

Artists' Books

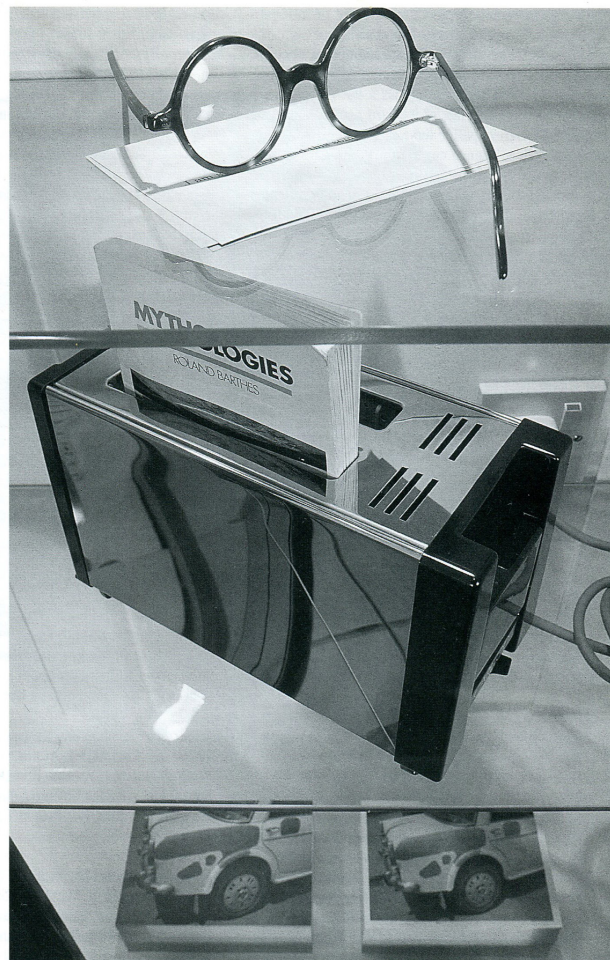
Something Else

Cathy Courtney

'Partworks' is the overall title for a continuing collaboration between Julia Farrer and Ian Tyson, initiated by a Research and Development Grant from Wimbledon School of Art. While the two artists have known one another's output for many years and some of Farrer's work has been published by Tyson's Tetrad Press, their practice for 'Partworks' was a leap into sensitive territory, an experiment that involved the intrusion of altering and adding to each other's meticulous contributions to a series of shared works in progress. Despite a base level of common values, each has a recognisable visual vocabulary honed by conviction and developed over a considerable period, so there must have been many points of shock and frustration as well as of enrichment.

Rather as *Water on the Border*, the most recent publication by Helen Douglas and Telfer Stokes (see *AM*193) is visibly the harvest of their many years of making and thinking about the qualities of the book structure as much as it is the expression of their research in China and Scotland specifically for this piece, so 'Partworks' is also resonant with the steady meditations on the form that Tyson and Farrer have each contributed during the past 20 years. This may be a rare marking moment in the history of contemporary book art, a time that sees the maturity and expertise of Britain's long-term practitioners expressed with astonishing freshness and assurance. It is no surprise that it coincides with a burgeoning of activity among those new to the field. Among the muddle of publications streaming out, there are signals of strength from enough relative beginners to suggest that the next 20 years could be a fascinating, if indirect, conversation.

There are other voices in 'Partworks' besides the two named artists – the Suprematists as much as Donald Judd (for whom some of the work is a memorial, paired with another dedicatee, Witold Lutoslawski) – but there is no sense of being locked in the



past, rather that the language of art history is busy speaking again and has something contemporary to say. Allied to this is the intellectual understanding of musical structures that both Tyson and Farrer share and which surfaces in the exchanges between left and right hand pages, in the dialogue between the pulse of strong rhythmic blocks of darkness suspended in air and the fluting

Top: **Les Coleman**

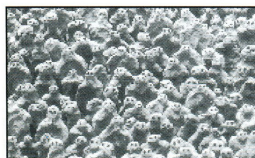
I am sure I have read this somewhere before. 1995

Centre: **Cornford & Cross**

Operation Margarine 1995

Bottom: **David Blamey** *Learning Curve* 1995

lightness of delicate pencil lines. A quality is summed up in the last line of a Mallarmé poem from which *Sainte (Partwork*



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VII) takes its title: 'Musicienne de silence'. As Tyson has said in the past, 'I'm very interested in the punctuations of silence, which is to do with very small relationships in space'. (AM122)

The stage for this notation of words and images is a shifting one, delighting in the controlled use of differing densities and layerings of paper, the relative frailties and strengths underscoring the polarities within the drawings. The play of light and shadow has an active role, manipulated especially by the use of semi-transparent layers. The apparent breaking-up of the spreads by line and implication, curtailment and extension, is a central subject, emphasised sometimes by the actual shaping of the pages. A set of books consisting only of cut paper constructions focuses on this theme, creating an entirely different reading experience, more robust in the reader's hand. These are oddly serious in mood despite their potential for play, which may stem from the art historical associations of their primary colours as much as from the paper texture.

Artists' books are notoriously difficult to exhibit, but these sang all the louder for being seen at the Eagle Gallery in the context of the wall-mounted drawings and prints which are equally components of 'Partworks' and which extend the investigation using the same controlled colour range and vocabulary. My viewing of the two prints dedicated to Judd and Lutoslawski was utterly changed when I looked again after spending time with the pair of related books and realised that the prints were, in effect, the pages in motion. As well as its recent showing at the Eagle, 'Partworks' has been seen in Tübingen, Germany. It deserves to tour elsewhere in this country and abroad.

David Blamey, the curator of 'something else' at the University of Derby, confronted the problem of showing artists' books by intentionally compounding the difficulties. He has chosen a locked glass-fronted display cabinet built into a wall in the University's reception/administration room as the site for a year long procession of exhibitions related to publishing but not necessarily involving books. With 'something else', he wanted to point up the idea of the books being out of reach and circulation and 'to capitalise on the dumbness of the unreadable publication object'. Artists were invited to display an object and a piece of publishing, (not necessarily their own).

The proposition produced an unexpected

edly punchy combination of arrangements, all of which spoke with a much louder voice than might have been expected. The office context didn't produce a sense of disjunction and the staff working in the room seemed far happier with the intruding objects than many a security guard in an art gallery. The strength of the exhibits could well withstand people coming and going through the room for purposes other than to see the display and most people seemed to do both without a problem; in a strange way it made it easier for the art to operate than being seen in a silent white room.

Perhaps the sense of integration stemmed partly from the fact that many of the objects were related (though in a Surrealist sense) to domestic objects found 'exhibited' in people's homes. The most striking on entering the room was a gleaming toaster (contributed by Cornford & Cross) from out of which was popping a copy of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. Similarly, a section from John Baldessari's version of *Tristram Shandy* cloaked a beautiful, small, time-worn 18th-century brass clock within the folds of its leprello. The alarm clock was found by Blamey at Baldessari's instruction and it was presumably serendipity that its face mirrored the blanked-out spaces in the faces of the characters in his book. Daniel Jubb engaged directly with the location and amalgamated both parts of Blamey's brief by 'publishing' a kitsch collector's plate, a parody of the kind bought in their hundreds via mail-order advertisements in the Sunday colour supplements. *Coupe Plate* comes complete with an especially nasty gold rim and has at its centre a sepia image, the domestic style of the whole contributing blissfully to the impact of the picture which shows a book being rinsed under a tap; were the fairy cakes poisoned, too?

Two exhibits were particularly creepy. Peter Josef Abels combined a framed close-up picture of Christ crucified (with blinking eyes in the manner of the 'moving screens' that used to be given away free in cereal packets) with a student's black file containing texts and images, some of which were disturbing and others of which were very funny. Slightly more sinister because less was said, was the piece credited to Bob & Roberta Smith which made use of ready-made published material and set a 12-year old's birthday card (the sort out-of-touch relatives send with a wholesome sailing

scene and a rhyme utterly divorced from any known form of daily life) beside a crude model of an electric motor made according to the instructions in *Look and Learn*, the children's magazine so beloved of educationally minded parents. The more one looked, the more dangerous the machinery appeared and the more one wondered about the hidden life of the imaginary 12-year old.

Blamey's printed piece, showing the drastic changes effected by altering the margins on a postcard of one of his own images, and Richard Wentworth's book of photographs and handwritten documentation of the changes in the Berlin cityscape in 1993 were the closest to the objects we have come to associate with artists' publications. Alan Murray angrily widened the debate by including work related to his dispute with a company which markets industrial safety harnesses for whom he was commissioned to design an instruction manual. Alongside disgust with the company, Murray calls for artists to engage in the real world. A video version of the safety harness instructions played on a pocket television within the cabinet, adding sound and a rhythmic movement to the already vocal display.

Also reaching out, but in an utterly different way, was Richard Long's contribution: a tiny circle of fossils set beside a black and white card documenting a larger, different work made in the landscape. Despite being seen in the cabinet with all the others, this piece lived in a space of its own, its poetry reinforced by its position within Long's wider practice. Les Coleman's contribution was a characteristic pair of spectacles whose two limbs strode away in opposite directions and which rested on printed cards, the uppermost of which read 'I am sure I have read this somewhere before'. For those who know they haven't, 'something else' will be housed in the resident glass cabinet at the Camden Arts Centre between March 22 and May 5. ■

A one day conference 'book to basics' will be held on March 21 at The Dean Clough Galleries, Halifax. (Tel Karen Babayan 01422 344555 for details). Speakers include Stephen Bury and Chris Taylor. 'Change the Context: Change the Text' runs at the Dean Clough Galleries March 9 to April 28.

DRAWN

DOUGLAS ALLSOP

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ATLAS STUDIO
SPACE

10 atlas mews ramsgate street
london e8 2ne
telephone: 0171 241 4567
or/and fax: 0171 352 2635