

inkubator

An essay by Neil Cameron

Do you see this square old yellow book, I toss I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about...?

It was with these lines that the poet Robert Browning introduced the physical evidence in the story of *The Ring and the Book*, the curious tale of the mysterious Count Guido Franceschini. These were the lines that came vaguely to mind when the artist David Faithfull asked me if I would write something for an exhibition on artists' books – an exhibition where visitors would be free to handle many of the works on display. In offering this chance to have a direct physical experience with productions which would normally only be available in specialist galleries and booksellers, there is a motive to try to democratise them. This seemed like an engagingly open and trusting attitude in a milieu which tends, however yellow the books may or may not be, to have internal conversations between artists, publishers, curators and collectors rather than external dialogues with a wider public.

Artists' books have a long and complex background, and in this context it is only possible here to draw out a few diagnostic themes. In some respects, the artist's book can be traced back to medieval illuminated manuscripts. Some of the earliest European examples, such as the *Book of Kells* from around 800 AD, do not simply utilise text and image together but integrate them profoundly, allowing analogies to be made with modern idioms which are also concerned with this interrelationship, such as concrete poetry. Of course any history of book-making has to mention Johannes Gutenberg, the man who is credited with the invention of moveable type in the mid 15th century, the starting-point for techniques of mechanical reproduction which lasted until the development of the computer. Book-making and print-making are obviously closely allied, but the potential of the print as a separate entity with its own aesthetic validity found particular emphasis in the great series of wood-cuts and engravings produced by Albrecht Dürer in the years around 1500. In etching, the technical innovations and quite exceptional ability of the French artist Jacques Callot in the What for one person may be a beautiful, remote landscape can, from another perspective, represent a sector to be exploited. The sense of multiple viewpoints presented in some of David Faithfull's work is a rich metaphor for the fragmentation in our perception of what it is we are actually *seeing* when we experience natural environments. In his curation of this exhibition, he has also sought to demonstrate a sense of plurality - that diversity of viewpoints in all senses - through one medium. With its word-play on 'ink' and 'incubator', the content and aspiration of *Inkubator* are clearly signalled. Sent from various parts of the world, the works on display represent a richly diverse library of ideas and formats for that most universal of creative productions, the book.

NEIL CAMERON © 2007

Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62)

BIOGRAPHY

Neil Cameron is a cultural historian and writer based in Edinburgh. Trained at the Courtauld Institute, University of London, and at the University of Cambridge, he currently works as an art historian for a government organisation in Scotland. He has

written or contributed to a number of books and articles on art and architecture from the medieval period to the present day and has published in newspapers and magazines including *The Independent*, *AJ* and *Frame*. His last book was *Graven Images: Design in a Cold Climate* (Amsterdam/Basle, 2002).