

THE LIFE OF A BOOK

Ewa Monika
Zebrowski
and Dean Rader
in Conversation

Ewa Monika Zebrowski is an artist and a poet. Since 2001 she has produced 25 artist's books and one trade edition publication. **Dean Rader** is a San Francisco poet, essayist, and scholar who has authored or co-authored 12 books.

After returning from Paris Photo 2023, Ewa noticed that the PhotoBook explosion was still in full swing. She had attended the Fair to launch her first trade publication, *I NEVER KNEW CY TWOMBLY, Bassano in Teverina* published with Nearest Truth Editions.

She began to wonder why everyone was interested in making books, from zines printed on inexpensive newsprint to limited edition artist's books, and everything in between. There was an entire section dedicated to PhotoBooks at Paris Photo 2023. Large publishers, small independent publishers, and self-published books.

Overwhelming.

So, she called Dean Rader, with whom she had recently collaborated on an article/conversation and who shares her love for Cy Twombly and books. She wanted to discuss this growing global desire for books with him. This dialogue is the result of their shared interest in the function and materiality of books.

DEAN RADER · My friend, Jordan Kantor, who is a great visual artist based here in San Francisco, once said to me that I am a poet who wants to be on the wall, and he is an artist who wants to be on the shelf.

Why the shelf? What is it about artists and books?

EWA MONIKA ZEBROWSKI · Artists and Books, books and artists.

Maybe a book is concrete proof that we exist.

A book is something tangible that can be found in a bookstore,
in a library

or on a coffee table.

A book is a physical object.

Pages between two covers.

An edition. A CODEX. Or not.

Longevity.

Whereas an exhibition is ephemeral.

We need to differentiate between books and artist's books.

What is the difference in your mind?

DR · A great question. I feel like you are better equipped to answer than I am, but I will give it a shot.

I have collaborated with the calligrapher Thomas Ingmire on several

different artist's books, each one unique and utterly special. And I guess that would be my sense of the distinction between an artist's book and a "regular" printed book—its one-of-a-kindness.



**FORMS OF
INCOMPLETION**

1: *Refiguring Cy Twombly.*

Poetry: DEAN RADER
Calligraphy, drawing and
binding: THOMAS INGMIRE

A unique book
16 pages, 9.5 × 11 inches
ink, gouache, acrylic
and gold leaf.

In the collection of
LETTERFORM ARCHIVE,
San Francisco, CA

My recent collection of poems, *Before the Borderless: Dialogues with the Art of Cy Twombly*, is a book of poems paired with art, but all of the versions out there are the same. Gorgeous design and printing, but all the same. The books I did with Thomas—even our Twombly collaborations—he made by hand. Also, he did not copy or duplicate his calligraphy—there is one edition only. In some ways, then, it is a bit like a unique work of art that is also a book. Or a unique book that is also an original work of art. A piece of art on the shelf. And thus, they are “collected,” often by special libraries or collections.

What is the distinction for you?

EMZ · For me an artist's book is conceived as a personal project, a small edition, with limited distribution and circulation.

An artist's book does not have to be handmade but needs to be crafted with special attention to paper, binding, typography, and of course, in my case, use of images.

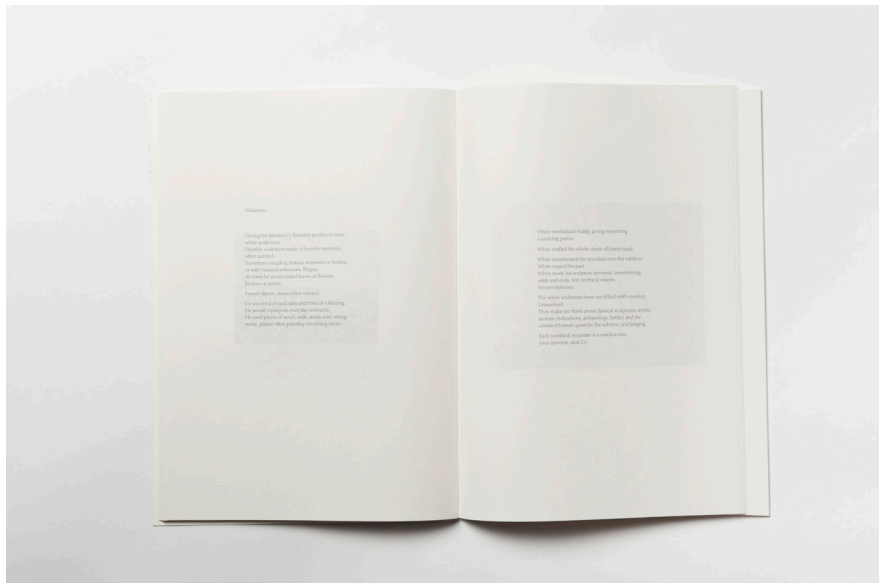
There is no formula. Each book is approached in a different, distinct way.

Sometimes I collaborate with a poet or writer, sometimes I write the text or poem myself.

I like to include words.

I produce the book dummy myself, then work with my graphic designer who produces an InDesign file for printing. I often produce five or six dummies before deciding on the final version. Since 2015 I have been working with Datz Press in Korea. I have produced 10 books with Datz, usually editions of only 20 copies.

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The White Sculptures.
EWA MONIKA ZEBROWSKI
Edition of 20, 2019.
Book photographs:
DATZ PRESS

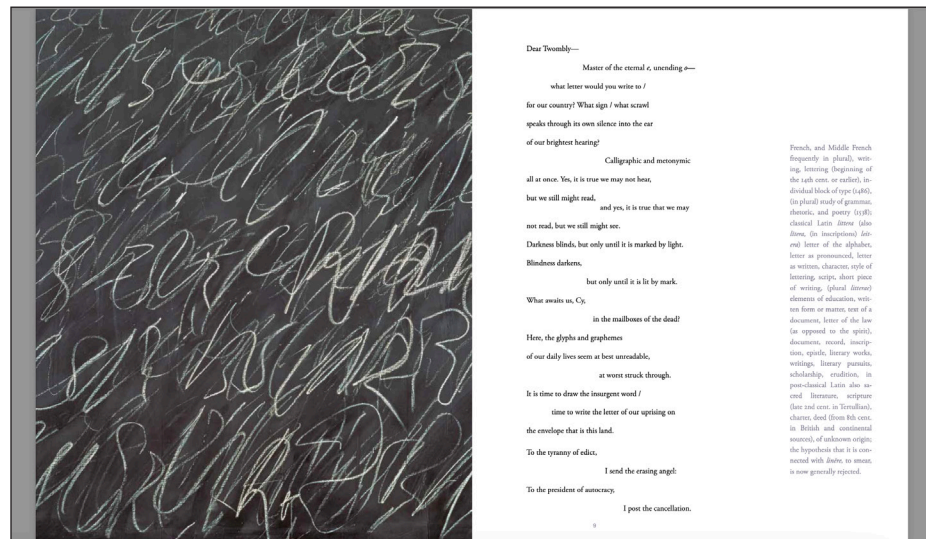
My clients are collectors and institutions, museums, and universities. In 2023 I produced my first trade edition book with Nearest Truth Editions. *I NEVER KNEW CY TWOMBLY, Bassano in Teverina* is an edition of 250 copies.

I find it hard to believe that there are 250 copies of my book in circulation!

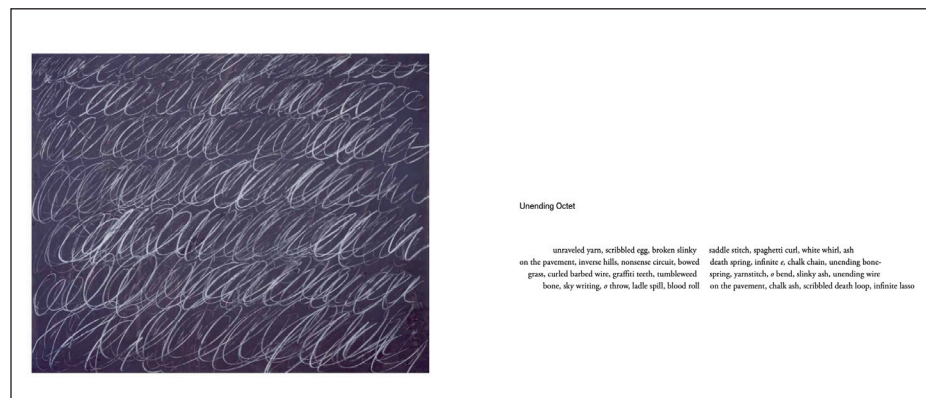
Tell me about your book production experience.

DR • I feel like I have had so many different book production experiences. It is impossible for me to encapsulate. I have co-authored a textbook, co-edited anthologies, written a scholarly book with dozens of images, written books of poems, co-authored a collection of sonnets, and even co-authored an exhibition catalog. Radically different books and radically different kinds, sizes, and print runs of books. Not surprisingly, all have been unique projects.

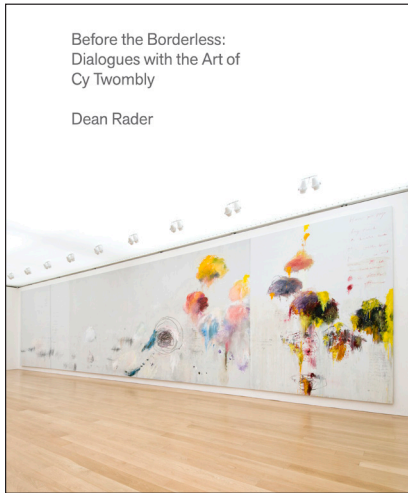
Before the Borderless has been the most complex, I think, but also the most special. When you open the book, you see a Cy Twombly image on the left-hand page, and you see a Dean Rader poem on the right-hand page. There are roughly 30 poems and over 50 Twombly images. Often, my poem



Two details from
*Before the
Borderless:
Dialogues with the
Art of Cy Twombly*,
COPPER CANYON
PRESS, 2023



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is a visual translation of Twombly's work, making this book doubly visual. I worked with a wonderful designer, Phil Kovacevich, to get everything just right. He was super patient with—I won't say my *demands*—but with my *requests*. The middle section of the book gets sort of funky. The poems are longer and rather rangy, and he came up with some really creative solutions that helped preserve the flow of the poem and highlight the Twomblys as two collaborative endeavors in conversation with each other.

So, this book was a new experience for me as it is the first one that is primarily about looking. Not just reading. I think of this book as a visual text. As a poet, that is a new (and exciting) change.

I'm curious what it feels like to see your photographs in a book as opposed to on a wall.

Is there an emotional difference walking into a gallery where your work is hanging (that you know is temporary) as opposed to holding a book (that is a series of reproductions of reproductions?) but that you know is permanent?

EMZ · I like both the gallery experience and the book experience. Public versus private. Temporary versus permanent. I like seeing my photographs on a wall, but I also like seeing my images in a book. Two very different experiences.

The book usually contains/presents more photographs than found in an exhibition. The book is a more in-depth experience in my opinion. More complete. A wonderful vehicle for carrying/transporting images.

Looking at a book for me is more of an intimate experience than walking through a gallery surrounded by other people. I like the idea of sitting alone in silence, undisturbed, to contemplate and reflect. You can thumb through the pages, forward and backward at your own pace.

The gallery experience is finite, curated whereas one can return to a book over and over, and over again. And always discover new things.

The most exciting thing for me is creating a sequence of images in a book. Creating, curating a journey for the viewer. I like to introduce text to the visual journey. Words and images complement one another and expand the experience.

In my last book, *I NEVER KNEW CY TWOMBLY, Bassano in Teverina*, I laboured over the sequence. I wanted to create an immersive experience for the viewer. The sequence in the book is somewhat circular. We see/enter a room, a space, of Cy Twombly's residence in Bassano in Teverina and then after a few pages, we see it/experience it again, but from a different angle. Sometimes the same room is shown 3 or 4 times, each image a different experience of the space. Cumulative. This creates a certain emotional response/experience, connection.

Your AFTERWORD to the book adds another dimension. Your words complement my images. The words mirror the visual experience.

In 2020 I was invited by curator, David Company to show a selection of photographs from Bassano in Teverina at the Biennale fur Fotografie aktuelle in Mannheim, Germany. Company selected 11 images. The photographs were printed 20 × 24 inches on Asuka Japanese paper. Only 11 images were exhibited, or was it 10, as opposed to 37 images which are shown in the book of 82 pages.

Scale plays an important role in viewing photographs in a gallery setting. Images in a gallery are larger than images in a book. Scale gives us a different “reading”, a different experience of the image. I like sometimes showing a small image on a large wall. An element of intimacy.

I always feel that we “read” images much like we read words, a visual language. I like to think that in the book, *I NEVER KNEW CY TWOMBLY*, my sequence of images creates a poetic experience, hovering between reality and imagination, if compared to the experience of seeing photographs in a sequence on a wall. In both cases, I produce a new, different experience of my experience for the viewer.

I like to think that a book becomes a poem whereas the exhibit remains a singular experience in space and time.

What is your feeling about “reading” images? About how language and image work together? Have you ever presented your poems printed and hung on a wall in a gallery?

DR · Well, I have very strong feelings about reading images. The very first book I ever wrote was a collaborative textbook with Jonathan Silverman called *The World is a Text*. In it, we have several chapters—including one on visual culture—in which we argue that the world is a constructed text designed to be read and decoded. All visual art, even abstract art, is comprised of language—marks, shapes, slashes, lines—that our brains try to make sense of. So, I’m interested in reading art much the same way I’m interested in looking at poems.

I have never had an “exhibit” of my poems in a gallery, but I have enjoyed a few experiences where my poems and prose have been hung on a gallery or museum wall or been in a display case as part of an exhibition. It is thrilling. I do think reading a poem on a wall in a gallery or museum is a different experience than reading that same poem in your house in a book. First of all, there is something about the public-ness of the gallery that alters the engagement with the text. Second, being hung in a gallery tends to foreground the aesthetics of a poem, rather than its “message” or “plot.” It feels more like an object to be appreciated rather than a story to be “understood.”

I’m very intrigued by your observation about scale. I totally agree. You have a lot more room to work with on a wall than on a page.

Last week, the novelist and filmmaker Laleh Khadivi and I went to the Legion of Honor Museum here in San Francisco to see a couple of exhibits. As we stood in front of a particularly large and impressive painting, I confessed a bit of envy. I was jealous of the immediacy of the emotional effect of the painting. It hit me in milliseconds. Whereas, even a short poem takes seconds to read. Some take minutes. A novel requires days. Her response was interesting. She said she agreed, but she was convinced we remember and think about poems and books longer than visual art. They stay with us.

I wonder if the ability for someone to keep your book on their nightstand, to go back to it now and again, makes whatever is in the book more present. Do you feel more attached to work of yours that has appeared in books? Or in a gallery? Or, do you think they are two sides of the same coin in terms of longevity?

EMZ · I do not think it is a question of longevity.

It is more a question of an experience.

The book experience complements the gallery experience for me as an artist.

An extension of an idea. Where does an idea begin, where does it end?

Galleries seem more interested in exhibiting photographic work if there is a book available

I am told.

Perhaps the book becomes a tool for the gallery for selling Art.

I am sorry but the image on page 55 is no longer available!

I ask myself is a catalogue of an exhibition a book?

What is the difference between a catalogue and a book in your opinion?

What is your definition of a BOOK? Why do we desire to make BOOKS?

DR · Whoa. These are heavy questions. I love it.

I do think of an exhibition catalogue as a book. But I don't think I have ever considered my own definition of a book.

I realize in thinking about your questions that my ideas of a book are old school. Analogue. I am thinking pages, spines, covers, print.

But, with Kindles and phones and iPads and Audible, I realize my notion of a book should expand. There are "books" that have only been released as an audio file. That is weird. Glorious. But weird.

My mother-in-law is an avid reader, but she has ditched printed books in favor of her Kindle.

I guess I am thinking of two kinds of books or at least two different notions of books. One as an object; one as content. There are novels that only exist in digital form. There are podcasts that only exist in audio form, but if they were to be transcribed and printed, they would be a book.

I am increasingly interested in the book as an object. Something that is an artifact. The Donohue Rare Book Room at the University of San Francisco, where I teach, collects Artist's Books—books that are less about the words in them and more about their design. They are more like sculptures than, say, mass market paperbacks. I love books as objects, artifacts, art. That is what I want to live with and around.

Which leads me to larger questions of libraries, museums, and galleries. Why do you think a library feels different than a museum? Isn't a library a museum of books? Would you rather spend a week living in a library or a museum?

EMZ · I like your statement, "a library is a museum of books".

Depends which library. Not all libraries are alike.

Some libraries keep most of their books in the stacks so we see few shelves filled with books.

Then there are the older, more historic libraries which do fit your description.

I like Rare Book Libraries.

These libraries preserve and cherish old books.

Books printed on parchment and bound in leather with embossed gold leaf titles.

Rare Book Libraries also collect artist's books.

Small edition books made by artists.

Artist's books are a genre unto themselves.

Rare Book Libraries give us a sense of the history of the book and therefore do feel like museums.

I started to think about finding a definition for BOOK and a definition for MUSEUM.

Words and images. Libraries store words whereas Museums are places that store images/where we go to have more of a visual experience.

DEFINITIONS

DEFINITION OF BOOK: a set of written, printed, or blank sheets bound together between a front and back cover. Oxford Dictionary says a written work published in printed or electronic form.

DEFINITION OF MUSEUM: a building in which objects of historical, scientific artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited. Oxford Dictionary says a building used for the storing and exhibition of objects including antiquities, natural history, and works of art.

I like this definition.

A MUSEUM is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

— ICOM definition, International Council of Museums, adopted in 2022.

Libraries and Museums are both places of reference and knowledge, which overlap in spirit.

They feed our imaginations and our desire for inspiration. They are containers for human creativity.

Libraries are places where people go to borrow and/or read books.

Many libraries are set up so that people can go and actually work instead of working from home. Many libraries have “reading rooms” available to the public.

The same books always remain on the shelves to be consulted or can be found in the stacks or borrowed from another library.

I always loved the idea of the inter-library loan.

The idea of sharing books.

Museums are places where people go to see exhibits which change every few months.

Libraries are quiet places of reflection.

The digital world has now entered libraries with computer screens and access to electronic files.

Museums feel more effervescent with the comings and goings of visitors.

Places for social interaction.

I would say the mood is different from one to another.

Often Museums have their own reference libraries.

You asked me, but I would not want to live in either a library or in a museum.

I am glad both exist. Two institutions that continue to nourish the spirit today.

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DR · I've been thinking about books and authority. I think it was Derrida who argued that the written word always carries more power than the spoken word. I think about the *Bible*, the *Quran*, the *Talmud*, the *Declaration of Independence*, *The Emancipation Proclamation*. The objectness, the writtenness, of physical documents. What does more semiotic work: a wall of books or a wall of art?

There is something authoritative about a book. Something powerful. An image might carry more emotional weight, but a book contains gravitas. It's heavy.

Thus, a book of images is a miracle in that it does all levels of work.

How do you feel when you hold, in your hands, a book of your images?



EWA MONIKA ZEBROWSKI
a selection of limited
edition artist's books

EMZ · I always feel a book of images, my images, is a miracle.

I am always amazed to see my images on a page, in a sequence, telling a story.

I often wonder what has motivated me and where the inspiration has come from.

I shoot so many images and always find editing such a challenge.

This image or that? Where on the page? What size?

Will there be text?

And somehow more often than not I feel text adds another dimension to the reading of the images.

Another voice which is so important.

A book is like a finished statement. Final. No more changes.

And in the end, it is the intimacy of a book that I find so appealing.

Feels almost like a letter to the reader to enjoy, to interpret, to live with.

Ewa Monika Zebrowski is a Montreal-based photographer and a poet. Her photographs and artist's books touch on themes of displacement and memory, place and time, traces. She creates visual narratives often inspired by art and literature, sometimes collaborating with writers and poets. She worked in the film industry for seventeen years before obtaining a BFA in Fine Arts and an MA in Visual Arts, having previously completed a degree in English Literature. Zebrowski has had thirty-six solo exhibitions and produced twenty-four? artist's books. Her work can be found in many

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museum and institutional collections in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Denmark and Australia. Since 2012 her work has been inspired by the celebrated artist Cy Twombly.

Dean Rader has authored or co-authored twelve books, including *Works & Days*, winner of the 2010 T. S. Eliot Prize, *Landscape Portrait Figure Form*, a Barnes & Noble Review Best Book, and *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry*, a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award and the Northern California Book Award. *Before the Borderless: Dialogues with the Art of Cy Twombly*, was published in April of 2023 from Copper Canyon. His writing has been supported by fellowships from Princeton University, Harvard University, Headlands Center for the Arts, Art Omi, and the MacDowell Foundation. Rader is a professor at the University of San Francisco and a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry.