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8-1-2007

Member Profiles: Karen Hanmer and Peter Verheyen

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Recommended Citation
Verheyen, Peter D. and Hanmer, Karen H., "Member Profiles: Karen Hanmer and Peter Verheyen" (2007). *Library and Librarians' Publication*. Paper 4.
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GUILD OF BookWorkers Newsletter

521 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10175-0083 Number 173 August 2007

Standards 2007 Update

October 17-20 in Dallas, Texas

If you've misplaced your Newsletter, visit the GBW website at: http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byorg/gbw/ for complete Standards information and to download registration materials.

Online room reservations for Standards may be made at: https://reservations.synxis.com/LBE/rez.aspx?Hotel=12552&Chain=5968&group=GOBW

For room reservations by phone, please call: 1-800-777-6464
Please be advised that you will see a $96 per night room rate. This is the $84 rate plus 15% tax.

Member Profiles

KAREN HANMER & PETER VERHEYEN

This is the second in a continuing series of interviews of Guild members. Current and former Exhibitions Chairs Karen Hanmer and Peter Verheyen met at Standards in Chicago in 1999. She never dreamed his subliminal messages would entice her from making "freaky-foldies" to become a binder. He never suspected she would attempt to seduce him to the other side with odd examples of vaguely book-like ephemera. They share an appreciation of fine craft, spare design, and excessively robust (read Teutonic) endsheets.

KH: You are involved in a number of activities where you make something: bookbinding, model railroading, beer making, restoring your vintage car (what am I leaving out here?), virtual publishing with *The Bonefolder*, creating an online community with the Book_Arts-L listserv and Book Arts Web. Do you find your work in these areas to be related in some way?

PV: Hmm, quite true. You didn't really leave out anything, though the only credit I can claim for the car (1975 BMW model 2002) is that I cut the checks, and lots of those. For some time I thought that might be a fun article for something like AIC. Book restoration versus car restoration: What's it like to be on the other (paying) side. I think there are definite parallels between the bookbinding side and my "model" railroading. Both involve lots of building, many of the same tools, and most of my buildings are made of cardboard or paper. The online aspects to my life such as *Bonefolder* and *Book Arts Web* seem to be what I am most known for. I got started in 1994 with *Book_Arts-L*, a listserv that quickly grew to over 2000 subscribers, and added the first incarnation of the *Book Arts Web* a year or so later. While I can't claim to have invented the Internet, I was perhaps the 3rd book arts person online having been beaten in by Richard Minsky and the University of Idaho. I think the online world has really changed the way the book arts (and presumably other crafts/hobbies) are learned and experienced. I was asked to speak on this change at the Silver Buckle Press' 25th anniversary in 1998 and there has been a huge growth in online opportunities for exchanging information both practical and theoretical and showing off one's work. That talk is online at www.philobiblon.com/HotType.shtml. My online activities continued to grow as my job changed from bench conservator to a more managerial/digital role. The latter is challenging (and sometimes trying) but I enjoy it. Finding time to follow my creative pursuits has been increasingly difficult though, and I'm not doing as much as I'd like to. My activities with the Guild (as Exhibitions Chair for 8 years and Publicity Chair for 6 years, including dragging the Guild online) have also been a large part of who I am.

PV: But since this isn't an interview about me, what attracted you to the book arts and how do you perceive your transition for book artist to design binder? From what I've seen of your work you seem to be spending more time working on traditional bindings and less on your photographic artist's books. It's almost as if you have the transition backwards. Isn't one supposed to go from traditional bookbinding to artist's books? Isn't traditional binding in leather... dead? What's the future of GBW exhibits?

Young Karen Hanmer makes do with modest equipment.

KH: I came to book arts from photography. Black and white, exclusively. I did my own darkroom work, but still I wanted more of a physical connection with my work than the camera and darkroom gave me. I felt too removed from the electronic and chemical processes that created the image. So I experimented coating odd papers with emulsion, using pinhole, photographing myself. Then I ten years ago had a project in mind that involved combining text and image on hinged panels—like case bound books without the text block, just the pastedowns. A friend got me started scanning and working with PhotoShop and I began studying binding. I thought I'd just learn what I needed to for this project, but I really liked how it felt to make books. I also liked the viewer could connect physically with the work.

A few things got me interested in fine binding. First, four or five years after I started making artists' books, I participated in a set book exhibition, and I observed that few of the bindings (including mine) had a strong relationship to the content. I knew I'd want my bindings to have a very strong connection between the two. Also, I began to take notice of some looser, more alive, more playful bindings (work by Priscilla Spitler and Barb Korbel) unlike the very traditional designs that I had always thought of when I thought of leather binding.

Peter Verheyen already thinking about later full leather bindings.

I'm still doing artists' books, but yes, I have been spending a lot of time working on traditional binding skills the past few years. The binding is a different kind of challenge—working with a limited set of materials and a set size and shape, without the opportunity to let the story unfold as the pages are turned. I've got the front and back boards and spine, separately and in combination, to present whatever it is I want to get across.

Unless it is a set book combination, I tend to not bind something finely printed, or classic literature but instead something I've read, and that I'm interested in. (Remember when you guessed which DeGolyer entry was mine because of the low brow subject matter?) So, like my artists' books and installations, fine binding is an additional way for me to work with the subjects that interest me.

Also, we've all seen too many poorly constructed artists books (which I see as being 100 percent equivalent to technically well executed bindings with uninspired designs). It seems to me natural that someone who makes any kind of book art would want to keep building skills in crafting both their content and their structure.

As far as the GBW exhibits, I was pleased to see that the 100th Anniversary show is roughly a 50/50 split between artists' books and traditional bindings —by this I mean roughly codex-style books. I've begun planning the 2009-10 traveling exhibit. I hope the theme (*Marking Time*) will be broad enough to accommodate artists' books and traditional bindings. I'm also pleased that several the regional chapters are planning exhibitions, which tend to be non-juried.

KH: What are you working on now?

PV: Since about 9 months prior to the 100th Anniversary Exhibition I can honestly say that I've bound one book. The burnout has been incredible. There are also several projects on hold that I'm trying to get back to. Since I don't work at the bench anymore in my primary job, any binding work I do is on my own time and has to compete with family time and

the trains. I do want to remain active, if only for myself and am working on getting back into binding.

KH: What would your dream job be?

PV: Don't know if I have one. I very much like working in a research library environment and managing projects. I also like interacting with our researchers and helping them find the resources they need, mostly in digital form. I also continue to oversee the conservation lab and am fortunate to have had two excellent conservators to work with. Ideally, I would love to work on specific projects—planning, organizing, executing, evaluating—then move on to the next. You know, project management.

KH: Describe your dream personal project.

PV: Don't think I have one. I think in my next life I would like to have more of an art/design background. I find the design process my greatest challenge, much harder than the technical aspects of binding.

KH: How long have you been collecting artists' books?

PV: I wouldn't say I'm collecting artists' book specifically but more collecting exemplars of structures by book artists whose work I admire and with whom I've had interesting interactions. As many may guess, I'm actually rather traditional in terms of my binding aesthetics and training. The interest in artist's books grew out my increasing and regular interactions with undergraduate students making "books." We didn't have very many good examples in our collection at Syracuse (something that's changed) and it's still not a collecting focus. So, I decided to acquire my own exemplars to show, and allow the students to handle. What's important is that they see exhibition quality work by recognized book artists.

KH: What are you looking for in what you collect, and can you talk about a few of your favorites?

PV: As I mentioned above, primarily exemplars of structures—flag books, accordions, sculptural, interactive, freaky-foldies. Some are even just toys that could be (and have been) used for "books" such as Jacobs ladders. It's no secret that I love your photographic flag books and I'm pleased to have *Destination Moon*. My first was Claire Van Vliet's *Bone Songs*. I also love Melissa Jay Craig's sculptural books

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(like the one in *In Flight*) and I'm pleased to have acquired one in the auction at the 2004 Standards in Providence. Also a Carol Barton's pop-up books and Susan Share's *Headbanded Strip*, the latter because historic endbands are a personal fascination of mine and I love the idea of them as a "book."

KH: What is a book?

PV: My students like to say they are whatever THEY say they are, an attitude shared by many. Not sure I agree with that, but you've been successfully teasing me with wonderful exemplars such as Sweet Hearts, "Sanitized for your Protection," and computer punch cards. I think it's up to the artist to convince me, and intent is part of the process.

KH: What is not a book?

PV: See above.

KH: Do you have some examples that stretch the normal definition, or your definition?

PV: Sweet hearts, cuneiform tablets (dependent on content), video/film, installations. They can be book inspired/derived, but I'm not sure that makes them a book. I would say a book goes beyond the codex though, and can incorporate many forms. While some may find the discussion of bookness (a term coined by Philip Smith) boring, I think that we as a field, as a craft, as an art, need to more openly and critically discuss our work and all that surrounds it to be taken more seriously in the art world in general. That's something MANY are very reluctant to do for any number of reasons. In terms of qualities, I agree though that a poorly (uninspired) designed traditional book can be equated to poorly crafted artists' book on some levels, but would unhesitatingly choose a flawlessly executed simple craft binding where everything harmonizes over a floppy/sloppy "artists' book." I also think even with artists' books, not everything is art.

KH: What skill would you like to have that you do not have now?

PV: I'd like to regain/resharpen the skills I had. Beyond that, just once I'd love to do a flawless gilt edge or gold tool a binding.

PV: You mentioned the DeGolyer and my recog-

nizing your book because of the "low-brow" nature of the text. I've bound plenty of "trade books" and will likely continue to. However, the fine press book tradition has great appeal to me and having collaborated with or bound editions for printmakers has only heightened that belief. It comes down to the total package. On the other hand, there are people like Richard Minsky who have created very strong works based on trade books. I think ultimately it comes down to the intent. The contrast between pulp fiction and fine traditional materials can be quite alluring, and appropriate.

PV: As someone not "from the trade" originally, where do you see yourself? I think that you're quite possibly not as encumbered with the "baggage" of traditionalism some of us thrive on. There may be other "baggage" but I admire the way you've followed your path and been able to learn the skills you need to further develop your work. I also think it helps tremendously in being versatile.

KH: I've been fortunate that even though I'm not part of a bindery, conservation lab or art department faculty I've always been welcomed by many generous people (especially my Guild pals) who I've turned into my mentors and colleagues and I call on when I'm trying to work out some structural or content issues. I do feel at a disadvantage that I don't have ready access to a library of properly done examples or creative solutions to refer to, so I'm slowly building a collection.

I used to feel badly that I have this funny degree (Economics) that doesn't seem to have prepared me for anything I'm doing, but now I realize that my liberal arts studies taught me to have a lot of curiosity, broad interests, and an ability to draw unusual connections.

PV: Based on GBW (and other) exhibitions, where do you see the future of the book arts? Will traditional binding survive? Will more binders/book artists cross over (in either direction)? What about education?

KH: As I mentioned, I was very, very pleased and encouraged to see so many traditional bindings in the 100th exhibition. People I know, both in and out of the artists' books world are split, maybe 2/3 thinking it is cool to be working on fine binding, the remainder being puzzled or even horrified that I would choose that way to spend my time and energy.

I see a lot of offerings for fine binding/traditional binding/historic structures courses, and I see very skilled binders like Laura Wait, Priscilla Spitler, Don Glaister, Monique Lallier using non traditional materials and structures creating their own content. I can't think of as many book artists crossing over towards hard-core binding.

I see also book artists and especially people new to the book arts being seduced to jump right into the non-traditional before learning some basics of the engineering of how a book functions; and too often the binding being an afterthought—a mere wrapper for the prints inside rather than part of a well integrated whole.

PV: Where do you see the book in the context of Second Life? Richard Minsky has put the Center for Book Arts into Second Life at http://slartmagazine.com/cba.htm.

KH: I'm going to pass on this one. Did I mention that one of the attractions fine binding holds for me is that is I have to/get to step away from the devil box to do it? You're a digital guy. What do you think?

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PV: Just fine binding? I see the "devil box" as you refer to it as a tool and only that, even though my family and others think I view it as much more than that. This tool enables us to collaborate in ways not possible until recently; enabled those without type shops to produce textual works, and those with to create type and images in innovative ways such as photopolymer plates (Claire Van Vliet's *Bone Songs*); enables those that can't draw to create designs; enabled the development of a vast virtual community and reference network; and perhaps most importantly has brought many, many new people to the field who might otherwise have not learned about it. While there is a real sense of community in many places among book artists, it is also a microcosm of society and fraught with many of the same pitfalls. I also think we need to be careful to think of that as sole source of information though. There is still far more good information in print than online. I use my extensive real reference library far more than the "devil box."

Will the virtual book arts establish themselves online in the long term? Perhaps, but for myself, I need to feel the materials, handle them … For teaching, in person is also still best because of the hands-on interaction between teacher and student. I've taken part in online workshops as both, and never really been satisfied. On the other hand, I've found online exchanges, including the sending of photos, diagrams, and even video to greatly facilitate teaching/mentoring in an established relationship. I'm not sure Second Life will make a positive contribution and will watch from the sidelines … In the end though, we need to remember that digital technology is a means to an end, not the end itself. At the end of the process is still a "book" that lives and breathes. That said, I'm very proud of what I've been able to accomplish and the contributions I've made using the "devil box." It's been a wild 13 years.

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