

Thinking Machines v The Big Swap

Maria Fusco

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Matthew 7:13

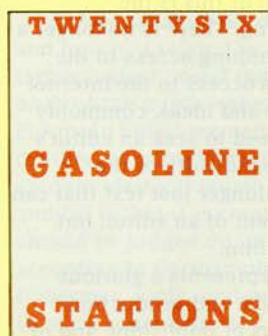
To read too many books is harmful.

Mao Zedong

Getting your fair share is all about exchange. The relationship between the reader and the read is a tender one that requires an acute account of critical complicity, a measure of the type that might be normally associated with students and exams. This activity however is not compulsory, and for many of us, takes place in what may be termed 'free time'.

As a form of visual art practice, the 'artist's book' has been kicking around for rather a long time. Livres d'artiste, or Künstlerbuch, is generally a very limited-edition, handmade book or folio constructed by an artist in response to an existing text; Picasso, Miró, Chagall and Rouault all made them. This was, and indeed still is, a regular mechanism of production for many practitioners, who want to retain a small and large audience at the same time, in the form of a profitable package. The term – livres d'artiste – when translated into English however – artist's book – has a very different connotation, more suggestive of a mass-produced, less expensive publication that flits between the bookshop, the gallery, and the bed. Between the covers, this mongrel has a saponaceous character, for it looks, stacks and smells like a regular book but is, in fact, a meta-critical operation, that is to say, it calls attention to the very conceits and conventions of its own form. A simple descriptor then, is that an artist's book is a piece of work authored in one sense or another by an artist, which can only be realised in book form. Marcel Duchamp has simply said that an artist's book is a book made by an artist, and again, more importantly, that a book is an artist's book if the artist himself says so. Clive Phillpot observed in *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books* that, "What really characterises artists' books is that they reflect and emerge from the preoccupations and sensibilities of artists as makers and as citizens".

The inventor of the contemporary artist's book is generally nominated as Ed Ruscha, who stated that he wanted his own publishing efforts to have, "...a professional polish, a clear cut machine finish... I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass-produced product of high order...". And so in 1963, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* steamed out of Ruscha's studio practice of paintings, prints and drawings, the first in a series of small, cheap paperbacks that seem even now to kick-start their own model of production. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is a filmic succession of dispassionate, black and white photographs documenting the gas stations on US Route 40, beginning in Los Angeles, (where the artist worked) through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and into Oklahoma City (where he grew up), it has no text, except for functional captions that outline the name and situation of each station. It's a steady, compelling narrative, slow to start and even slower to finish.



Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, cover image, 1962.
Courtesy: Gagosian Gallery

Ed Ruscha, *Union, Needles California*, 1962, from the book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, image 12.4x26.7cm.
Courtesy: Gagosian Gallery

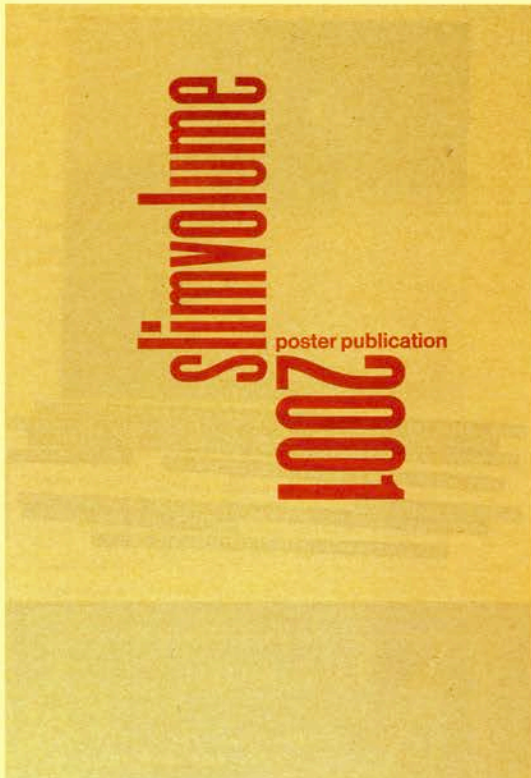


UNION, NEEDLES, CALIFORNIA

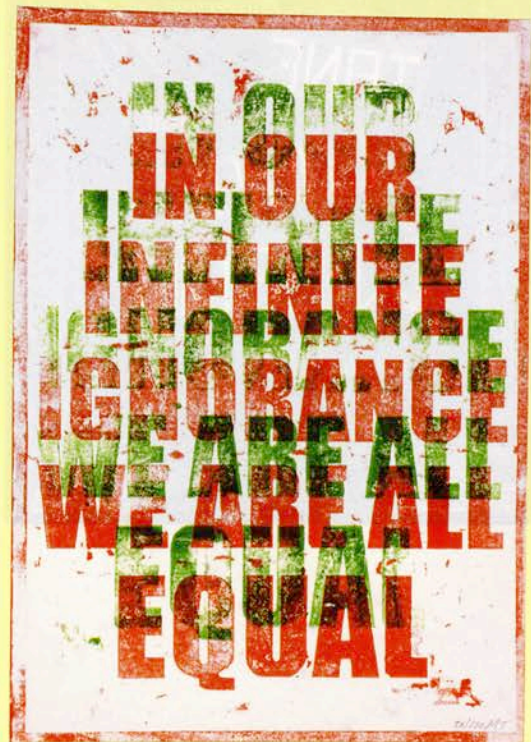
There are two significant aspects of Ruscha's early publishing here, that we can continue to refer to as persistently 'contemporary'. The first, his emulation of common book trade rather than that of fine art publishers, both in terms of the book's basic production qualities – cheaply printed rather than hand-rendered and bound – and the print run – initially four hundred. It is interesting to note that the first production of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was large by then current artist's book standards but, that Ruscha still retained some conventions of more exclusive limited editions: each of the four-hundred copies were numbered and the first fifty of them were signed. This is a clear indication that old habits die hard and that the journey from gallery to bookshelf is often a sticky one. Ruscha later realised that this disciplinary ownership ran contrary to the work: "One of the purposes of my book[s] has to do with making... mass produced object[s]... The final product has a very commercial, professional feel to it. I am not in sympathy with the whole area of hand-printed publications, however sincere. One mistake I made in *Twenty-Six* [sic] *Gasoline Stations* was in numbering the books. I was testing – at that time – that each copy a person might buy would have an individual place in the edition. I don't want that now." A subsequent edition, identical in form, rectified this, signalling that each book was singular in its place as an independent artwork. The second key aspect is Ruscha's method of distribution: for the books were sold, amongst other places, in the very gas stations featured in their pages. This urge to multiply, this need to belong, this search for an audience, is an active legacy; it's feasible today to sell artists' publications in bookshops, hotels, lifestyle stores and airports, even if there is only a handful, just now.

If as Walter J Ong suggests in *Orality and Literacy*: "Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. Back-looping can be entirely occasional, purely ad hoc." Well then, dear reader, we can

together deftly advance towards an examination of a small, non-representative sample of contemporary examples of visual arts publishing, examples that are actively creating new methodologies and continuities within their pages.



Front cover of *Slimvolume Poster Publication 2001*, letterpress on 300gsm Kapok recycled paper, 297x420cm. Courtesy: Andrew Hunt



Mark Titchner, *In Our Infinite Ignorance We Are All Equal*, woodcut on paper, 297x420cm, from *Slimvolume Poster Publication 2001*. Courtesy: Andrew Hunt and the artist

A Magnificent Gift

Oddly cohesive in the realm of compound meaning, *Slimvolume Poster Publication*, organised by Andrew Hunt, is a loose-bound edition of works rolling thirty artists together into a neat flat package. An annual event since 2001, its method of distribution as an alternative economy is a key facet of the project, operating through the nomination, by contributors, of copies of the publication to an international range of individuals and collections, meaning that at the moment, you can't buy one, you must be given one. Each edition is also accompanied by an exposition of some sort, allowing more than just the tube's recipients to see the work. The constitutional framework here is solid enough, for by building a network of associations, *Slimvolume* is creating its own party of friendly users – albeit a deliberately leaky one, remaining 'open' to gatecrashers.

With a nod towards Michel de Certeau's assertion that, "The means of diffusion are now dominating the ideas they diffuse", *Slimvolume* traverses the cracks and tracks in average visual art production, by persuading participants to represent and self-fund 150 A3 copies of their work. Hunt says, "I don't fund the artists' production costs (although sometimes there is a small nominal fee for artists). The idea is that this works because the publication is given away to recipients of the artists and the artists all receive a copy each as well, so it's like a big swap... Another important thing is that the lack of money means that each artist's work reflects the economy of his/her situation at the time – they make whatever they can afford to and this usually makes for an exciting and unusual result." And although there were some copies of the 2003 and 2004 editions for sale, this swapping action swiftly both challenges and reaffirms the position and role of the artist within the publication as a whole, allowing the producer to make as they are able, although perhaps not quite as they wish. In addition, the A3 format can be succinct or expandable, so in 2004's production, there is a musical score from Johanna Billing that folds up into an A3 book, Simon Morris' double-sided A2 poster which folds down to A3, or John Russell's poster that sprinkles glitter through the publication.

This year's edition is a particularly self-reflexive activity, with thirty artists responding to ideas outlined in the work of Adorno and Deleuze around the idea of the 'utopian blink' – a compression or peep at a transformed reality that sits at once inside and outside of received notions about current socio-political possibilities. As the publication's corpus is essentially constructed of posters, which in a display context usually signals or advertises something that is forthcoming, 2005 *Slimvolume Poster Publication* is already moving ahead of its own time, signalling that what you are about to read is as much about the communication of information as the information it communicates.