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An Art Form Learns to Fly

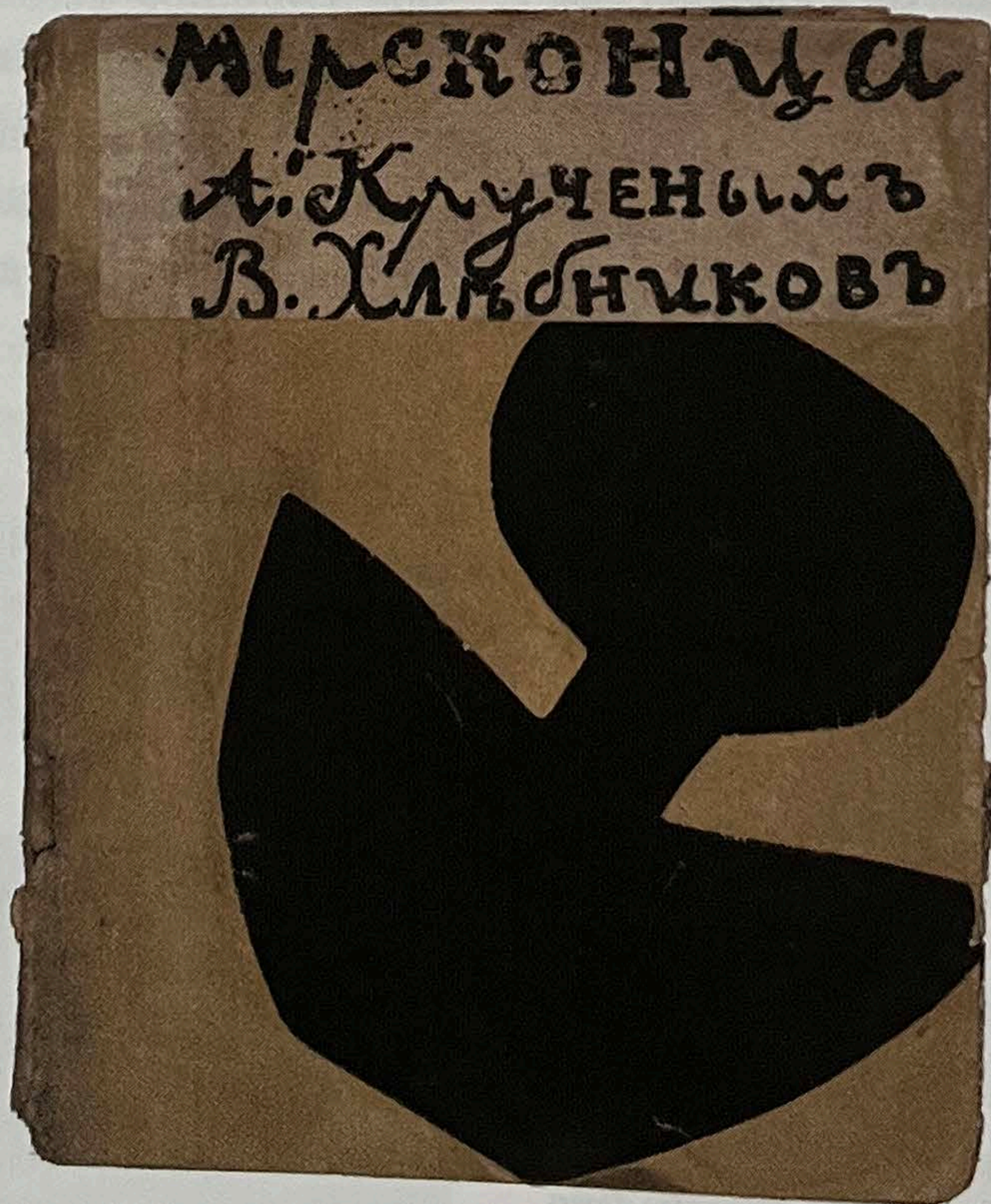
A brief history highlights the potential of the artist's book.

by Debra Riley Parr

Whether it's a mass-produced multiple or a precious one-off, the artist's book is a strange bird. Not just because of the way it seems to flit between disciplines as broadly divergent as literature, conceptual art, handcraft, mass production, and popular culture, but because, after a hundred years or so, it still has all the markings of a fledgling. As historian and artist Johanna Drucker puts it in *The Century of Artists' Books* (Granary Books, 1995), one of the few comprehensive histories of the form to date, the artist's book is "the quintessential twentieth-century art form." Even so, when it's up against older arts such as painting, sculpture, and even photography, the artist's book has a hard time getting noticed.

This tough contemporary situation can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when artists trained as painters or sculptors began turning to the book as an avant-garde gesture. Refusing to continue old, elite forms of representation, artists such as the Italian futurist Fortunato

BELOW: Natalia Goncharova, collaged cover for *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards) (text by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh), 1912; edition of 220; 7½" x 5¾". Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Depero took full advantage of new technological methods of reproduction to make books instead of paintings. His *Depero Futurista* (1927)—bound by metal bolts, printed in metallic inks and machine-inspired typefaces—was more than an archive of his work. It moved beyond the *livre d'artiste* tradition of the nineteenth century, in which artists provided the illustrations for deluxe editions, to become the prototype for artist's books to come. Depero's book, in its materials and method of production, embodies a de-

sire to be modern, to make a new art that has no reference to, or reverence for, the past. *Dinamo Azari* is not a representation of Depero's work; it is the work of art.

and publish a book critiquing the State of the Union address is in stark contrast to the slowness with which government operates, even in times of crisis.

Another book that responds to the current political moment is Keith Smith's *PEACE NO W*. Admired for the brilliantly engineered structures of his books, Smith captures a sense of urgency in this book, a swift response to the election of 2004. The cover is modest, the binding remarkably simple. But the title is easily misread as a demand: peace now! What the title really refers to is an ephemeral moment Smith experienced when he was driving past a dormitory at Cornell University. From a window hung a banner with the word "PEACE" on it; from another window below it hung a banner with the word "NO"; and from another below that, the letter "W." A kind of dialogue between competing political viewpoints, or an underscoring of the demand for peace? For all its modesty, the book desperately pleads for a rewriting of history, for letters to be reshuffled into some other order. The text inside the book plays with this potential reading and misreading in the way the text extends across the cut pages, each of which is one letter wider than the preceding page. The first page turning changes the word "soldier" into "bloodier," turns the word "friend" into "end," "ground" into "wound."

The handcraft of Lynn Sures's recently completed edition of *Variations on the Dialectic between Mingus and Pithecanthropus*

ABOVE: Keith A. Smith, PEACE NO W, book number 227 (three views), 2004; ink-jet prints hand bound in a quarter cloth-on-paper cover with a pamphlet-sewn binding, edition of 200; 7³/₄" x 7³/₄".

erectus continues the artist's-book tradition of long-term collaboration: She worked on it with, among others, Rick Potts, an anthropologist who wrote the text; Terrence Chouinard of The Wing & the Wheel Press, who helped with the text design and printing; and Harold Kyle of Boxcar Press, who made the photopolymer plates. Sures carved the wood blocks, cut stencils for the delicate watermarks, and made 1,400 sheets of paper, including 400 pulp-painted sheets for the colored images and 400 pulp-washed sheets for the black-and-white images. Clearly a labor of love, inspired by the jazz of Charles Mingus, the book was almost ten years in the making.

The exposure of these books—the contemporary as well as the historical—remains, unfortunately, limited. The exception may be Ruscha's books, which will get more attention when he represents the United States at this summer's Venice Biennale. Revolutionary, avant-garde, edgy hybrids deliberately difficult to categorize and exhibit—these characteristics of the artist's book are also the quintessential stuff of twentieth-century art. The things that make this young art form—albeit a century old now—so attractive are the very reasons that it finds itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century still something of a featherweight, still in the margins, still learning what it can do, what it can be.



THIS PAGE: Lynn Sures and collaborators, *Variations on the Dialectic between Mingus and Pithecanthropus erectus (two views)*, 2005; accordion book with sixteen pages (handmade abaca pulp-painted paper letterpress-printed with woodcuts and text) and three pamphlets (made of handmade abaca and hemp paper; each contains two polymer-plate letterpress-printed images, a watermark, and a letterpress-printed essay), edition of 55; 10½" x 7½" x ½". Photo by the artist.

There are many venues that archive artist's books, and many centers continue to foster their growth, and yet relatively few exhibitions and publications feature the form in a way that is readily afforded other arts. Even book artists find it difficult to agree on how their work should be situated within the overlapping worlds of books and art. Disagreements over seemingly simple decisions like whether artist's books should be handled or exhibited in vitrines point to the difficulties faced by curators. The relative modesty of the form also creates a challenge in the context of a contemporary art scene desirous of spectacle. But the biggest challenge for the artist's book may be thinking through, and beyond, its own short history and envisioning a manifestation that has yet to be imagined. ●

Debra Riley Parr, professor of design history, teaches a course on artist's books for the Book and Paper Center, Columbia College Chicago.



Images on the Web

El Lissitzky's *For the Voice*: www.getty.edu/gri/digital/lissitzky
This site is an online archive of *Monuments of the Future*: Designs by El Lissitzky, a 1998 exhibition at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

Fortunato Depero's *Depero Futurista*: www.colophon.com/gallery/futurism/index.html This page, on the www.colophon.com book-arts website, is an essay by Maurizio Scudiero on Italian Futurist books. Click on the image of *Depero Futurista* for images of its pages.

For more resources on artist's books in general, visit our website, www.fiberarts.com.