literary creative material in the form of essays, articles, poetry, images, drawings these periodicals came in all shape, size and print quality. (Hage, 2016)

Dadaist was innovative in its strategy to promote these journals and other published material.

“ One of the most effective strategies of Berlin Dada was to create their own media ‘empire Dada’ and to distribute their publications in editions of up to 12000 copies...the das hired a hearse and a band and processed through Berlin, selling 7500 copies of the Magazine (Everyman his own football) before they were stopped by the government.” (Kuenzli, 2006)

Kurt Schwitters’s published his avant-garde magazine *Merz* from Hanover, Francis Picabia’s art and the literary magazine named *391* and Duchamp’s *Blind Man*, are few such examples. *Blind Man* was a Dada art journal published from New York by artist Marcel Duchamp, Beatrice Wood, Henri Pierre Roche. Though it published two issues in 1917, the second issue gained more popularity for its reactions to the rejection of Duchamp’s readymade artwork *Fountain*. It had entries in the form of poems, essays, drawing, prose and so on, by significant names from the Dada moment at that time, including Francis Picabia, Alfred Stieglitz and Clara Tires.

Artists Books

Historically, the artists and books relationship can be traced back to Illustrated manuscripts from the early Christian era, Persian and the Mughal illustrated books. However, artists consciously working in the book format for the sole reason of creating and sharing art is what we are looking into. However, defining the term **artists’ book** rigidly and precisely will be a paradox. Johanna Drucker, in her book, describes artist books as a space that is created by all the elements and activities which contribute to it.

“There are many of these activities: fine printing, independent publishing, the craft tradition of book arts, conceptual art, painting, and other traditional arts, politically motivated art activity and activist production, the performance of both traditional and experimental varieties, concrete poetry, experimental music, computer and electronic arts, and last but not least, the tradition of the Illustrated book, *the livre d’artiste*”... (Drucker, 1995)

Artworks created by an artist in book formats, self-published or published by galleries, limited editions to sometimes none, inexpensive to exclusive collector's items, these are few characteristics which artists books. Their exclusivity sets them apart from art zines, while also, creatively liberating them from the burden of producing multiple copies and setting them on

different conceptual paths. It is for this reason; one feels artists' books experiment with the book format with un-inhibition, different forms of bindings, experimenting with the codex format (loose sheets in a box, playing cards, handcrafted wooden pages, cutting, folding, constructing with paper, scrolls), with the medium/material (paper or no paper pages, printing techniques and so on) craftsmanship and more. They may or may not have literary text and can be completely handmade or printed and so on.

Precursor of Artists books

One of the most significant precursor to these artists books have been the 19th century *Livre d'Artiste* books and predating we have the example of William Blake, the 18th-century British artist. He compiled his drawings and writings, in the form of a book after engraving and printing them.

Self- printing and publishing his books, he devised (arguably) the technique of relief engraving his drawings and text on metal plates, printed and then hand-painted them. This technique came to be known as illuminated Printing. Self-funding the entire process, he was only able to produce limited editions. (Sampson, 1905)

Livre d'artists, on the other hand, are books where artists and writers were brought together by a third person such as an art collector or gallerist. Started by Ambroise Vollard in mid-1890s in France, the practice later continued by other gallerists like David Kahnweiler.

Most of these *livre d'artists'* books are a collection of visuals in the form of drawings or prints, engravings by artists interpreting classic texts or authors, or sometimes illustrating their text. Major artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Miro and Braque worked in the *livre d'artiste* book form illustrating the writings or classic texts selected by the editor. Usually following the clear distinction between the text and the image, *livre d'artiste* did not inquire into the book format, conceptually, materially and format or construction wise. These books had a deluxe look with rich paper and handset type with very commercial ambitions targeting the growing middle-class interest in the artworks and art collection.

Nevertheless, not all the books by artists in this era were *Livre d'artiste*, funded by gallerists with clear goals of improving the marketing prospects of the artists. There were artists like **Toulouse Lautrec** working with a contemporary writer on characters from real life working-class society. Lautrec's book *Yvette Gilbert* published in 1894.

The 16-page book was a collaboration between the artist and writer Gustave Geoffroy. This witty limited edition album based on the life of a popular Parisian cabaret performer Yvette Gilbert. The text, using her life as catalyst spoke about and illustrated the working and living conditions of the working class. Toulouse Lautrec's lively sketches of Yvette singing, dancing, preparing her makeup and so on, accompanied the text. Not aimed for commercial success the book with a political bend was promoted quite efficiently. (Castleman, 1994)

Artists continued working in the booking form through the early twentieth century, through the various art movements and political boundaries. Though these books came in before the term artists book or art Zines came into being but one cannot ignore their contribution and influence on the same.

Books also became a popular mode of creative expression with young artists during the Russian Futurism. In contrast to the state-controlled prevalent Russian art of the time, these futurist books were unconventional, eccentric, juxtaposition or combination of images, words,

sounds, calligraphy, collage and so on.

The small-sized handmade books were generally side stapled. Made from found paper like wallpaper and so on, every page was of a different size, texture, and quality. The self - published books were interactive, required rotating or turning upside down as the image and text played on the page space without any restrictions. These were printed using linoleum cutting, lithograph, stamps and so on and at times were collaborations between artists and writers. Two famous proponents of the movement were women artists – Natalia Goncharova and Olga Rozanova (n.a, 2016)

Both, Self- Publishing and books as a medium continued their popularity run through both the world wars, as visible in the case of Dada journals. But away from the journal and periodicals, there were works produced which are similar to today's artist's book and can be called the direct precursors of the same.

Artist George Grosz was making politically charged works and publishing them in the form of small hand-sized booklets. One such example is his booklet of 57 drawings, titled *The Face of Ruling class*, 1913 the black and white booklet has drawings sharply critiquing the German middle class and the ruling class. Exposing the greed, and moral reality of cold ruling class their exploitation of the working class through satire and witty drawings. His powerful line drawings depicted the indifference of the middle class to the atrocities being played out on the streets of Germany during the war. (Museum, *The face of the ruling class*, n.d)

Post-war artists exploring/ working in the book form, took their inquiry into the form to a whole new level. Borders on the conceptual as well as material aspects of the book as an art form were pushed real hard by artists like Dieter Roth and Ed Ruscha.

Dieter Roth, a Swiss-born artist, is known for his artistic explorations onto the ephemeral sculptures and the book form. Considered, as one of the pioneers in his exploration with the books as an artwork, his book art can be called the first artists' books in contemporary terms. Though working with the conventional codex form of a book he dispensed away with all the conventions and rules of book reading, such as linear narrative, pagination, sequence, binding and orientation. His artist books unlike books were not imparting knowledge but were visual artworks in the form of books, which required a viewer's reader's active participation to manifest. (Drucker, 70-71)

His first experiments with the artist book were in the year 1954 called *Kinderbuch* or children's book. In his books, *Kinder Buch*, *Bilder Buch* and *volume 8*, based on his explorations with graphic designing, where the composition developed and dissolved with each page. The multi-colour pages with compositions based on geometric shapes, had die-cut shapes on them, an idea which opened a window for the viewer to look at the subsequent pages. Using transparent acetate sheets added to the drama of creating a new composition with every page-turning. He continued investigating in his later books too. (Libraries, 2015)

Dieter Roth also experimented with the physical dimensions of his books as well as medium and binding. From a One Inch book to, simply assembling papers from old comic books, in random order and orientation, spiral binding to unbound pages of a book in box. His one-pager book titled *Snow white* is an example of his conceptual experiments. The front of the book has text scribbled saying '*not at home*', the book opens to viewer/ reader looking at a page size picture of an empty room, with the last page of the book saying *at home*. (Cassone_art.com)

Ed Ruscha

If Dieter Roth was exploring the physical elements of the book form in his artists' books, Ed Ruscha was exploring the conceptual possibilities it offered as space to reach out to viewers. His first book *'Twenty Six Gasoline Stations'* is a black and white photobook, with images of *Twenty six gasoline stations*. Indifferent yet similar looking images taken from a distance are sometimes spread across two pages. There was no text or narrative, these were just everyday banal images but with a deeper meaning, in this case, commenting on industrialization and mass production (godfrey, 2014). In all he did 16 books, there has been a lot written about his seemingly banal looking images in his books, but what is more important here is his ability to create a parallel model from the 'exclusivity' based marketing model of the gallery, even if for a small period of time.

Ruscha very clearly described in a 1965 interview about his books:

“ I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass-produced product of the highest order...it is almost worth the money to have the thrill of seeing 400 exactly identical books stacked in front of you.” (Allan, 2010)

It was his interest in creating a book that was not exclusive but available at a nominal price to the interested, which made his artist books/ photobooks cross path with the concept of the zine.

Fluxus artists too used books as an alternative space to the gallery system to disseminate their artworks, performances, and so on. Japanese American artist Yoko Ono was one of the artists using the form of the book as space to create art. Her self-published book *Grapefruit* (1964), uses instructions/ directions in the form of drawings and text, conceptually guiding the viewer on creating the artworks. The book divided into five sections- music, poetry, painting, object, event, was originally published in an edition of 500 copies. (ono, 2000)

Artists experimenting with the book form whether it was art zines or artists' books increased during the 1960s and 70s owing to the developing feasible and accessible printing technology as well as the changing social and political climate. Artists and thinkers, questioning the institutions, existing traditions, market systems in the art world, were also questioning the commodification of arts. Hence the artists' books and zines became the alternatives which allowed the artists to reach a more significant number of an audience rather than just the gallery regulars. Often, the Do-it-yourself approach, and low-cost factor involved, gave the artist the freedom to experiment with the content and reach out to like-minded people. Though short-lived this idea of democratic art-making and sharing is still as fascinating.

Artists in the west as well as in India have continued experimenting with the artists' books. Like all 'alternative' and ephemeral art practices, artist's books were later also incorporated in the gallery system. Now often commissioned by art galleries/ institutions artist and many popular artists like Louise Bourgeois, Kara Walker and Damien Hirst.

Artist Books in India

Artists in India too had worked with the book format, long before the terminology reached our country. Artists like KG Subramanyam, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakkar have illustrated books.

The prolific Indian artist KG Subramanyam wrote and illustrated a set of 10 illustrated books published by Seagull in the year 1996. He addresses complex social issues in his books by

retelling old fables with wit and humour, making them alluring them to readers of all age groups. His ink drawings, collages directly outlaid on the page of the book, play along the with the spacing of the typed text. The first hundred copies were printed using silkscreen while subsequent copies were in offset and Nominally priced. Some of the books from the set are *How Hanu Became Hanuman*, *A Summer Story When God First Made the Animals*, *He made them all alike*.

Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh also explored handmade books such as *Book of Journey*, short comics in Gujarati, as well as illustrated books. These lively and exceptionally creative books transcend the borders of illustrated books, artists' books and art zines.

Indian artists are now more aware of the formal aspect of the book as an art medium and are consciously expanding their area of investigation of the same.

Tanmoy Samanta, a Delhi based artist uses book as raw material. He appropriates his books by cutting, pasting, stitching, collage and painting while keeping the structure of the book intact (Jain, 2014). Whereas, artist Samit Das in his unique edition artist books engages with constructing, building, folding, cutting, removing the text from the codex to create the artwork, which is the book itself. He states on his webpage, "...to engage with the book is a form of performance and a manner of taking this process further by the use of different architectural thoughts." (Samitdas.com)

Artists such as Mithu Sen and Astha Butail play with the conceptual idea of what constitutes a book. While Mithu Sen explores digital anomaly in her book, that is accidental misprint/ overlapping of printed text. Astha Butail, in her conceptual participative project titled *A Story within a Story* invites viewers/audience to contribute to her books in the form of writing, drawing, illustrating, dialogue and script. A part of a more extensive and ongoing art project initiated in 2012 for Sarai 09 at Devi Art Foundation. (Asthabutail.com)

Conclusion

Over the years, the enthusiasm and engagement of the Indian artists with the book format have increased. Their area of exploration now stretches from artist books, art zines, collection of drawing printed in the format of books (by artists such as Kanchan Chander and Jai Zharotia) exquisite handcrafted artists books, catalog d' artistes, to intensely personal photobooks.

However, these artists books are unique editions books only with limited or no copies and are treated as art objects in contrast to the Art Zines. Zines which 'burst with an angry idealism' and 'spoke for a marginal' (Duncombe, 1997, 2008) are gradually creating a space amongst the enthusiasts in the country. Nonetheless, both these mediums offer a kind of freedom in terms of space, content and viewing experience which bypass the gallery conventions. Furthermore, innovations and explorations happening in both these forms of expression in terms of medium, codex format and content, offer possibilities to engage through and with a unique space physically and metaphorically. Space which can be touched, picked, flipped and engaged with, like heterotopia- space within a space, least the idea of freedom if not the manifestation.

The words by art critic Lucy Lippard still stand valid when she says, " In an era of proposed projects, photo-text works, and artists' books, the periodical could be an ideal vehicle for art itself rather than merely for reproduction, commentary, and promotion." (Lippard, 1997. 2001)

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