



RISING TOGETHER

an Exhibition of Artists' Books, Prints and Zines with a Social Conscience

Credits

The exhibition *Rising Together* was organized by the College Book Art Association in 2018. It is on view at The Center for Book Arts April 18 through June 29, 2019. The Center and its staff are grateful to the College Book Art Association for organizing this timely exhibition. Extra special thanks to Camden Richards, Amos Kenedy, Chanlder O'Leary, Jessica Spring, and Theo Roth for their help providing insight for this essay.

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28 W 27 St, 3rd floor
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Support for the Center for Book Arts' Visual Arts Program is provided, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



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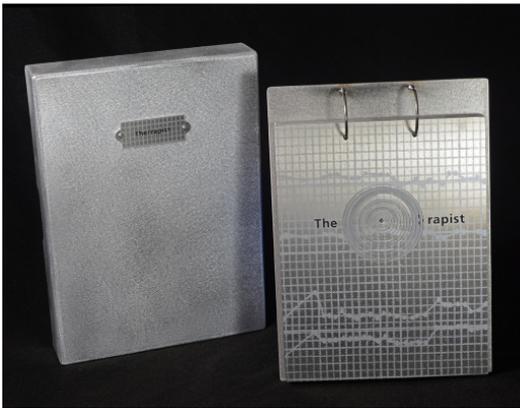
Essay by Alison Karasyk

Rising Together is an exhibition that brings together artists' books, prints, and zines with political, personal, and cross-cultural resonance. The selection, juried by artists **Amos Kennedy**, **Chandler O'Leary**, and **Jessica Spring**, reflects a collective care for rigorous craft and experimentation, while demonstrating the potency of artists' books as tools for socially conscious expression. Diverse in format, scale, style, and subject matter, the objects presented in this exhibition give voice to marginalized perspectives and histories scarcely told. They require us to interact with art, the artist, and their narratives in an expansive and individual sense – to unpack, to touch, to turn, to feel, to listen, to look, to question, and to enter into alternative vehicles of language, image, and conceptual and physical material. In the United States' media-saturated present, slowing down and breaking from our screens to absorb information with intimate, tactile, and personal possibility is a rare but real need. It presents an opportunity seldom offered in the proliferating present of social-media obsessed art institutions, startup business cultures, and emotionally laborious hospitality-focused service industries (among other supposed cutting-edge arenas of imagination and social activation).

At The Center for Book Arts (New York, NY) this travelling exhibition is accompanied by a selection of artists' books from the Center's archive. These objects build on the show's temporal, stylistic and geographic dialogues, fostering further possibilities for exchange and co-thinking. The objects that comprise *Rising Together* were made between 1989-2017, covering a substantial period of national and global change. And more so, the concerns addressed in these works extend beyond the

strictures of a demarcated time block. Attending to historic specters of violence that form a through-line into the present, and recently-recognized issues like environmental devastation that will disturb generations to come, the contents of *Rising Together* push us to look back and forward to ground ourselves within present.

Many works in the exhibition investigate systems of power and socio-political injustices through interactive design structures and affecting materiality. Interrogating how such information has been communicated and weaponized, these objects forefront marginalized narratives that warrant enduring scrutiny through experimental approaches to the book. Taking up a form that is known for dispersing authenticated knowledge and challenging its physical and experiential constraints in service of underrepresented narratives is an intrinsically political act. Viewers encountering such works are not only pushed to question established histories, but how we access and absorb these structures of knowledge and systems of information. *Rising Together* brings together a diverse scope of works that engage with and continue to expand this radical tradition.



Chilling to the touch, **Maureen Cummins's** book *The/rapist* (2017) focuses on Dr. Walter Freeman, a physician who promoted lobotomies, performed over 4000 in total, and popularized this procedure as a cure for suicidal housewives. Composed entirely of aluminum, the book alludes to the icy

fig. 1

surfaces of operating rooms and surgical instruments and is incised with a grid overlaid with an image of a different woman on the verso of each page. Accompanied by a hole drilled through the book's center, every woman's head is punctured with a trace of remove. Harnessed with cold metal rings, the austere artwork is to be read vertically like a notebook of scientific observation, thus referencing the medical binder. In contrast to the malleable and delicate paper that most books are composed of, *The/rapist's* sharp corners, visceral opacity, and weighty

material transmit the gendered history of psychosurgical abuse with a haptic transference of threat.

Danielle McCoy's *Disposable Negroes* (2015) juxtaposes historical and contemporary instances of violence against black males through material translucence and dos-à-dos binding. Addressing the judicial system, the media, and the mainstream's ongoing attitudes of disposability and dispossession, the artist's deployment of facts, serial layering of images, and binding structure together delineate the irreparability of ongoing racial discrimination. The book places the facts of Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till's deaths in direct relation, binding these narratives literally back to back. Beginning with a magenta sheet of transparent acetate shading the images of each victim, the stories of the individuals living in 2014 and 1955 converge due to their deeply disturbing fates. The final pages state what the seventeen and fourteen year old boys were each armed with the evening they were murdered – Martin with a bag of skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea and Till with a sliver ring with his father's initials. Presenting these searing truths in this deliberate and stark format opposes the frenzy of media coverage that frequently frames instances of violence against black males in America. McCoy's decision to isolate these final facts and have them meet at the book's structural center suggests a thread of agonizing and interminable continuity, warning of a lack of end in sight.

Elsi Vassdal Ellis's *Here is the Church, Here is the Steeple, Here are the questions for the people* (2017) is a third noteworthy example of a work in *Rising Together* whose narrative is informed by and complicated through the object's interactive expressivity. Packed in a

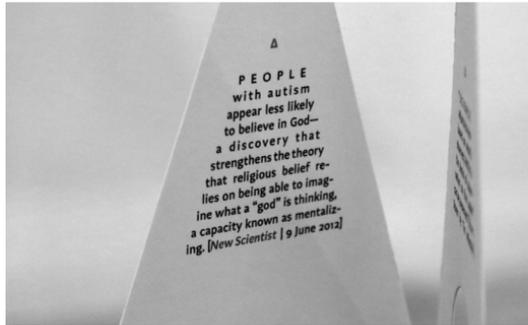


fig. 2

black clothbound box, as if to cover the pages of a bible, the book first appears to be a two dimensional silhouette of a church resting harmlessly in its container. Upon sliding off the taut band that fastens this structure shut, we encounter an object of rigid architectural organization. It feels like an act of rebellion to unwrap the constrictive work, yet once the pristine architectural vessel opens, the walls reveal a matrix of clashing information. The book's insides are overtaken by quotes from

the bible interspersed with Supreme Court rulings concerning the First Amendment and the artist's probing questions and research material. Amassing contradictions within the Church's history, communities, ethics, and the interchange of religion and politics in the U.S., the book's dichotomy of design and dissent powerfully questions systems of physical and religious partitioning.



fig. 3

Daniel J. Martinez's *Obscene Is* (1990), from the Center's collection, takes the form of a plastic clamshell box enclosing two-dozen wrapped red, blue, and green condoms whose packages are inscribed with the words, "Freedom Is/Freedom Is" followed by an expiration date. The contents are read through the bold black letters embossed on each side of the enclosure: "We will not tolerate / forced morality / We will not tolerate / government censorship"

followed by the piercing question, "Obscene Is?" and related declarations. Commissioned by the Peter Norton family for the AIDS Commemorative Day Without Art, the work addresses the violence of institutionalized discrimination demonstrated by governmental inaction in response to the AIDS/HIV crisis. By 1989, a year prior to the book's creation, the number of reported AIDS cases in the U.S. had reached 100,000¹ Combatting the notion that those who've contracted this virus should be forced to live in the shadows, *Obscene Is?* emphasizes transparency and protection, asserting that intimacy, safe sex, and medical attention are rights that all individuals are entitled to, regardless of sexual preference, race, or gender.

A selection of works in *Rising Together* address current political turmoil in America by confronting the divisive rhetoric, discriminatory policies,

1 HIV.gov. "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS." <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

and flippant behavior of President Donald J. Trump. Broadsides by collectives like the **Guerilla Grannies** – senior citizens asserting their discontent – and the **Dead Feminists** – an artist duo that letterpresses drawings and quotes of historical feminists – are two of the groups that channel dissent into objects of collaboration. **Melanie Mowinski's** *The 50 Card Project* (2017) and **Sheryl Oring's** *Urgent: Missives from the People* (2018) confront the executive branch by mailing carefully crafted postcards that challenge Trump's current policies to the President's administration. Oring's work, in particular, combines community building with individual attention. Setting up a portable civic office and inviting strangers to dictate their messages to the President, the artist joins the act of listening to others with the endeavor of giving voice to a multiplicity of perspectives. These works, and those to be subsequently discussed, explore how artists' books can function as agents of social change.² In contrast to painting, sculpture, photography, and video – mediums traditionally displayed on walls and pedestals of museums – the power of this medium lies in its insistence on a democratization of information and its capacity for direct communication. As dispersible, interactive objects intended for holding and touching, artists' books convey content through amorphous, individualized experiences. They are vessels of language, image, and design that necessitate contact and provoke exchange, rejecting self-containment. As platforms of critique, these works propose creative modes of advocating for underrepresented populations and pressing social issues.

In *Rising Together*, many artists use humor and satire to stage provocative interventions with the book format in their critiques of the President. **Kimberly Maher's** *Biglyopoly* (2017), a book-gone-board game, mimics the depression-era game of Monopoly with the end goal of bankrupting Trump from office to "Make America Great Again." Maher's clever work insinuates an ethos of greed and impulsiveness, questioning if the role of the executive is treated as a calculated game of self-gain in our present moment. Inspired by conceptual artist Dieter Roth's *Literaturewursts* (1969), **Michael**

2 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, (New York, NY: Granary Books, 1997), 287.



fig. 4

Henniger's book *Trump Tweets Country Bologna* (2017) takes the shape of a sausage as a mode of presidential subversion. Gathering over 2,900 of Trump's tweets from the six-month period before the 2016 election, the artist printed and cut up the constant stream of language and swathed these snippets in meat casing and curing salt. Materializing this reckless torrent into a handheld object instead of an Internet window that can be scrolled over or closed, Henniger transforms the inconceivability of the President's attempts at control and communication into a sardonic object of consumption.

Rising Together juror Jessica Spring explains, "personal objects provide an intimate, interactive experience for the reader and often approach a familiar topic in a whole new way. That potent combinations of structure (is it a sausage or a book?) and content can engage and challenge [us] to reexamine assumptions and biases."³ Ligorano and Reese's collaborative project, *Contract With America Underwear* (1994) from the Center's archive, takes on the domestic form of a garment installation. Composed of six pairs of white cotton briefs, each book features a screen-printed image of Newt Gingrich on one side and the text from Gingrich and Dick Armey's 1994 "Contract with America" on the other. By transferring this formal document, which was seen as a political ploy by many, onto a banal clothing item, the work "satirizes political values and lampoons morality," in the words of the artists.

A selection of works in *Rising Together* utilize traditional binding structures and materials that engage with the book as a space of intimate exchange in the face of harrowing socio-political realities. These works imbue political material with personal meaning, emphasizing the medium's unique capacity as a vehicle of communication between artist and viewer. **Clarissa Sligh's** *Transforming Hate: An Artist's Book* (2016) was made ten years after she received an invitation to respond to a selection of white supremacist books for an exhibition organized by the Montana Human Rights Network and the Holter Art Museum. As a 67-year-old black woman artist at the time of this request, Sligh delves into memories of Civil Rights events alongside the decision to turn the vile material into origami cranes inspired by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. The book moves through the artist's experience of receiving the box of books, working with its horrific contents, and materializing constructive and critical artwork out of objects intended to disseminate prejudice and hate, presenting a deeply personal view into her biography and artistic process.

3 Jessica Spring, email message to Alison Karasyk, March 24, 2019.

Lyll Harris and **Patricia Silva's** *Paper Boats* (2017) began when the artists were expats in Italy witnessing the refugee crisis firsthand. The book is composed of 100 photographs of hands holding paper boats made of Origami papers that reference the sea and upcycled Italian language books and maps. These anonymous images are punctuated with pages containing quotes that reference the profoundly difficult, arduous experience of migration and the terrifyingly liminal space of the ocean. Ten portraits are interspersed with the subject's eyes covered by attendance tickets with African, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European names and a number from 1 to 1,000,000, referencing the estimated number of refugees who entered Europe by boat in 2015 (the year the project started). Articulating this reality through a series of intimate images instead of numbers flashing on a news screen, the book's meditative format provides an individualizing portrayal of this contemporary crisis of displacement.

RAPE (1976) by Suzanne Lacy, contributed by the Center's archive, is an ardent feminist precursor to the #MeToo movement that parodies sappy "Happiness is..." books. Employing a serial format, each pair of pages contains a single sentence, beginning with

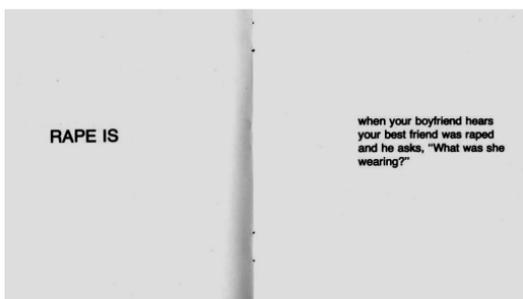


fig. 5

the words "RAPE IS" on the left page, followed by an example of assault or objectification that contributes to the normalization of sexual violence against women. The book's stark design – a single sentence in bold black typeface at center combined with an otherwise overwhelming blankness – conveys a sense of isolation and emptiness while also suggesting that each instance is worthy of individual scrutiny. Emphasizing a slow form of reading through both its format and sparse, unflinching language, *RAPE* potentially employs the space of the book to reconfigure how sexual violence against women is written about, acknowledged, and understood.

Is the artists' book an inherently political medium? What about the artists' book makes it a powerful tool for protest? In 1967, art historian Lucy Lippard lauded the artists' book in *Art in America*, stating that its rise began in the early sixties. Describing this shift and its potential, Lippard wrote, "the artist's adaption of the book format for works of art

constitutes a criticism of criticism as well as of art-as-big-business.”⁴ With this move away from the homogenous market-driven art world, the rise of alternative spaces for such modes of production, such as artist-run publication programs like Printed Matter and Martha Wilson’s Franklin Furnace, commenced. During this time, the artist’s book provided a distinct opportunity to destabilize and challenge commercial and profit-driven galleries and to politicize artistic practice.⁵ Inherent in this pivot away from the gatekeepers of an overwhelmingly homogenous art system – in terms of both those writing about and selling art – was the possibility for new narratives to enter the channels of critical discourse. As a ‘democratic multiple,’ the book form breached the barriers separating professed high and low culture.⁶ A kind of apparatus of interference in its own right, taking up the object of the academy and pushing it to a radically different end, the artists’ book has always suggested a carving out of new space, for art to exist autonomously and in contrast to the exclusive, patriarchal, capitalist machine (and the critics, museums, and galleries who contributed to its inequities).



Exploring the medium today, artist Anton Würth proposes that in the making of the artists’ book, the artist intrudes upon conventions and linear organization of the book and language, experimenting with the integration of image and text in ways that are continuously fruitful and

fig. 6

challenging. Würth attributes this experimentation to be part of the growing process of new systems of linguistic and visual communication, innovations that have the potential to help resolve current global, social and environmental problems. In the twenty-first century, “artists’ books are enigmatic, provocative and confrontational in and of themselves” writes artist and critic Karen Eliot. The artists in *Rising Together* are

4 Lucy R. Lippard, “The Artist’s Book Goes Public,” *Art in America*, Jan-Feb 1977.

5 Janneke Adema and Gary Hall. “The Political Nature of the Book: On Artists’ Books and Radical Open Access.” *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 78 (2013):140. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 20, 2019).

6 *ibid.*

active participants in this dialogue as they demonstrate that the codex, the accordion, the broadside, the postcard, the board game, the undergarment, the sausage, the balloon, the tablet, and the architectural model are all pertinent vehicles to empower marginalized voices and express dissent. Rejecting racism, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of social and ecological violence, the works in the exhibition collectively reject the stigma that the book, in 2019, is a linear, uniform, or knowable object. *Rising Together* instead asserts that the artists' book is a site of conversation and critique, a space to unlearn and reformulate reading and the formats through which knowledge can be encountered, transmitted, absorbed, and felt.

Figures

- fig. 1 *The/rapist* (2017) by Maureen Cummins. Courtesy the artist.
- fig. 2 *Here is the Church, Here is the Steeple, Here are the questions for the people* (2017) by Elsi Vassdal Ellis. Photograph copyright The Center for Book Arts 2019.
- fig. 3 *Obscene Is* (1990) by Daniel J. Martinez. Photograph copyright The Center for Book Arts 2019.
- fig. 4 *Trump Tweets Country Bologna* (2017) by Michael Henniger. Photograph copyright The Center for Book Arts 2019.
- fig. 5 *RAPE* (1976) by Suzanne Lacy. Photograph copyright The Center for Book Arts 2019.
- fig. 6 Installation view of *Rising Together* at The Center for Book Arts. Photograph copyright The Center for Book Arts 2019.