

Atzmon, Molly, and Ryan Molloy. *The Open Book Project*. Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University Galleries, 2014. 248 pp., color plates, halftones, references. Paperback with detachable laser-cut acrylic front and back covers clasped with rubber bands and dust jacket, \$25.00 - \$35.00.

Reviewed by Benjamin Dory, Studio Artist

Leslie Atzmon is a Professor of Graphic Design and Design History at Eastern Michigan University. Her writing appears in many journals such as *Design Issues* and *Eye* and is currently co-editing the anthology *The Graphic Design Reader*. Ryan Molloy is Assistant Professor in the Graphic Design Department at EMU. He also works as a freelance designer, artists, and interdisciplinary designer, showing his work nationally and internationally. Both co-coordinate the Open Book Workshop in Ypsilanti, MI, and curated the exhibition *Open Book: An International Survey of Experimental Books*, events that inform, with cumulative benefits, *The Open Book Project*.

The Open Book Project, a collaborative effort between individuals across many fields who create, design and consider the various facets that make up books and book art, holds a mirror to contemporary thought that surrounds not only the book arts community but also a larger one analyzing the role of books as a 'vehicle for visual or verbal information...' (4). When glancing over both a critical and media driven landscape, where persistent accounts concerning the decline of the printed book share the arena with insinuations that affirm the necessity for printed material, one thing seems to be certain, as

The Open Book Project does well to demonstrate. The role of books, in their many forms and incarnations, are in a state of flux. Editor Leslie Atzmon and co-art director Ryan Molloy dovetail collected essays and explorative musings with an exhibition catalog, investigating the history and potential for books in their many forms.

Upon first viewing the book and its separate components, one is struck with the notion that a number of design approaches coexist. Accompanied by photo covered, fold out dust jacket, and, if you opt for the \$35.00 edition, a laser cut cover in either book board or acrylic, *The Open Book Project* is an exploratory publication. Where the content could be conveyed in a stylistically straightforward manner, every component is uniquely designed, employing various papers, fonts, and layouts. The result works in favor of the text, helping to organize and individualize the varied contents. The dust jacket, in addition to displaying photos of the Open Book Workshop with an introduction to the event by Malloy, can be cut and folded into signature to create a small stand-alone book. Each essay receives its own graphic treatment by separate designers, which speaks to an idea that unifies *The Open Book Project* - how innumerable combinations of formal and conceptual components affect one another in the transmission of information.

The text begins with a casual conversation between the editors about recent thoughts on the development and outcome of *The Open Book Project*. After an insightful introduction by Atzmon, 8 essays presented in written, visual and blended formats, make up the bulk of the text. Each examines alternative and exploratory ways to understand and approach

books. Denise Gonzales Crisp's visual essay, *Listening to Books*, and Phil Jones' *The Book as a Tunnel* explore ways to register the contents of a book, one intuitive and one scientific and semantic. Historical context leads the way for examining continuous and future roles printed books play in an environment of digital resources in Johanna Drucker's *What is the Cult Future of the Book?*. Tony White's *The (R)evolutionary Artist Book* describes how the intentions of artists' books in the '60s do not match an ever expanding genre of self publications by designers, architects, curators, etc. that, misleadingly, uses the same or a related name. Also presented against a historical backdrop, Emily McVarish's *Facing Pages: the Art and Design of Experimental Books* documents how the many iterations of the artist book have evolved with the technology and philosophical mood at the time, currently framing books as cultural objects and allowing for unprecedented collaboration between disciplines.

Book Unbound, both an interactive sculpture and the essay by Bonnie Mak and Julia Pollack and Danielle Aubert's *File Sharing, Reading the Index in Rosalind Krauss and Wim Crowwel* look to paratextual elements as important additions to the overall reading of a book. The prior dissects book components to isolate and identify them for further readings. The latter is a blended written and visual essay using readers' notations, underlines, and highlights as a vehicle for new understanding of a text. In addition to participating in the *Open Book* exhibition, Penelope Umbrico considers the curious roles books and book images play in advertising and as props. *Our New Library: The Use of Books in Consumer Media* also expands on our physical libraries acting out a more

decorative role as reading habits become more inclusive and "horizontal" on digital platforms (109).

Following the essays is the exhibition catalog for *Open Book: an International Survey of Experimental Books*, which presents work by and information on 15 artists who expand the notion of what a book can be. Digitally conceived work accompanies more traditional approaches conducted with needle and thread or a simple knife. Static, aging books share the room with a piece that responds to the dynamic and constant flow of information from an internet feed. Both literal and abstracted iterations of 'book' bolster and add to the framework created by the essays. Returning to the design format used in the introductory sections, biographies, the colophon, and extras round out the book.

An accomplishment achieved with *The Open Book Project* is its promotion of the idea that physical and digital books will evolve together. To champion one over the other dismisses the opportunity to explore fertile conditions where artists and designers, theorists and programmers, and educators and architects (to name a few) may collaborate in such a way as to create new dialogues about and fresh insights into the potential of books. *The Open Book Project* offers this wise and receptive approach as we continue to assimilate new technologies into established methods of conveying information.