

Zurich, 18 January 2019

Press Release

## **Ding / Unding. The Artist's Book Unbound**

**13 February – 14 April 2019**

Opening: Tuesday, 12 February 2019; doors open 6 p.m.; introduction 6.45 p.m.

**The exhibition Ding / Unding<sup>1</sup> casts a glance at artists' books in the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich. In the early 1930s, the writer Bob Brown (1886–1959) confidently declared that “books are antiquated word containers” – and although he was of the opinion, even then, that books were already on the way out, rumours of the death of the medium seem to have been greatly exaggerated. In the world of art, the book has far from disappeared. Time and again, artists have challenged our ideas of what a book might comprise. Does it have to be bound? Printed? Made of paper?**

Forecasts about the future of the book have long been made, and still continue. Yet the prophecy that they have become superfluous in the so-called information age has not come to fruition. Fortunately not. In the world of art, engaging with this medium in all its many forms still plays an important role. Even the most fundamental elements of a book – pages bound inside a cover – are open to question, thwarting all attempts to define the artist's book within any kind of fixed category. This exhibition looks at the reasons why artists continue to work with the medium of the book, asks whether and to what extent they overstep its boundaries, and explores the ways in which the artist's book can assert its place in the digital and post-digital age. Today, more than ever, books oscillate between the physically tangible and the immaterially intangible.

This distinction between the physical and the no longer physical book can be linked to the analysis of things and 'non-things' in *The Shape of Things* by Vilém Flusser (1920–1991). According to this media philosopher, the world prior to the emergence of digital media was shaped by natural and artificially created objects. In the meantime, however, there has been a rise in increasingly intangible things from information streams to programs and symbols. All of these are continually diminishing in terms of actual physical traits and are increasingly becoming software without hardware. Flusser deduces from this that the hitherto acknowledged cycle of becoming-being-passing is being replaced by a notion of progress that goes in only one direction. The immaterial is forming an ever-growing repository of memory.

Artists' books, as material objects, playfully explore their character as objects and go beyond the status of the book as a container of information. **Dieter Roth** (1930–1998) ground the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* together with spices into a *Literaturwurst* [Literature

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<sup>1</sup> It is hard to find a suitable English equivalent for the German term “Unding”. The lexical meaning is “absurdity” (which is not equivalent), the literal translation “non-thing”. The negation in “Unding” does not mean the thing is not a thing anymore, but that it is, in its essence, questionable.

Sausage], while **Željka Marušić & Andreas Helbling** (collaboration 1998–2006) transformed the book into the shimmering, accessible travel oracle *Nada*. Leporellos are objects too. They do not lie flat on the table, but emphasise their presence within the space. In his work *Noh such thing as time*, **Hiroshi Sugimoto** (\*1948) reproduces a traditional Noh theatre stage in miniature, while *Every Building on Sunset Strip* by **Ed Ruscha** (\*1937) unfolds into a seven-metre long boulevard.

The book as immaterial object expands Flusser's take on the dissolution of the object into immaterial information. These are not simply no longer objects, but have instead become things that are hard to grasp and resist our comprehension. That includes the words broken down into oversized letters in the *Black Book* by **Christopher Wool** (\*1955) which are barely legible at first glance, as well as unbound books in which any semblance of order seems to have fallen apart. However, as noted by the philosopher and literary critic Hannes Bajohr (\*1984), post-digital forms of publication are also "non-things" which often reflect their position between digital code and analogue object. This includes print-on-demand publications that are printed only once they have been ordered online. *Non Facit Saltus* by **Lawrence Giffin** instructs us on each page to turn to the next one – which we can only do if we have the printed version. **Lauren Klotzman** (\*1987), in *Meat Joy Error Failure*, has turned the immaterial error alert from a five-minute (illegal) video of the famous performance by **Carolee Schneemann** (\*1939) into an eight-volume, 5,527-page poem.

In an age of infinite digital information, the question is whether books will maintain their character as objects or whether they will balance on the brink between the analogue and the digital. The answer to that, in the case of artists's books, is complex. In addition to a wide-ranging fringe programme offering insights into the works on display, there is also a reading zone where visitors can immerse themselves in the books, in both analogue and digital form.

### Practical Information

Curator	Lena Schaller, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich
Events	The exhibition is accompanied by a <b>curatorial guided tour</b> , five <b>artist talks</b> and an <b>evening event</b> . For details: <a href="https://gs.ethz.ch/agenda/">https://gs.ethz.ch/agenda/</a>
Opening hours	Daily, 10 a.m. – 4:45 p.m. <b>Closed: 08 April 2019 (due to traditional Sechseläuten festival) from 1 p.m.</b>
Entrance	Free
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