A Statement on The Integration of Faith and of Discipline

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Recommended Citation
Forsythe, Christine, "A Statement on The Integration of Faith and of Discipline" (2000). Faculty Scholarship Papers. 23.
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A Statement on The Integration of Faith and of Discipline

The Artists' Book as Form:
Reflection on Making at the End of the 20th Century

by
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August 1999
To all who are passionately dedicated to the search for new “epiphanies” of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts.

_Pope John Paul II taken from his letter to Artists_

_April 1999_
Introduction

From the time that I was perhaps four or five I fell in love with fiber and taught myself to sew. I started by making first doll cloths and then my own clothing and what every else with which I could challenge myself. When I went to college and became an art major I fell in love with weaving. In graduate school, papermaking soon became a passion.

About ten years ago book making became the vehicle of choice. It wasn’t that one process or love replaced the other but more that one grew out of the other—all of them though related to my love of fiber. It is as if I have spent this time searching for the perfect form to use to convey my ideas and interests and to channel my need to create.

This pursuit has not been an entirely conscious one, whereas the making of art was totally dedicated to decisions about form and craft. The search for form certainly has been an integral component in the direction my work has taken these past years. Questions regarding what is most useful, most appropriate, and what I resonate with, are what drive the direction of the form and style in my art making. Perhaps most profoundly though, are questions concerning my own Christian faith and how this belief system interjects with making art that have lead me to reconsider the form that I was using from my work.

What is very conscious and yet instinctively driven on the other hand, is a need to make. Ultimately these two components of making (craft), and form (the arts' book), have shaped the outcome of my work. They are intrinsically linked to the integrity of making that I believe Christian artists are called.
In this paper I would like to reflect on the practice of Christian art making, and the form I have chosen most recently – which is the artists’ book. The reason for this defense of the artists’ books is that this form seems to be the exception rather than the rule in mainstream Christian art these days. Painting is the form or process of choice by the great percentage of Christian artists. I reference Christian Art specifically because this is the audience with whom I mostly closely affiliated. However I believe that though the form of the artists’ book is obviously different, the ethic and calling to make the work is quite Christian. First, I will reexamine the theme of my previous paper; *The Christian Ethic of Making*, which I believe to be fundamental in directing my own practice of making. I will then give a general historical context and definition to the artist book. Lastly, I will reflect on these choices as appropriate for a mature Christian to embrace as a means to communicate faith and ideas.

**Section I  Making: A Christian Ethic**

**Theological Origins**

The first chapter of Genesis tells us that humans, male and female, are created in the image of God. Because God is creator, we too are images of this creator, and it is in us to create or to make. John Walford, an art historian, states, "This [Gen 1:26-27] implies not only that man’s nature reflects God’s holiness, rationality and capacity for love. But also that he partakes of
God's powers of creativity and sense for beauty".¹ God made us whole, and part of this wholeness is this need to create just as God creates. Pope John Paul II in his recent *Letter to Artists* confirms the use of the story of creation as told in the first chapter of Genesis as “rooted in the very essence of both religious experience and artistic creativity”.²

**Art and The Layperson**

For most people today the image of ourselves as makers seems oddly foreign. We feel uncomfortable at the thought of having to create anything. Engaging a person in a conversation about art usually falls into one of two categories. The first goes something like this; “I don’t know anything about art, so please don’t ask me my opinion”. The second, “I don’t know anything about art but I know what I like.” This conversation usually continues in the direction of anything “modern” is – bad; modern being the catch-all term used to described anything that is not realistic or readily understandable. For most, it is an awkward or uncomfortable conversation to verbalize ideas concerning art. More disconcerting for the layperson is actually making something that may not have an obvious function or utility—the act of making or creating art is mysterious. We are not all called to be artists, just as we are not all called to be doctors and mathematicians. We do however, have a responsibility as Christians to the arts regardless of our calling.

**The Post Industrial World of Consumers**

¹ Walford p.7.

² John Paul II, p1.
The post-industrial Western world has rejected the notion of 'making'—that is to say making with our hands—and yet, our creativity is part of our wholeness in God. Industrialization has made it unnecessary to make the items that were once required of households to sustain an existence. We are consumers. In that pre-industrial society the skills "to make" were truly a necessity in order to survive, however, time and time again examples of everyday life fill our museums, proving the point that our ancestors did not just make; they adorned and created. They went beyond what was essential: they were imitating God through making. God did not just create this world in order to sustain our existence, God gave it unity and variety of kind beyond our imagination. The world God created abounds with incredible complex beauty.

Our ancestors were all makers of some sort, whether by necessity or by choice. It was culturally ingrained as part of life. By contrast, contemporary society has largely removed the outward need to make: we have become consumers of mass produced goods. This statement is not a critique of industrialization; at its essence technological advances are a very good thing. Movements in the visual arts such as the "Arts and Crafts" movement of 19th century England and The Bauhaus of pre-WWII Germany exemplify how easily art and industry marry. Both movements were dedicated to creating communities which integrated artist, designer, craft person and technology. Today there continues to be extraordinary examples of creative energy at work in all aspects of our culture. My
concern here lies with the multitude, those whose occupations are not fulfilling the need to engage in the arts by making or other activities. How does this lack of interest in art manifest itself within the body of Christ? More importantly, what does it mean "to create" to a society of people who believe that they are not creative?

The Artist as Maker

Why is art and making art so forgiven and mysterious to the laity? Perhaps the best place to start is to clarify the definition of a few terms. Pope John Paul II distinguishes between creator and craftsmen,

The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing - ex nihilo sui et subjecti, as the Latin puts it - and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the almighty alone. The craftsmen, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning.  

Harold Best defines creativity as "the ability both to imagine (think up) something and to execute it". He goes on to define craft as the execution of something: it is the skill without the imagination. I would like to substitute the word "make" for craft, as the baggage of the word sometimes denotes something that is inferior to art where as maker is a more neutral term. A maker then gains/learns a skill in order either to copy or

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1I define the multitudes as the lay person, those who are not artists, craftspersons or designers by trade. These people are still called to be makers and doers. I do not limit the use of these terms to apply only to the traditional arts.

4John Paul II p1.

5Heie, Wolf p.249.
execute an idea. For the most part, we can argue that none of us: painters, designers, potters and so on, make anything totally out of nothing, therefore we are all craftspeople or makers using these definitions.

The Christian Responsibility to the Arts

Leland Ryken poignantly states:

What I have said about the creative artist applies equally to those who are not themselves artists but instead constitute the audience of art. They are the ones who enter into the creativity of others. To do so is to acknowledge the worth of human creativity and to honor God who gave the gift of creativity to the human race. To delight in the work of the human imagination is to value the image of God in people, just as producing creative work is. The Christian doctrine of creation does not allow for a disparagement of artistic creativity.  

The Vocation of the artist is indeed a calling. It is “an obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbor and of humanity as a whole.” Both Ryken and John Paul II, among others, speak to the responsibilities that the artist has to the Church and to humanity at large. Artists have a responsibility for their own moral values and how these values are given aesthetic form. But that is not to say that they should be limited to creating popular images for the masses that bow to the lowest common denominator of aesthetics. They should not be reduced to making thin weak art that does not challenge us or even at times make us uncomfortable. Pope John

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6 Ryken p.68 69.
7 John Paul II p3.
Paul writes clearly, "Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption." The visual arts like theater, film, and the other arts demand an attention span on the part of both the artist/maker and the viewer. The viewer must be open to becoming more visually literate, and the artist/maker must help educate the viewer beyond visual pabulum. In an essay on film and other media entitled, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear, and Minds to Understand*, Jasmin Sung and Richard Peace discuss the need for literacy in media which can be applied directly to the visual arts.

We had to learn how to read between the lines and to interpret a text carefully. In the same way, we need to develop critical thinking skills to become media literate.

Becoming media literate involves learning to go beyond our first impressions or reactions. It involves asking questions and talking to others about what we see. We must learn to take a movie [or visual art work] apart and to examine its elements—identifying, appreciating, and responding to its components.⁹

Being visually literate, as both artist and viewer, opens our minds and hearts up to new and non-traditional ways of making and viewing art. It gives us the opportunity to think between the lines that were once not apparent. The traditional Biblical narrative may be an appropriate and reasonable vehicle for many of the Church’s needs today, but it is not the only way to wrestle with Christian concerns using a visual language. The same can be said for the format that artwork may take: drawing, painting, sculpture and so on,

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⁸John Paul II p 8.

⁹William Spencer ed. p 143.
allocating art making to conventional forms may also stifle creative new ways or structures of communication. In the next section of this paper I would like to give insight into the book as form and to relate how I have used this structure as a mode of expression for my own ideas about faith and art.

Section II: The Artists’ Book as Form

Origins and Insights

Dard Hunter, the great archivist of the development of papermaking, divided the history of human growth into three main categories: Speaking, Drawing, and Printing. He wrote this in 1943. If he were alive today, I think he would agree that the development of fiber optics and the information superhighway would be a significant advancement in our ability to communicate and thus a fourth category. Reflecting on these categories, I believe it is our human need to communicate that has spurred the development of the book in its many manifestations. The format of the book has been prompted primarily by this drive to communicate. It has also been shaped by other things such as available materials and technologies and specific cultural demands. All of these have played a part in the history and making of books and in particular artist books.

The Shape of the Book

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\(^{10}\)Dard Hunter p. 1.
Integral with the advancement of materials to use as a writing surface, was the format or shape these pieces or 'books' took. As writing materials became easier to use, the book became more portable and so we advance with the use of materials from stone to papyrus (2,500 B.C.) to parchment (500 B.C.); and with a change in form from tablets, to scrolls (2,500 B.C.) which then developed into concertinas or fold books and eventually to bound books or 'the codex.'

This process took many thousands of years — the books, the way we commonly understand them today — first developed in the Christian era around 100 A.D.11 Scrolls were flattened out in accordion like pleats and hinged together with leather thongs. Eventually boards were added to each end to protect the pages. These consequently became the cover which evolved from simple wooden boards to elaborately jeweled leather-covered boards. The evolution of the book into a portable organized form of the codex made it more accessible for books be duplicated and distributed and hence easier to read. This led naturally to the increased use of the book which brought about the literate era in the West.

The Book and The Church

The Church, along with God in a sense—for these books were inspired by belief in God, became the great patrons of the book arts, not unlike the Church’s role in the development and promotion of the other arts of the Middle Ages. Other patrons were the aristocratic class and the state. However, the Church, for the most part, was the chef

producer, author, editor, and caretaker of the book. It provided the inspiration for the content, the artisans to create the books and a library to house and perpetuate them. Typical topics of religious books were: The Gospels, Church Missals, and Prayer books. One might suggest, particularly after viewing such books, that these were that the first artists’ books; for it was artists who truly had their hand in every part of making these books. The care in creating these books is a tribute to the importance that the Word of God held for these people.

The Printed Book

The invention of the printing press in the mid 1400’s ultimately would challenge the look of the page if not the book. At first books were printed so that there was room for the book’s owner to commission artisans to illuminate each book individually. An example of this is the Gutenberg Bible, the first printed book. Each of the forty some books known to be in existence today are all somewhat different in their illumination.12

This practice was a natural outgrowth of the kind of illumination that typified the hand calligraphed books created before the invention of the printing press.

The printing press, serviced by the important new industry of papermaking, was responsible for putting the book into the hands of the masses. For those who could not read the book was as much of a source of information and inspiration as it was for those who could read. The illustrations served the illiterate just as the stained glass of the

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Gothic Cathedrals educating those who could not read. Illustration became a prominent and important feature in books. The most important artists of the time were sought after and commissioned to create images for the book. During the time of industrialization the artist became more distant from book production and collaboration with publishers. They had been replaced by a new industry who fostered careers such as that of illustrator, author, printer, and binder to work independently co-ordinated only by a publisher. The quality of the final product had diminished. The control of the printing of images and the look of the text and type had been taken from the artist, thus the illustrator started to gain importance.

With the development of lithography and the resulting higher quality of printing, the ability to print color easily and the facility to print photographs in books, artists once again became more interested and perhaps even liberated in working with the book. In the late 19th C., it was the style of a particular artist and their fame that helped prompt a publisher to publish artists’ books. At first artists’ images accompanied text by famous authors but eventually artists soon used their own text and integrated text image and book format to convey their own message.

The Artist Book and the 20th Century

Two British artists, William Blake, an 18th century artist and William Morris in the 19th century, both pioneered artistic and technical strides using the book as an artist medium. It is however, Ambroise Vollard, a Parisian art dealer at the turn of the century, who is
generally credited as the father of the modern artists' book. It was through his insight and patronage as a publisher who saw the value of giving well know, along with little known artists of the time, the opportunity to work with the book as medium. He united the artist and the author again in collaboration and he gave painters and sculptors access to printing processes that they would never have encountered without his help. Artists such as Bonnard, Picasso, Degas, Matisse and Rouault stand out among many others who worked with Vollard. This marriage of the artist and the book not only gave opportunity to the artist for a new form of expression, but created a less expensive vehicle for the public to own work by these artists.

The Contemporary Artists’ Book

The history of 20th century art also chronicles the history of the artists’ book. Johanna Drucker, a noted artists’ book historian and maker, states that the artists’ book is the quintessential art form of the 20th century. She goes on to state that “Artists’ books appear in every major movement in art and literature and have provided a unique means of realizing works within all of the many avant-garde, experimental, and independent groups whose contributions have defined the shape of the 20th-century artistic activity”13 She proposes that the popularity of the book is in large part due not to aesthetic reasons or even the material of the book, but to the flexibility of its form. Riva Castleman, curator of the exhibit and author of A Century of Artist Books, corroborate Drucker’s stance by stating: “The book has emerged as a central formal element in art. It is no

13Johanna Drucker p 1.
longer solely a text printed on pages that have been decorated by an artist ..., but an object totally created by an artist which may not have text, paper pages, covers, or any other properties usually associated with books."\(^{14}\)

Castleman describes artists' books to be "books known primarily for artists' contributions"\(^{15}\) Drucker on the other hand is more precise in her definition. "... an artists' book is a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of preexisting work. And also, that it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues."\(^{16}\) She would insist that the artist has control over all of the parts: content, materials, form, and production. Drucker leaves little room for collaboration using historical texts and she is very critical of the role of the publisher. She would insist that most historical books, though artistically made, are not artist books because they are made to be in service to the text and that they do not challenge the rules and conventions of the book.\(^{17}\)

Today, artists and students are indebted to the past and people like Douglas Morse Howell, a professor, who in 1963 introduced the crafts of papermaking and bookmaking to Cranbrook Academy in Michigan. This was the first academic experience with these

\(^{14}\)Riva Castleman p.13.

\(^{15}\)Riva Castleman p. 24.

\(^{16}\)Johanna Drucker p 2.

\(^{17}\)Johanna Drucker chap. 1.
crafts. His students helped to propagate the production of Artists' Books in the university and the art scene. By 1988 more than 70 college and university art departments were offering courses in papermaking and bookmaking.\textsuperscript{18} Today's artists can explore a myriad of possibilities combining image making, text, and book structure.

\textbf{The Artists' Book as the Perfect Metaphor}

The artists' book, from my vantage point, is directly connected to the historical form and content of the past book production particularly those executed before the printing press. I believe that many of these early books are indeed artists' books in that one artist or a group of artists had control over the execution of the book. As Christians we acknowledge the inherent value or importance of 'the Word' to our faith. What I find interesting, as I have previously mentioned, is that connection of the development and growth of popularity of the codex with the growth of the Church. The history of the two is uniquely intertwined.

My interest and use of this format, the artists' book, is wrapped up in both ends of its history. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all religions of the book. The historic connection of the form of the book to the Word and the absolute weightiness with which our faith regards it is ever present in my work. The book form itself, without any innovation, takes on a power that is mirrored from the Bible. In our culture merely capitalizing 'The Book' denotes the Bible. It is an out growth of the ideas of The Book

\textsuperscript{18}Sandra Kroupa p.53.
and The Word, that make it the perfect metaphor for my use.

One of my favorite references to the power of this book is captured in Steven Spielberg’s 1997 movie *Amistad*. The movie is set in the late 1830’s. At one point in the movie the men and women that have been captured from a slave trade boat have been imprisoned in the U.S. The leader of this group has been given a copy of the Bible. After spending some time paging through the book, unable to read it, he is able to glean from the illustrations the power of the man Jesus. Thought this may be a fictional account, the very fact that this scene was crafted as part of this story gives credence to the amazing power this book.

**Reflections on The Form Today:**

The book is interesting to me on many layers and in turn, it is the layering of ideas, structure and material that I respond to the most. At the other end of the historical spectrum I am, as Drucker explains, very interested in capitalizing on the versatility of the form of the book. The book is an intimate art form that needs to be held and opened and paged through. This action of examining a book seems somewhat ceremonial. Different people approach books in different manners yet they tend to impart a sense of caring about the object that is unique. Books make the viewer a physical partaker rather than a passive onlooker. The viewer can choose the pace of going through the book; they can react to the present, turn to the future, or go back to the past. The dynamics of time: past, present and future, is all there and all at once. It is a physical and
metaphorical layering. There is a wonderful video that I show in my ceramic class about two potters exchanging ideas and techniques, one from the East and one from the West. The Western potter explaining Eastern ceramics said that it requires the act of participation to give it meaning\textsuperscript{19}. I believe that this is also true of Artists' Books.

I enjoy the shape (or shall I say the endless possibilities of shape) and size a book can take on. I like the fact that something small can house so much... The contents can be simple or complex. The fact that something that is relatively two-dimensional can grow and change to be three dimensional and back to relative flatness is also very mysterious; it is as if the book grows and swells with the questioning and understanding that the viewer may be going through and then they both seem to settles down at the end of the journey.

Books structures which seem to push the envelope of the traditional understanding of bookmaking are those that I find most interesting and inviting. They seem to harken back to the earliest explorations of humans trying to determine how best to arrange records of ideas and on what to record those ideas. Book artists not only borrow from the past, they use formats from other cultures combining contemporary and personal ideas and imagery. Artists' books are the perfect medium to reflect the multilayered, non-linear thinking with which a number of book artists today are interested. They combine any number of materials and processes that may or may not direct the viewer in asserting a particular meaning from the book. These book artists seem more interested in

\textsuperscript{19} Alan Dater dir.
tweaking, questioning, and provoking the viewer into a response rather than conveying information or inspiration.

The book begs the viewer to become a partaker of the experience. The experience becomes intimate and ceremonial as a participant is drawn into and engages in opening and physically moving through the book. Their formats challenge our preconceptions and prod us on to remember, revisit, and reconsider our own experiences with books: our childhood books, our favorite book, our sketch book and note books, the Books that we love. Riva Castleman justly sums up the artists’ book when she writes:

...the abundance of recent exhibitions devoted to artists’ books of all kinds, those special endeavors that have occupied the creative work time of so many, is a clear example of how the book form has become a symbol of a turning point in our culture. Just when electronics have called into question the privacy of possession, these multidimensional creations reaffirm the human need to embrace objects worthy of dedicated attention, admiration, and affection.  

A Word on Beauty

As a Christian, and an artist, working in the visual arts my first debt is to the integrity of the work; I ask myself is the work complete and honest, does it read well? I must examine and critique my work and the form that it takes as an appropriate manifestation of my ideas. I have the right to borrow from the incredible storehouse of history that collects our amazing heritage. I also have the obligation to make art that reflects my place in this history; a history that is hurdling at the speed of light into an ethic of art making that is wholly rooted in technology and where beauty—that is how something

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*Riva Castleman p. 78.*
looks—takes a back seat to meaning.

In the preamble to his book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, published in 1962, George Kubler forecasts this movement in the visual arts away from beauty and toward a preoccupation with meaning without concern for the form or beauty. He states simply, "...for while the studies of meaning receive all our attention, another definition of art, as a system of formal relationships, thereby suffers neglect. ... no meaning can be conveyed without form. Every meaning requires a support, or vehicle or a holder."\(^{21}\) The very essence of how we understand beauty is through formal relationships. It is not my intent in this paper to further critique the ideas brought forth regarding beauty and meaning, however I believe that as a maker beauty is a desirable vehicle through which I communicate. Pope John Paul II states the “beauty is the visible form of the good” and that “The artist has a special relationship to beauty...beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of “artistic talent”. “\(^{22}\) As a Christian I cannot deny beauty in the things I create if I am at all to deal with the concepts of honesty and truth. I am searching for these epiphanies of beauty, as John Paul II so elegantly puts it, to give as gifts to God and humanity.

\(^{21}\)George Kubler p. vii.

\(^{22}\)Pope John Paul p. 3.
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