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You can't judge a book by its lack of a cover

By Glenn Oakley

"I've never been too concerned with definitions other than to destroy, alter or invert them," says Tom Trusky, BSU English professor, director of the Idaho Center for the Book and chief iconoclast-in-residence.

Thus, when Trusky produced a book exhibit last year at the Hemingway Center, one room was filled with a collection of... well, let's call them sculptures. Oregon artist Sandra Lopez's books included *Daybook*, a paper box divided into compartments, each one containing a found object from each day of a year in her life—flower petals, wasp nests, lichens, a pearl. Another piece, *Rain/Fall*, is a book where the pages, made of Japanese handmade paper and mylar, open to a sculpture of sorts that is 9 feet tall and 2 inches wide.

Are these books? "A book is any sort of structure that conveys information," responds Trusky, who acknowledges that such a broad definition opens a mighty wide door. "Is a bowl of Alpha-bits a book?" he asks rhetorically. "A book artist would say, 'Yes, and you can eat it, too.'" At this point he pauses to reconsider his offhand analogy. "Gosh, has anyone done this...?"

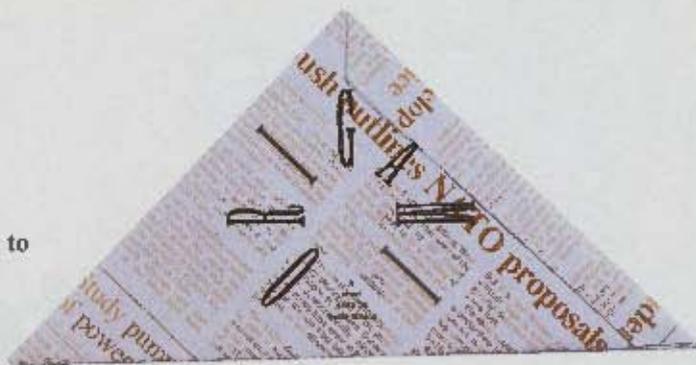
But his point is this: "Different cultures have always tried to record information, usually their history, on a wide variety of materials." Modern book artists are often simply salvaging ideas for books from the dustbin of history.

What we know as a book is a codex using paper upon which the text is printed. Two thousand years ago people were writing—or, rather, painting—on scrolls made of papyrus, parchment, silk and linen. Before that they were making impressions on clay. But when paper, a Chinese invention, started showing up, its advantages became readily apparent: It could be mass produced; both sides could be used, unlike parchment; and especially when bound along the edge, it was less bulky and more portable than scrolls. When Gutenberg invented moveable type, the dominance of paper was assured.

So, the book form we know today is a product of human evolution favoring convenience, portability and economics. None of those are characteristics that modern book artists particularly care about.

Housed in the BSU Library's special collections are an eclectic assortment of artists' and eccentric books. Artists' books are volumes created by artists; eccentric books are non-traditional in structure or material. They are in the special collections because they are unique and rare and because they often cannot be easily shelved like standard codex books. "Origami," for example, is a short story printed on a long paper scroll that has been folded into triangles. One reads the book one triangle at a time. Another work, "Vogue Patterns," is designed and packaged just like a, well, Vogue sewing pattern, complete with the blue tissue-paper template.

As for content, some is terribly glib, some deeply introspective



and some incredibly obscure. For example, there is *Robert Jacks Twelve Red Grids Hand Stamped New York 1973*. The book is exactly what the title says it is: a small book with 12 pages, each one bearing a simple red rubber-stamped grid.

Ideally, the form of the book is as much a part of the message as the text itself (assuming the piece contains text). "Origami" is about a paperboy who folds his newspapers into triangles. "Vogue Patterns" is a satire on women's "traditional" role in society.

"The medium is part of the message," says Trusky. "You can emphasize your book by how you package it. When I come to a publishing project I never start out with the assumption it's going to be a codex."

When Trusky decided to publish the diary of Sweet, Idaho, farm wife Evelyn Amos, he wanted to pay homage to her years of writing on whatever paper she could find: brown paper bags, movie flyers. So even though the published diary is in codex format, there are inserts recreating the paper she used, plus artifacts from the farm itself. Because Amos wrote about the botany of the area, Trusky and his students went to the old farmstead and picked and pressed lupine flowers that were then inserted into the book. Lace snowflakes were created and added to the pages of the book.

Trusky began collecting national awards for the BSU student literary magazine *cold-drill* immediately after becoming faculty adviser in 1971—in no small part because he abandoned the codex format and published it in a box instead. He admits that the first editions, which were loose-leafed pages stacked in the cardboard boxes, were "hell to look at" since the pages were difficult for the reader to keep in order. On the other hand, Trusky doesn't believe in making books

too convenient to read. "The authors and artists in there are deserving of your respect and attention. You shouldn't be able to just flip through them."

Apparently a large number of people agree that artist books can be worth the extra effort. On the national publishing scene, Madonna's *SEX* became one of the hottest-selling large-format books in history. Whether its success can be attributed as much to the die-cut aluminum cover as to the erotic photos of America's favorite bad girl is probably beside the point. It's the whole package that sells.

Trusky, who teaches a course in book arts, adds that interest in the subject "is skyrocketing." In Idaho, Trusky's traveling eccentric book exhibit, sponsored by the Idaho Center for the Book, "Booker's Dozen" is reserved through 1996. □

