

# ART HISTORY OR LITERATURE? DOCUMENTING ICELANDIC ARTISTS' BOOKS

by Arndís S. Árnadóttir

The project of creating a catalogue of Nordic collections holding artists' books, initiated at ARLIS/Norden's annual meeting in Helsinki in May 1996, was the starting point for a survey of the material held in Icelandic art libraries. This focused on the type and size of the collections of artists' books in four art institutions covering twentieth century art in Iceland, and examined the current documentation standards applied to artists' books in Icelandic collections and the extent of national bibliographic control.

## **Artists' books as library material: the problems**

During the mid 1970s I had my first encounter with some books I had ordered from sources called 'Something Else Press', 'Serendipity Press' and 'Other books and so'. I had ordered them on the recommendation of the Icelandic artist Magnús Pálsson (b. 1929), then head of a newly established Department for Mixed Media (Nýlistadeild) at the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts. The books were untraditional, to say the least. One of them reminded me of the New Testament; another included poems arranged in an unpredictable way across the pages of the book, even skipping pages, but still not poetry. And then there was a book by the Icelandic artist Kristján Guðmundsson (b. 1941), a donation to the library, its pages consisting only of straight lines, without text, not even a single letter except the title *Nidur/Down* and the edition. And there was another one, made by Richard Tuttle in the shape of a triangle, which on further examination turned out to be an exhibition catalogue as well. However, if one disregarded these eccentricities they all fell into the definition of a book, since physically they had pages, a spine, and a cover, and some of them included text and illustrations and even had a traditional title page.

Magnús Pálsson's intention was to have his students experience the books, so I had to cope with putting them on the library's shelves; this meant they had to be classified by the Dewey Decimal Classification System and catalogued according to the Anglo

American Cataloguing Rules (AACR), and that is when I began to encounter some of the major problems associated with this form of material.

First there was the problem of identifying an artist's book, and even of finding a proper definition, something which is not that easy, as the Nordic artists' books project group has since discovered. The borderline between an exhibition catalogue and an artist's book is quite tricky to spot – it is much simpler when you have a sculptural object to deal with, an object you obviously cannot shelve and which is not going to be loaned. Many of these artists' books are bookworks, unique or almost museum objects in their own right, and it therefore becomes essential to identify them (e.g. by tagging them) early in the ordering and cataloguing process.

Second came problems with cataloguing and classification. Looking back at the books acquired for the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts Library in the mid-seventies, I could see that there had been attempts at diligently cataloguing them according to the Anglo American cataloguing rules, somehow managing to fit them into a bibliographic standard. More than a decade later, in 1989, the notes on the descriptive cataloguing of artists' books issued by ARLIS/UK & Eire<sup>1</sup> were welcomed, with their recommendation to choose the fullest level of description. These guidelines also recommended using AACR2 as creatively and exhaustively as possible in order to describe the items adequately, using the rules for three-dimensional realia as well as those for books and graphic materials. And then came classification...

'Art History – 20th Century' (Dewey 709.04) was my first thought – after all this was an art library. Later I became more precise and classified them according to decades, dating them as belonging to the 1960s or 1970s. I even tried 'Bookmaking' and 'Book Design' and 'Photography', but somehow it never occurred to me to classify them as 'Literature' or 'Poems', with the exception of those that contained stories or traditional poems (like the ones by Ásta Ólafsdóttir, Einar Gudmundsson and Helgi Thorgils Fridjónsson). But on the other hand, some of them were obviously 'Children's Books', like Nína Tryggvadóttir's linocuts.

However a search of the Gagnir database of the National Library of Iceland/ University Library<sup>2</sup> reveals that artists' books such as Kristján Gudmundsson's *Periods in the poems of Halldór Laxness* are classified in 'Literature - Iceland' (Dewey 800), while Helgi Th. Fridjónsson's *Nokkrar teikningar/Some drawings* was classified in 'Drawings – Iceland' (Dewey 741), Jan Voss and Einar Gudmundsson's

*Conversation* was classified in 'Literature' (813) and Ragna Hermannsdóttir's various photo books in either 'Drawings' or 'Literature'. Some were even stored in envelopes as ephemera. Obviously the National Library preferred 'Literature - Iceland', 'Poetry' or 'Drawings' to my 'Art History'! It truly was a question of '*Art History*' or '*Literature - Iceland*'.

The third major problem area concerns the conservation and preservation of artists' books. Most artists want the viewer to experience the bookwork by flipping through the pages, holding it, and so on, unavoidably causing some wear and tear. And one must keep in mind that the artist designed the book the way it is. By altering it in one way or another, by putting classification labels on the spine, using protective covers and elaborate gold-lettered bookbinding for paperbound bookworks, we are interfering with the original. Possibly some artists want us to do exactly that as part of experiencing a bookwork, but quite often by carrying out various necessary library tasks we have actually changed their work and possibly ruined its value.

And finally, there is the lack of bibliographic control. Since so many of the artists' books are published by the artists themselves, by small private presses using, besides printing, various untraditional methods of duplication, such as typewriting, xeroxing, stencilling, various methods of printmaking and even mail art, bibliographic control becomes extremely difficult, as the following study reveals.

### **Size and type of artists' books collections in Iceland**

In order to establish the size and type of collections of artists' books in Iceland four art institutions covering 20th-century art were selected. Three of these were museums – the National Gallery of Iceland (Listasafn Íslands), the Living Art Museum (Nýlistasafnid) and the Reykjavík Municipal Art Gallery (Listasafn Reykjavíkur-Kjarvalsstaðir) – and one academic art institution, the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts (Myndlista- og handídaskóli Íslands). Not included, but possibly holding a substantial collection of artists' books, is the National Library/University Library (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn), although this collection is concealed amongst the book collection as 'Literature – Iceland', etc., as I described earlier, and the material is sometimes even categorized as ephemera and boxed chronologically.

For the survey a preliminary questionnaire was designed, based on the discussion points proposed earlier by the members of the Nordic working group on artists' books<sup>3</sup>. The main areas examined were:

- General information on the institution
- The artists' books collection, including the size and type of the collection
- Access to the collection and exhibitions
- Documentation of the artists' books collection
- Other relevant information, including conservation/preservation methods.

*Type and size of collections*

	Books by foreign artists	Books by Icelandic artists	Artists' periodicals	Artists' sound	Artists' films	Artists' videos
National Gallery of Iceland	11	139	2	X		
Living Art Museum	98+	208+	X	X	X	X
Reykjavík Municipal Art Gallery	7	37	1	X		X
Icelandic College of Art and Crafts	100+	70	6	X	X	X
TOTAL:	216	454	9+			

Fig. 1 Books, periodicals, sound works, films and videos by artists in four collections in Iceland in April 1998. (x) indicates availability, but total numbers of holdings were not asked for (or in one instance, not given) in this survey.

The four collections examined include both foreign and Icelandic artists' books. Works by Icelandic artists were predominant, totalling approximately 454 bookworks. That number would be 552 if the Dieter Roth Collection at the Living Art Museum was counted as 'Icelandic' bookworks. Technically, close to 90 of Roth's books were published in Reykjavík by Forlag ed. during the period he lived and worked in Iceland<sup>4</sup>. Foreign bookworks in the four institutions total approximately 216, including the Dieter Roth collection (but only 118 if his work is counted as Icelandic).

All the institutions started to collect artists' books during the last twenty years. The Living Art Museum owns by far the largest public collection of artists' books in Iceland (306+) including a substantial collection of books (98) made by Dieter Roth.

The National Gallery on the other hand focuses on collecting books by Icelandic artists (139 books by 34 artists), including Dieter Roth out of a total of 150 bookworks. The collection at the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts is close to that size, approximately 170 items including books made by art students and teachers. The Art College's collection of 98 foreign artists' books is substantial, mainly dating from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and including, for example, books by Lawrence Weiner and reprints of Dieter Roth's artbooks published by Hansjörg Maier. The collection of the Reykjavík Municipal Art Gallery only numbers 44 bookworks, mostly by Icelandic artists. All the collections include periodicals, and also exhibition catalogues, that are additionally defined as 'artists' books'.

All the collections surveyed mentioned that they knew of private collections of artists' books in Iceland, a source that is not included in this survey but one which would make an interesting study.

None of the collections have special funding for acquiring artists' books. The Living Art Museum acquires this material exclusively as gifts, and the other three, the National Gallery, the Municipal Art Gallery and the Art College, acquire them either as gifts or by purchase.

#### *Access to the collection and conservation*

At present all the collections keep their artists' books in a separate location or on separate shelves, except that exhibition catalogues which are artists' books are often held with other exhibition catalogues in the regular book collection and are not always counted in the final total. Both the National Gallery and the Municipal Art Gallery keep part of their collection separate and on closed access, cataloguing them as works of art. The Living Art Museum keeps all its artists' books in store and now has plans for stricter rules about acid-free containers and wrappings for conservation purposes. The Art College collection has from its inception been intended primarily to be handled and used for educational purposes, and until recently it was largely included in the loan collection. Now new rules apply, both regarding loan policies and preservation, partly due to the increased value of out of print material but also to the disappearance of books in the past.

## *Documentation*

Basically the bookworks in the four collections are either treated as works of art or books. Works of art are documented according to CIDOC rules: each museum has its own cataloguing rules for art works, since there is no standardization between museums yet. Those treated as books are either not catalogued, as in the case of the National Gallery, or are included in the card catalogue according to AACR2 and the ARLIS/UK & Eire guidelines, as at the Art College. The Art College has not yet catalogued its artists' book collection into Gegnir, the National Library/University Library database, primarily because of the problem of assigning a classification number<sup>5</sup>. There is a printed catalogue according to AACR2 of 208 titles by Icelandic artists at the Living Art Museum, as well as a list of about 100 titles by Dieter Roth published in an exhibition catalogue accompanying a Roth exhibition several years ago<sup>6</sup>. The Living Art Museum is the only collection that has part of its artists' book collection already photographed, some even digitally. Coinciding with the 1998 ARLIS/Norden conference in Reykjavík an exhibition was set up at the Living Art Museum on the bookworks of Dieter Roth. One of the issues raised there was the need to design standardized documentation procedures for this valuable collection in preparation for future database cataloguing aimed at wider accessibility, nationally as well as universally.

### **National bibliographic control of artists' books in Iceland**

No bibliography exists on artists' books made either by Icelandic artists or in Iceland by foreign-born artists. Twelve years ago, in 1988, the art historian Adalsteinn Ingólfsson<sup>7</sup> estimated that 300 bookworks by Icelandic artists had then been made, but no analysis has been made of the period 1988-2000, so the present number is unknown. In order to establish a source for, and the possible extent of, a future bibliography of Icelandic artists' books, a separate study was made of how national bibliographic control in Iceland deals with this type of publication. To do this a random survey was made in the database Gegnir, on the titles of the 202 books that were shown at two major exhibitions of Icelandic artists' books in the 1980s, the first in 1983 at the Museum Fodor in Amsterdam, and the second at the Franklin Furnace in New York in 1984. These exhibitions included books by Icelandic artists as well as

books produced in Iceland by foreign-born artists, such as Dieter Roth, Jan Voss and others. Most were published by private presses and small galleries, such as Forlag ed., Silver Press and Gallerí Sudurgata 7, as well as at art academies such as the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts and the Jan van Eyck Academie, where the bookmaking was by Icelandic artists and students, just to name a few examples. Most of these publishers are not within the traditional legal deposit sphere, and are therefore hard to control. Only a few items in the sample were book objects.

The survey revealed what had been expected. Out of the 202 titles examined in Gegnir only 31, or approximately 15 per cent, were found to be catalogued in the joint database of the nine member libraries of Gegnir, which includes the National Library itself. This was quite understandable, since it is extremely hard to control publications of such diverse material, ranging from typewritten publications to computer printouts. But clearly the outcome is an indication that, in order to build a bibliography of artists' books made by Icelandic artists or those made in Iceland by foreign-born artists, one cannot rely on traditional databases like national bibliographies, and must therefore depend on other sources.

It seems obvious that documentation of artists' books, whose numbers are estimated at between 300 and 400 works, is poor in Iceland and, as elsewhere in the library world in dealing with this type of material, standardized rules need to be applied, both with regard to cataloguing and to preservation and conservation.

#### Notes

1. *Descriptive cataloguing of artists' books*. ARLIS/UK & Eire, 1990. These guidelines are currently being updated by the Cataloguing and Classification Committee of ARLIS/UK & Ireland for publication in 2000.
2. A joint database which includes nine major libraries in Iceland.
3. Including one member from each of the five Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.
4. See Adalsteinn Ingólfsson. 'Bók um bók um bók...' in Skírnir vol.162 Spring 1988, p.51-82, on Roth's period in Iceland.
5. The staff would prefer to classify them as 'artists books', which the library system does not accept!
6. *Dieter Roth: Listahátíð í Reykjavík/The Reykjavík Arts Festival 11 júní - 10 júlí 1994*. Reykjavík: Nýlistasafnid, 1994.

7. *Op.cit.*

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## Captions

1. Einar Gudmundsson and Jan Voss. *Conversation*. Reykjavík: [Silverpress], 1975.

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2. *Ça va? Ça va. 4 Constats islandais*. Hreinn Fridfinnsson, Kristjan Gudmundsson, Sigurdur Gudmundsson, Ben Sveinsson. Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, 1977.

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3. *Iceland: the art revealed*. Exhibition curated by Ingólfur Arnarsson at Franklin Furnace, New York, April 19 - July 31, 1984.

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