

# Fancy Dinner Date

## Conversing with Artists' Books to Spark Creativity

*Laura Dimmit Smyth, Fine Arts and Cultural Studies Librarian, University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library; Leslie Hurst, Head of Teaching and Learning/Literature and Humanities Librarian, University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library; Suzan Parker, Head of Collections and Course Support Services/Anthropology Librarian, University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library*

### NUTRITION INFORMATION

This activity introduces students to artists' books—what they are, (some of) the formats and bookmaking skills that might be represented, and how artists' books represent a fascinating dialogue between content and format. By providing an opportunity to physically interact with these unique materials, this activity will help build student confidence around using special collections materials. Guided “interview questions” will help students hone in on the relationship between content and format while practicing the ability to identify and relay themes from complex creative works. This activity is based on the UW Bothell/Cascadia College Campus Library Mobile Artists' Books Collection, which functions as a special hands-on teaching collection and is intentionally located outside of the UW Libraries Special Collections department.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

- understand artists' books as a diverse and constantly evolving form of knowledge production
- investigate the relationship between information content and information

format through close reading of artists' books

- explain central themes of individual artists' books by responding to them in creative works

### RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

3B, 4E

### COOKING TIME

Options:

- a 1-hour session, with students creating their “response” pieces as homework or in another class session with the instructor
- a 2-hour session, with work time provided for students to work on their “response” pieces
- a 1-hour session without the “response” piece section—instead, wrap up with students identifying and reflecting on the themes identified in their chosen artists' books

### NUMBER SERVED

Somewhat dependent on the size of the

available collection (see below), but recommended for classes under 45.

### INGREDIENTS (INCLUDING COLLECTIONS USED)

Artists' books or other book arts materials—critically, items that can be handled by students. A similar activity could be developed with other formats, including zines and chapbooks.

### PREPARATION

Before meeting with students:

- Select sample artists' books from the available collection, ideally enough for one per student, but one book per two students would also work.
- Prepare and print handouts with a selection of suggested “interview questions” for students to use during activity cooking time.

During class time:

- Define artists' books through a facilitated classroom discussion. We suggest this explanation from Anne Evenhaugen, writing on the Smithsonian's *Unbound* blog:

An artist's book is a medium of artistic expression that uses the form or function of "book" as inspiration. It is the artistic initiative seen in the illustration, choice of materials, creation process, layout and design that makes it an art object.<sup>1</sup>

Follow up by asking: *What IS the form of a book? What is the function?* Some other ways to rephrase that question:

- How does a book usually look?
- Describe the physical parts of a book.
- What is a book's typical purpose?
- Provide a brief primer on handling artists' books (point out that these skills are transferable to other types of special collections materials as well).

Despite the need for careful handling, emphasize that these materials are meant to be held, touched, and interacted with! Take a moment to "show and tell" with one or two samples.

Some tips to share:

- Handle with care—Every book is unique in its own way.
- Be aware that some books are not bound and may have separate or loose pieces.
- Please keep books in their protective cases when they are not in use.
- Artists' books "buffet"

Provide time for students to walk around and browse through the available collection. This time can be ex-



Figure 1. "Tunnel Vision"



Figure 2. "Tunnel Vision"



**Figure 3.** "Frogs in Heat"



**Figure 4.** "Frogs in Heat"

panded or condensed, depending on the time constraints of the session.

- Invite students to choose a book to work with for the rest of the activity.

Students may need to work in pairs or groups, depending on collection size and class size.

- Model discussing the relationship between content and format of artists' books. Each collection will have its own unique items, but here are two examples from our own collection:
  - "Tunnel Vision," Laura Davidson, 2012 (see figures 1 and 2)

This book uses accordion-style construction to capture depth and nuance. It creates several distinct "slices" that can be inspected in relation to one another or on their own. The artist identifies the visuals used in the piece as their own personal view of a specific construction project at a specific point in time. Does this change how you interact with the book?

- "Frogs in Heat," Ruth Hayes, 1983 (see figures 3 and 4)

This book uses the "flip book" format to capture a playful slice of the frog mating process—an "active" format for an "active" subject matter. It relies primarily on visuals and choices made by the reader—Do you flip through the book slowly? Quickly? Do you examine every page on its own, or do you take it as a whole?

- Distribute handout with suggested "interview" questions. Consider collaborat-

ing with the class instructor to create additional questions that tie more closely into the course topics and themes. Some sample questions follow:

- How would you describe this book to someone who can't see it?
- Identify three ideas you believe are important to the message of this book.
- How do the format, images, and materials of the books help convey the artists' message?
- Finish the following statements:
  - This artists' book is similar to a traditional book because . . .
  - This artists' book is unlike a traditional book because . . .
  - Looking at this book makes me feel . . . because . . .
- Individual (or pair) work time
  - Ask students to document answers to "interview" questions on a worksheet you provide or in their own notes. The amount of time can be flexible, based on the constraints of the session, but at least 15 minutes is recommended.
- Share out
  - Invite students to "show and tell" with their books. One suggested approach is asking students to talk about their answers to the questions outlined above.
- Still hungry? Try this optional add-on:
  - This would work particularly well with studio or workshop courses (think drawing, painting, poetry, fiction writing, etc.). In consultation with the instructor, develop a short "creative response" as-

signment. Students will create a piece, in the medium of the class, based on the themes they identified in their artists' book interview.

#### **NOTE**

1. Evenhaugen, Anne. 2012. "What Is an Artist's Book?" Unbound (blog), Smithsonian Libraries, June 1. <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2012/06/01/what-is-an-artists-book/>.

#### **TASTE TEST**

Suggested assessment strategies include the following:

- Observe how students react to and explore the physical format of artists' books and the themes expressed within them.
- Record questions asked by students during the activity.
- If this activity will be part of a larger partnership with the class or instructor, follow up with instructor and possibly review student work based on artists' books. It may also be possible for some libraries to add student work (chapbooks, artists' books, etc.) to their collections.