

# On Being Contemporary

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Anne MOEGLIN-DELCROIX, *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste: Une Introduction à l'Art Contemporain*. 2nd edition, Marseilles/Paris: Le mot et le reste/ Bibliothèque Nationale de France [1st ed., *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste: 1960-1980*, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Jean Michel Place, 1997], 2012, 444 pp. ISBN 9782360540136.

In 2014, the qualification of contemporary applied to objects more than 50 years old may sound strange. The presentation of an aesthetic of artist's books as an introduction to contemporary art sounds even stranger. But it has its own historical justification: it is the new title of the second edition of a book by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix on conceptual artist's books from the 1960s and 1970s, originally published in 1997.

Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, Professor Emerita of philosophy of art at the University of Paris 1–Sorbonne, is a major scholar of artist's books. In the French-speaking world she is the sole author who has produced an extended theoretical and aesthetical survey of the field, such as may be found in the work of Johanna Drucker. Through her books and curatorship, Moeglin-Delcroix has played a crucial role in developing the status of the artist's book as an art form. In 2007 she was the recipient of the "Leonardo da Vinci" World Award of Arts, presented by The World Cultural Council. In the justification for the attribution of the prize, the World Cultural Council highlighted her *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste: 1960-1980* as a ground-breaking work, and classified it as the most important work in the field of artist's books.

The first edition of *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste: 1960-1980* was published in 1997, but, as the author informs us, it was written between 1992 and 1994 (ix). This second edition has a new title: *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste 1960/1980: Une Introduction à l'Art Contemporain* and is presented as a revised and expanded edition.

The author herself classifies the title as “quelque peu présomptueux”, justified by the need to “constituer les rudiments d’un savoir spécialisé, mais encore, pour mieux servir sa cause, plaider en faveur du livre d’artiste comme genre artistique à part entière” (ix). The new subtitle “An Introduction to Contemporary Art” is thus justified by the author: “[C]ette recherche consacrée aux livres d’artistes se veut, en même temps qu’un ouvrage spécialisé sur le sujet, une introduction générale à l’esprit de l’art contemporain, une réflexion sur ses principes fondamentaux, pour parler cette fois comme Wölfflin” (x).

The contemporaneity referred to in the newly added subtitle is a distant one. The time frame of this study (1960-1980) implies the exclusive treatment of books more than 50 years old with others that are around 25. They belong to contemporary art in most classifications but they are seen now as rather classic and historic. Even the questions they provoked, while most of them not solved (being “Is this art?” the dominant one), are by now established principles in discussions on art and aesthetics.

For Moeglin-Delcroix, this was the golden age of contemporary art. The author is very clear when she says: “Dans ce contexte, revenir par le biais du livre d’artiste des années soixante et soixante-dix, qui les illustre exemplairement, aux ambitions de l’art contemporain à sa naissance, peut aider à mesurer la distance entre les aspirations originelles de celui-ci et leur falsification actuelle dans une version post-contemporaine de l’art, marquée par la futilité de la mode et l’enflure de la ploutocratie” (xi). Therefore, Moeglin-Delcroix aims for a return to the purity and experimentalism of the contemporary art of the 1960s and 1970s. With this purpose, she keeps the work produced in those years as the paradigm and keeps redirecting the work produced thereafter to this standard, starting with the production of the 1980s. The contemporary contemporaneity (say the work produced in the last 10 to 15 years) is ignored, while the work of the 1990s is judged as treason to the initial values. In brief, Moeglin-Delcroix wants to frieze artists’ books in time and proposes that we venerate the conceptual artist’s book as the one and only artist’s book to deserve this egregious classification: “Revenons donc aux ‘commencements’ du livre d’artiste (...), à l’exigence des commencements” [qui] fait toute la «grandeur» du livre d’artiste à ses débuts” (xxi).

This book is about artist’s books. However it is difficult to find a definition of its object in the text. A straightforward definition is indeed intentionally avoided (8). From the characteristics of artist’s books presented and described by Moeglin-Delcroix it is possible to assemble a definition: an artist’s book is a work with the contemporary industrial form of the book (“l’ouvrage se présente sous la forme industrielle contemporaine du livre”: 20). The artist’s book is a book with the familiar look of an ordinary book that answers to a specific artistic project (20-22). The artist has an exclusive, or at least a prominent role, in all the stages of the production of the book,

namely its conception, production, and publication (23). It goes beyond its function of a conventional material embodiment to become a significant form (8).

Indeed, the author excludes from her definition most books that, in an intuitive approach to the subject, would be apprehended as artist's books: the beautifully-made books, with good papers, engravings and/or other original works of art, luxury bindings. And so artist's books that exhibit these production values are proscribed: "Il s'agit d'une bibliophilisation de l'intérieur, plus redoutable car elle affecte la nature même du livre d'artiste en atténuant sa spécificité" (xiv).

Despite its luxurious appearance and extensive photographic documentation, this book cannot be classified as an initiation to the theme "artist's books". Its language is rich and complex, it deals with many references to aesthetics and philosophy of art that are assumed by the author, and the strictness in the selection of objects presented turn it into a highly erudite study in a specific field of the realm "artist's books": conceptual artist's books of the 1960s and 1970s. Bearing in mind this theoretical frame, it is a highly consistent and well-informed work, and it is indeed a mark in the study and criticism of artist's books in France and the francophone world: its first edition divided the field into conceptual artist's books, on the one hand, and traditional artist's books, on the other, and both sides have remained entrenched in their own incompatible positions.

The conceptual field is headed by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix who is accompanied by Leszek Brogowski and Marie Boivent. Moeglin-Delcroix's is a strict definition of artist's books in their 1960s conceptual pureness: it is a book whose form and content are reciprocally determined by the artist, a multiple printed with industrial techniques on common paper, in open editions or at least in large print runs.

The traditional field has several advocates and their dean is Yves Peyré in his 2001 book *Peinture et Poésie: Le Dialogue par le Livre* and later writings. This is the rich and influential tradition of the *beau livre*, *livre de peintre*, *livre de luxe*, born in the late-19th Century with the Parisian publishers who made highly-crafted books that joined a writer (or a traditional text) and a confirmed painter who illustrated it, many times for a bibliophiles' association.

The history of the discussions around the definition of artist's books in France is vividly described by Moeglin-Delcroix (41-44). And some of her remarks on the contemporary production of artist's books seem targeted towards these advocates of the *livre de luxe* or *livre de bibliophilie*. She refers to these works as sloppy attempts to usurp a prestigious denomination in order to give a status of intellectuality to mere commercial endeavours destined to make a profit.

In this new edition, Moeglin-Delcroix protests against the qualification of "commercial" which is given to artist's books only because they are "à grand tirage", that is, because they are produced like industrial books from

which, according to her orthodoxy, all artist's books must come. She goes on to say: "dans le monde anglophone en premier lieu, [il y a] de plus en plus d'expositions de livres nettement inscrits dans la tradition de la bibliophilie de luxe, incluent un petit nombre de livres d'artistes qui ne ressemblent en rien aux premiers" (xii), equating contemporary artist's books with luxury books. She gives an explanation for this supposed confusion: "Notre époque post contemporaine", unlike the 1960s and 1970s, "pratique volontiers cette forme d'indifférence ou de paresse de la pensée que sont le mélange des genres et la confusion des valeurs qu'ils incarnent" (xii). Comforted by tradition, Moeglin-Delcroix does not hesitate in her determination of the "contemporary": the true and only artist's books are those of the early days and the new ones that abide by the same principles.

This book is imposing. It looks more like a coffee-table book than an academic or specialized work. At 444 pages in thick heavy paper, with a size of 30x24cm, it is unsuitable for bedside reading, but it is a delight for artist's book lovers. It presents in colour one or two images of all the major stars of the classic conceptual artist's book scene. Being reproduced in colour is a small perversion for many of these astonishing works of art who are humble Xeroxed pamphlets, or small booklets printed in plain black and white off-set.

The quality of printing and of the reproductions, the overall quality of the book, the prestige of its author, could easily lead to a higher price; surely its affordability (it costs 65€) is due to the joint publication of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, that had already co-published its first edition. The print run is not stated, and we can easily anticipate that this book will, in future years, fetch the high prices of the first edition.

The critical apparatus of the work is consistent with the academic background and the justified prominence of the author. The sequence and structuring of chapters is logical and progressive, even if the title of the first chapter is a little misleading: "Qu'est-ce qu'un livre d'artiste? /What is an artist's book?" does not present a forthright definition for artist's books. Each chapter, with only one exception, starts with the example of the work of an artist as a way of introducing the issues the author wants to discuss, which can be appealing to those scared by dry theoretical descriptions. The exception is Chapter 4 which starts with the year 1969, the year of conceptual art according to the author (152).

For those who already knew Anne Moeglin-Delcroix and the first edition of this book, *Esthétique du Livre d'Artiste: Une Introduction à l'Art Contemporain* may be a little disappointing: albeit presented as a revised and expanded edition, it is in fact the former edition with some new endnotes the author uses to get back at some of her critics and opponents. This is especially clear in the new preface, where the author makes reference to critical and academic works and events published or organized after the first edition. Here the author stresses her allegiance to the conceptual pureness of artist's books in

their beginnings, thus replying to those who had started to see a mellowing in the strictness of her earlier position.

Another source of frustration can originate in the new subtitle. Although the time frame is still 1960-1980, an update of the selected examples or a reference to the evolution of the artists studied (some of them still alive and producing artist's books like Christian Boltanski and Bernard Villers, just to name two authors used as chapter examples) would be part of an expected revision and expansion the first edition. On the other hand, the 1960s and 1970s are not as contemporary as they might have been in 1997. Now, they have become historical references. A more accurate subtitle to this book could be "Une introduction historique à l'art contemporain/A historic introduction to contemporary art". A simple reprint of the original work with a modest foreword would certainly be more adequate to the true nature of this new edition.