



# ARTISTS' BOOKS

– from creative printing  
to artist publishing

Exhibition at the Culture House

June 7, 2018 – June 2, 2019



National and University  
Library of Iceland

The term “bókverk” (book art or artists’ books) has a multi-faceted meaning in the Icelandic language. Books that fall into that category are diverse in the minds of those who are familiar with the term.

The term “bókverk” was first used in Iceland at the end of the 19th century to describe large-scale publications published in many volumes, with particular emphasis on the printing process, appearance and layout of the book. Since then, the term has been used when describing numbered books, journals, posters and various kinds of ephemera, regardless of their content. The term ranges from hand-made self-published prints to mass-produced publisher’s editions, where costs are inevitably high. Nowadays the term “bókverk” signifies a book by an artist – where the book itself is the artwork, its medium chosen by the artist because of the characteristics that the book has above and beyond other media.



1886, typefaces. Sigmundur Guðmundsson Printing House, Reykjavík.

## Experiments with the book form – the birth of the artist’s book



1944, *Lýðveldishugvekja um íslenskt mál*, Meistari HH. [Printer Halldórsson].

The exhibition focuses on displaying the early history of the artist’s book in conjunction with artists’ experiments with the form of the book. The works come from the holdings of The National and University Library of Iceland and have all been created in Iceland between the late nineteenth century and the present day. Examples of creative frameworks for the printing process are on exhibit, both bookbinding done by hand and different versions of commercial bookbinding, as well as ephemera such as posters and book covers. All the works on show are examples of prints by artists, printers and publishers, and experiments on creative approaches to printing, with a focus on collaboration between artists and writers. The older works on show are linked to book production in the present, where books and other artists’ works can be seen in various forms.

## Experiencing a book

The artists' book prompts the reader to experience the book as an object as he holds it and browses through it – weighs it and evaluates it. When reading books, the reader feels movement, repetition, and stability all at once, an experience in which all the senses are activated. The reader can appreciate the texture and touch of the paper, the smell and the combination of images and text – all this is the story that only books can tell.



2015–2017, *Listvísir – málgagn um myndlist*.

## Artists' initiatives

The outer framework and methods of printing books often belie their quality or importance. Artists' books are often made of cheap materials and even in a large edition. Thus, the published work is not a unique work of art, but rather part of an edition where methods of bookmaking and printing are used for the mass production of works by artists and poets. Artists' books are seldom published by large publishers or institutions which are part of the artistic establishment. Books that fall into this category are more often than not published by the artists themselves or by small publishers who specialize in artists' books. All through the twentieth century artists have more and more often taken the initiative to publish their own work, and today, the possibilities for artists to do so are unprecedented, ranging from traditional printing methods to digital printing, as well as increased opportunities for group funding and print on demand.



2018, brochures by 20 artists from an exhibition in the gallery Open at Grandagarður Reykjavík.

## Contemporary artists' books in Iceland

Today the publication of artists' books is booming and a wide range of artists utilize many different methods to create their works – from the handmade to numerous digital printing possibilities – depending on what's appropriate for each work. It may also be noted that during the last few years micropublishers, small bookstores and festivals have sprung up in Iceland where the emphasis has been on the dissemination and sale of books, drawings, zines and diverse alternative publications. All of this indicates that artists' books and books by artists are a fast growing part of Icelandic libraries' acquisitions.

“When the poet composes a piece of art, the artist creates a book. In book production artists consider the production process and role of the book in order to

1980, *Book on book*. Magnús Pálsson and students at The

enclose the form of the book into the concept of the work. That is how artists' books are made.”

Artists' books of today tell the story of each generation, and illustrate the ideas, methods and facilities of art at any given time. Artists' books can be seen as a conversation between the artists and their contemporaries and thus form a response to the environment in which the artist lives and works. Hence artists' books illustrate the condition of art in society at the given time, as well as demonstrating the focus of what is important to contemporary artists.



1962, *Hafið og kletturinn*. Sigurður A. Magnússon, Helgafell. Design: Dieter Roth.

## Dieter Roth

The making of artists' books has grown and flourished in Iceland since Dieter Roth (1930-1998) introduced the book as a work of art in Iceland in the early sixties. Dieter brought new trends to the arts in Iceland, and his influence on art, poetry and printing in Iceland is undisputed.

Since then, artists have used the book as material in their work, playing with texts, illustrations, paper, texture, scope and binding, thus utilizing all the different printing and design methods that have been available during the past 60 years.



1980, *Book on book*. Magnús Pálsson and students at The Icelandic College of Art and Crafts.

## ***Book on book* and Magnús Pálsson**

*Book on book* (*Bók um bók og fleira*) was a product of Magnús Pálsson's course in bookmaking at The Icelandic College of Art and Crafts. It was created by him and his students in 1980. *Book on book* is a tentative definition of what a book is: "The spine is an axis that keeps pages together. A page is a moveable surface. Information is the knowledge an object provides on something different from its own form, state or nature. Browseability. Transferability is the ability to move an item out of place without dismantling it."

The exhibition marks the 200th anniversary of the National Library of Iceland, and recently there has been increased emphasis on the unique status of artists' books in the National Library's holdings. The Library is in the process of developing a special artists' books collection within the library's special collections department.

The exhibition is located on the 3rd floor of the Culture House from June 7, 2018 – June 2, 2019.

During the Reykjavík Art Festival there will be a special exhibition of an artist's book by Eygló Harðardóttir: *Sculpture*. The prototype will be exhibited in the Reading Room in The Culture House from June 7 – June 17, 2018.



2016, Eygló Harðardóttir – *Sculpture*.

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