



CREDIT: STEVE ZANE, USED BY PERMISSION

The Center for Book Arts Celebrates 40 Years

An interview with its founder, Richard Minsky

Forty years ago Richard Minsky started the Center for Book Arts (CBA) in a storefront on Bleecker Street in New York City. There was nothing else like it anywhere in the United States, and nobody knew what book art was. Since then the center has mounted more than 200 exhibitions, including some that traveled around the world. It currently offers 100 classes and workshops annually. Many other centers across the United States and abroad were developed on the CBA model, including the Minnesota Center for Book Arts and the San Francisco Center for the Book. There are now thousands of book artists, and you can get a MFA in book art. Today

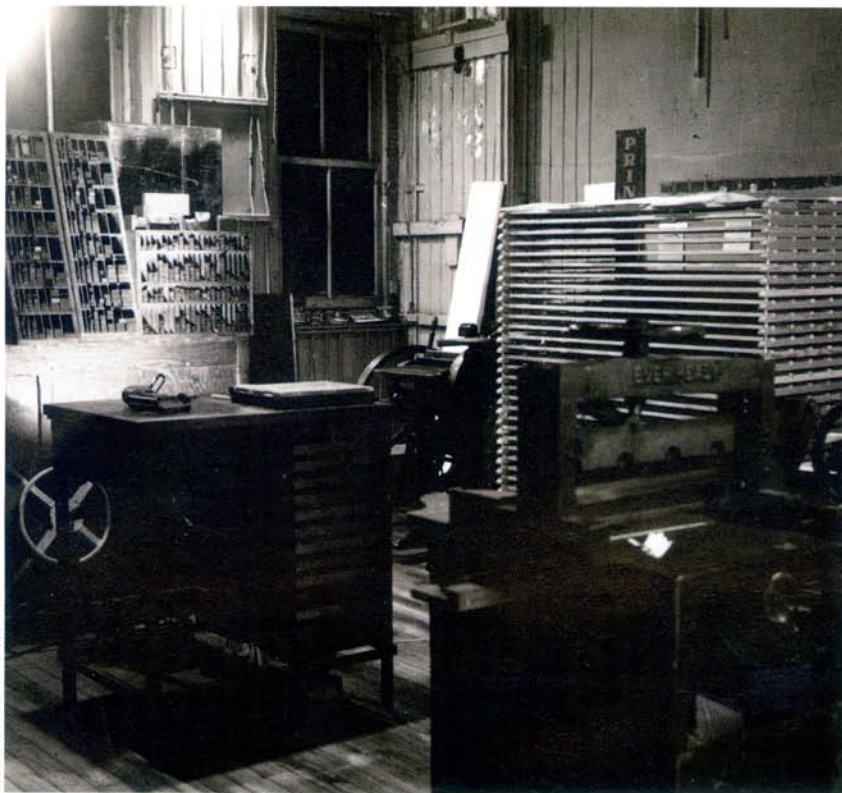
we turn the tables and interview Minsky in his own column.

FB&C: Why did you start the CBA?

RM: In 1972–73 I had a storefront letterpress printshop, bookbindery, and art gallery in Forest Hills, Queens (New York City). I taught classes there every day. It was not profitable, and after two years I closed it and stored most of the equipment in a friend's Brooklyn loft. Some of the lighter equipment went to my apartment in Kew Gardens, where I had three book art apprentices.

One July evening in 1974, walking down Bleecker Street in New York City on my way

This is the first photo image from the Center for Book Arts, taken in 1974 before the door opened to the public. Its founder, Richard Minsky, is at center, with his three apprentices—Gloria Zuss, Bob Bretz, and Robert Espinosa—on the left, and VLA attorney Rick Wall, an unknown bookbinder who had just walked in off the street, and Nicholas Caraccio, bowmaker and CBA board member, on the right.



COURTESY OF THE CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS

The interior of the CBA printshop in 1974, located at 15 Bleecker Street, New York City.



CREDIT: PHYLLIS BLICK, USED BY PERMISSION

Richard Minsky at a CBA exhibition in 1980. He was dressed to go afterwards to see *The Specials*.

to the music club CBGB to see singer and poet Patti Smith, I saw a sign “Store for Rent.” This spot, between SoHo and the East Village art scenes, was ideal. I wrote down the phone number and the next day called the landlord.

I showed up at the inspection wearing cut-off denim hot pants, a red tank top, and homemade goatskin sandals, carrying a violin (it’s important that a place has good acoustics). Either Charlie the landlord liked my fiddling, or he was really hard up for a tenant. He agreed to a two-year lease at \$350 a month, with the month of August free to do renovations and the right of renewal for ten years at a low fixed rate of increase.

The following week my apprentices came in. We demolished the existing interior walls, sanded the floors, moved the equipment in, and opened to the public in September.

FB&C: Was there much of an audience for book art then?

RM: There were several uncoordi-

nated kinds of book activity going on. A few hand bookbinders and letterpress printers were preserving the traditional crafts. Artists were making books of visual literature, mostly using commercial processes, and not particularly well constructed. A few artists were making sculptural bookworks. The CBA was a place they could all meet and influence each other.

Artists took classes in book crafts and artisans started exploring content in new ways. Collaborations started. Fluxus and Correspondence artists gathered at the CBA in the early days. The center’s first weekend event was a meeting of Ray Johnson’s Spam Radio Club.

I mailed flyers about classes and exhibitions to college art departments and advertised in local newspapers. Students began to come, and faculty members then started book art programs in their schools. Because it was a glass storefront on a mostly boarded-up block trafficked by artists, many visitors came in off the street. Part of the concept was to attract people to exhi-

bitions in the context of a working studio with classes, so people could see book art, be inspired to learn how to make it, and rent time in a shop with printing presses and bookbinding equipment.

Many poets came to the CBA and learned to set type by hand, producing editions of books and broadsides on our motorized letterpresses. Rick Fields said it changed the way he wrote poetry when he felt the weight of his words in lead.

FB&C: How did the center raise money to maintain the facility and pay salaries?

RM: There was no staff in the beginning, other than the apprentices and myself. Besides income from classes and studio rental, we earned income binding editions for places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Opera, and producing blank books that were sold in a local art supply store. Some months it was hard to pay the rent and keep the electricity on.

In 1975 we published a magazine

titled *Book Arts*, and that got us about 500 members all over the country. The following year we received grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, and a growing membership paid dues and received publications and ephemera in the mail.

FB&C: What sort of exhibitions did you mount?

RM: A wide variety. Traditional book-binding of Daniel Gibson Knowlton, the innovative hand papermaking of Douglass Morse Howell, experimental bookworks by Barton Lidicé Beneš, which included his *Book of the Dead*, made with the ashes of Hans Schneider, and his *Censored Book*, which was tied up in rope, nailed shut, gessoed, and painted. Syl Labrot's *Pleasure Beach* was an offset printed book that was cre-

ated in the color separations, and we mounted a large exhibition with all his pre-press work, showing the layers of imagery he manipulated to make the finished book. This was all before the days of desktop computers. Everything was done by hand.

FB&C: When did you start hiring other people to administer, teach, and curate?

RM: After about a year, one of my students, Kathy Weldon, became the first executive director, and ran the organization for seven years. In 1976 we hired Hedi Kyle to teach bookbinding. Then we got Joe Monza to teach printing. He had started in his brother's printshop in 1929 and later was a Kelly Press installer for American Type Founders. We had a Kelly B 17 x 22 flatbed cylinder press, and he taught us how to operate and maintain it.

FB&C: How long did you stay with the organization?

RM: In 1978 the National Endowment for the Arts and the British Council selected me as a US/UK Bicentennial Fellow, and I spent nearly a year in the UK, where I had a studio and was visiting faculty at several colleges and art schools. Fabio Coen, a publisher who had come to the center as a book-binding student, took over as president. The center was running well, had active officers and a board of directors, enough faculty to teach all the classes, and a curator for exhibitions. When I returned to New York the following year I was able to do more of my own work, and focus on specific projects for the center. Over the decades I've had many roles, teaching, curating, publishing, and occasionally serving on the board.

FB&C: Where is the CBA now?

RM: By 1984 it had outgrown the storefront on Bleecker Street and rented a large space in a building around the corner, where it stayed until 1999. Now the center owns the third floor at 28 West 27th street. You can also visit the center at centerforbookarts.org.

Richard Minsky is a book artist and the founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York City (1974).



COURTESY OF THE CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS

One of the earliest exhibits at the CBA featured the work of Barton Lidicé Beneš. Seen here is his *Censored Book* (1974), an altered book that has been heavily coated with gesso and ochre paint, bound with rope, and pierced from both the front and back with long metal nails, now in the CBA's collection.



COURTESY OF RICHARD MINSKY

Patti Smith's *Babel*, bound by Richard Minsky in 1979 using alum-tawed ratskin, sumac-tanned goatskin (both leathers made by the artist), and safety pins, with foil-stamped title. The endsheets' rubber-stamped safety pin motif was done by Barton Lidicé Beneš.

BOOK ARTS



VOLUME II

Volume two of the *Book Arts* journal produced by the CBA, with an original print of an Ian Hugo woodcut that was used for Anais Nin's novel, *This Hunger*. Said Minsky, "She gave the CBA her husband's woodblock, and the lead article in this issue, by Alexandra Soteriou (then an apprentice at CBA), 'Books by Hand,' is about their collaborations."