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Assignment #2

ASRA- Living Map

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Materiality as Method: Communicating Through Form in Artists' Books

My interest in the relationship between the physical form of an object and meaning – particularly feminist narratives about materiality, gender and the body – has led me to my current project as an ASRA recipient. This semester I have begun conducting my own primary research of the artists’ books in the Frick Fine Arts Library’s collection and have started comparing them with feminist periodicals from the Hillman Special Collections. Artists’ books are typically created in small editions and provide a relatively private and intimate viewing experience, whereas periodicals are intended for a wide public audience and are more publically declarative. I have begun to examine the disparity that exists between these works’ projected audiences, which results in discrepancies in their materiality and content.

Projected audience is something that I take into consideration in my own work as an artist. This experience has helped me analyze the artists’ books from an informed perspective in terms of creative process and construction as well as how the books’ content manifests in certain design choices that may be aimed towards specific audiences. I am particularly interested in how both address feminist issues, yet with the potential to reach and influence different intended audiences due to the mode and media that are used. Artists’ books as a medium have not received much scholarly attention. This is most likely due to the fact that the medium of artists’ bookmaking is relatively new, beginning in the early 20th century. I have not yet come across any comparative research done on feminist artist books and periodicals from the perspective of a studio artist and therefore plan to fill that gap with my own research.

My own research intentions for this semester were to use these past few months to conduct the foundational research for an art history honors thesis project, which I will undertake in the fall. My mentor, Dr. Gretchen Bender encouraged me to be flexible and spread my net wide in terms of researching sources to allow room for themes and questions to emerge. I have since created an annotated bibliography of about twenty sources including artists’ books on which I am focusing, feminist periodicals from the 1970s onward, and other secondary materials such as scholarly books and articles on artists’ books as a medium and anthologies about artists’ books, feminist art history, and art affecting social change. In my bibliography, I provided a brief summary for each of the sources and some insight as to why it is valuable to my thinking about my research questions.

From this point and after having many conversations with Dr. Bender, I plan to condense my bibliography by conducting a closer reading of the sources I have compiled in order to identify and pull out quotes, arguments, and other important information that will help me to streamline my own research questions. I also plan to spend more time viewing the artists’ books on which I am focusing and eventually write an in-depth visual analysis paper for each one. Based on my current understandings of the sources I have looked at, I see the possibility for me to respond to the writings of Johanna Drucker, a scholar who has written extensively on the viewing experience of artists’ books and their potential to communicate meaning. Once I spend more time responding to the texts I have listed in my bibliography, I will continue to develop a stronger idea about how I will frame my entering into the conversation about artists’ books and how my perspective as a studio artist provides something different from what has already been researched.

My time spent participating in the Archival Scholars program has served as both a source of research and practical experience for me in terms of coding metadata, which I engaged in over the course of the semester, also taking part in various side projects and presentations along the way. I devoted five hours per week to researching and building upon the Frick Fine Arts Library’s existing set of artists’ book metadata. My responsibility was to add categories of content, which corresponded to the topics I was researching for my own project such as artists’ books that dealt with the body, the materials or techniques used to make or bind the books, publisher, etc. Recently, I found out that the FFAL is working with a cataloguer to organize their artists’ book subject headings by adding and taking away certain headings. They are using my coded information to assist them in doing this. Through my method of coding I was also able to familiarize myself with a lot of different design possibilities that are present within the artists’ book collection. This time spent examining techniques will be of use to me if I decide to pursue the creation of my own artists’ book. Dr. Bender and I have discussed the possibility of me taking on a directed study sometime next year in which I would make my own feminist-inspired artist book.

Outside of my time spent at the FFAL, I went to Hillman’s special collections to view their collection of feminist periodicals from the 1970s onward a few times over the semester. While I was looking at the periodicals I was trying to identify and respond to the accounts I was reading, particularly about things that I noticed as being different or similar from source to source or from my own knowledge. For example, after viewing a few of the articles I observed that many of the periodicals attempted to promote intersectionality by either self-stating that they supported it or by including poetry, essays, art, news, etc. from women of color in the U.S., lesbian women, and women from different parts of the world. This diverged from what I had previously thought of second-wave feminism and it’s goals, as it is known to have focused mainly on the rights and issues of white women and in so doing excluding women of color and women from the LGBT community. Not only did many of these journals and periodicals address intersectionality, they did so on an international scale by reporting on news stories about women from different countries. This is not to say that the groups who ran these publications were actually involved in taking action for non-white or non-heterosexual women’s rights, but it does evidence that they were at least thinking about how they were privileged in ways that others were not. These discrepancies in my preconceived notions of feminist history and the content of these periodicals could represent a possible avenue or branch of my research that I had not previously predicted. I had also not anticipated the occurrences of art within the periodicals. Occasionally, there were some prints and drawings published in the issues, along with concrete poetry. These instances of artistic expression are also of interest to me as they relate to methods of communicating messages in a more direct way to the techniques used in artists’ books.

I have also participated in two research showcases this semester in which I presented my ASRA research to my peers and members of the academic community. I presented my project at HAAARCH, an undergraduate symposium that takes place in the Frick Fine Arts building in which students present their independent research projects, senior theses, and internships as well as at the Celebration of Research (COR) hosted by the Office of Undergraduate Research. For both events, I was set up at my own table accompanied by art librarian Kiana Jones, a poster I designed for the event, and a selection of artists’ books for people to view while I answered their questions. I chose to show three of the books I am focusing on for my own project (*Home Sweet Home*by Robbin Ami Silverberg, *Inviolable Habits* by Rebecca Lown, and *Service: A trilogy on Colonization* by Martha Rosler), as well as a few others from the collection and two of my own books that I made for past studio art classes. I received inquiries about the details of my research, explanations of the meaning of the books, what an artists’ book even is, etc. It was a valuable (and fun) experience overall for me to practice articulating the goals of my project and fielding questions from the academic community.

The picture I have included encapsulates not only the physical content of my project but also the surprise involved with viewing an artists’ book. The FFAL’s collection of artists’ books are all housed in specially made cases (unless the artist created a case for the book themselves) that are typically very plain and simple on the exterior. The interior, however, is almost paradoxical to the outside as the books themselves are often very intricate and detailed, mixes of different media and techniques. I think that the viewing experience of these books and taking them out of their cases mirrors the wonder involved with looking at the actual objects. It speaks to my project in the way that the viewing experience is related to my thinking about how feminist meanings are communicated, and whether they are more understated or have a surprise factor. My whole experience as an Archival Scholar was important because it provided me the opportunity to interweave my personal and professional experience as an artist with feminist inquiry and art historical research. My participation in this program and my research have put me in a place where I feel I will be able to continue this research and contribute to the artistic and academic communities’ understanding of artists’ books and their methods of visual communication.

