

ART

Artists hit the books in developing a new genre of creativity

I have in front of me a round, flat object, roughly 3 inches in diameter and half an inch thick. It is a small stack of white paper between black paper covers.

A twist of silver wire holds the papers together: a spiral binding like that used on note pads and such. Along the edge of a circle, though, such a binding not only keeps pages from falling out — it also binds the covers shut, making it impossible to open this "book" without destroying it.

A single word, printed in white block letters, adorns the cover: "Boundless."

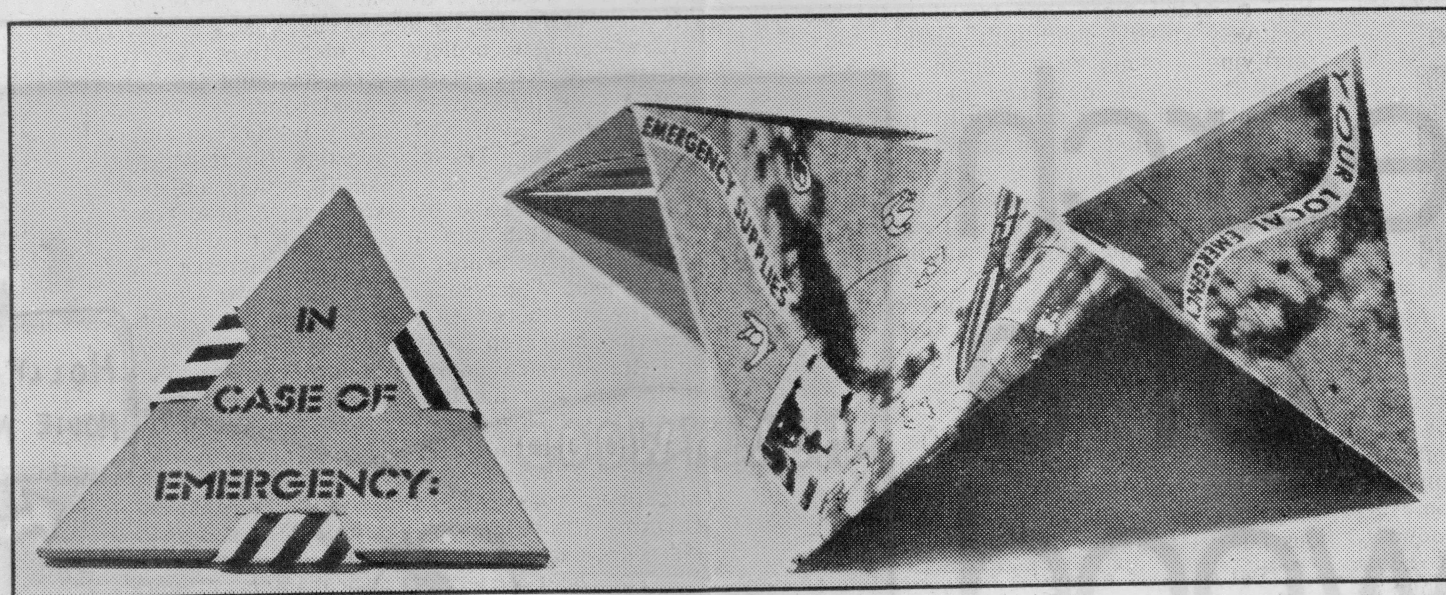
Objects such as this one, a hybrid of book and sculpture by Portland artist David Stairs, are appearing with greater frequency — and commanding greater attention — with each passing year. As artists search for alternatives to the increasingly impenetrable gallery/museum structure and the patently absurd art market, the book has become the exclusive medium of choice for many, and an important sideline for others.

Like Stairs, these artists often reject the traditional book format, as well as normal book publishing and distribution systems. They might challenge printers (and binders) to come up with new techniques, or learn printing themselves as a means of greater control.

One common strain through all this work is the artist's desire to control production — to create a book that, *in itself*, is the final work of art, rather than a mere collection of reproductions.

Important precursors have occurred throughout the 20th century. But the movement has grown so strong over the past 20 years that a name for this work — "artists' books" — has developed. At the same time, a fledgling network of support and a basic critical literature have developed.

Judith Hoffberg is an internationally known critic and historian of artists' books, and an indefatigable promoter of the genre in Southern California.



BOB RINGQUIST/The Press-Enterprise

Scott McCarney's "In Case of Emergency," distributed by Printed Matter Inc., is a triangular artist's book. It opens into a series of eccentrically shaped pages of text and images that deal with nuclear war.

On Art

Charles Desmarais



An independent curator, she organized five book exhibitions in 1987 — most recently at the Irvine Arts Center, 4601 Walnut Ave., Irvine. "Books Without Bounds" runs through Thursday and features, among other works, a room-size book by Diana Wilson.

Hoffberg's personal collection of about 2,200 artists' books was recently purchased by the Art Library at UCLA, where the books are now available for public viewing and research.

Hoffberg says there is no definition of the word book. "It's constantly being redefined by artists — that's what keeps me interested."

She will talk about what she calls "bookness," though. She feels that books should represent "a sequence of ideas, gathered together so the sequence remains the same. And a book must be participated in by an audience. A book is an organic, living, breathing thing; someone must read a book with their eyes or it is dead."

Hoffberg was the driving force behind the 1979 inception of Artworks, the only important source here of artists' books. Though she's no longer involved, her co-founders continue to run a comfortable little store at 170 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles.

At Artworks, visitors are encouraged to handle the wares, and a chair and table are provided for diehards. Says Lael Mann, now co-owner of the shop with Barbara Pascal, a scholar in the field, "Books must be hand-held; a book is an intimate, one-to-one experience."

The shop handles hundreds of titles by artists and small literary presses. Prices range from a few dollars —

"Boundless" cost me \$3.50 — to a few hundred for the more elaborate, limited-edition works.

Adrienne Wong's "Finding Chinatown," for instance, is a handmade replica of a Chinese food container, which opens and unfolds to a 10-page accordion book. Short poems on the Chinatowns of the world give a touching personal account of one person's search for authenticity. Each page is "illustrated" with color impressions apparently made from inked rice. Limited to only seven copies for sale, it is priced at \$125.

"Vote Nihilism" by Elisha Shapiro (\$7.95) is the 1988 edition of his annual calendar ("a tradition since 1980"). In good nihilist form, the calendar seems to cite more deaths than births, and chronicles such dates as Jan. 13, 1986 ("Kate Smith Loses Leg"), and May 12, 1911 ("Ronald Reagan Conceived").

This year, the calendar is also a bid for support for Shapiro's presidential campaign. Promising to be "A Dangerous Leader for Dangerous Times," he "supports 'Play Jazz Rock

Fusion, Go to Jail' legislation" and would move the national capital to Los Angeles.

Artworks also frequently displays one-of-a-kind works, such as Pam Moore's "Each Elastic Echo": a corroded metal box, stuffed with a book of metal, stone and paper pages, all bound with a metal chain.

Betye Saar, a prominent California painter, shows a handsome notebook of collage and painting titled, simply, "2." At \$200, the book could be had for a fraction of the cost of one of her paintings.

Getting information on a limited-production commodity with no organized distribution system isn't easy. One way to keep up is by mail.

Hoffberg publishes an irregular newsletter called *Umbrella* containing news, reviews "and sometimes a little gossip" at \$15 per year. It can be obtained by writing P.O. Box 40100, Pasadena, Calif. 91104.

Printed Matter Inc., a non-profit co-op and the best artists' bookstore in the country, produces an excellent free catalog surveying its 3,000-title inventory. They're at 7 Lispenard St., New York, N.Y. 10013.

One of the oldest and best publishers of artists' books is the Visual Studies Workshop Press (31 Prince St., Rochester, N.Y. 14607). VSW's free catalog also lists two seminal source works published there.

"Structure of the Visual Book" is part "how-to," part philosophy — a kind of Zen in the art of book making — by a master of the book form, Keith Smith. At last count, Smith had produced 112 of his own books, each dramatically different from the last. "Structure" is a demonstration of the incredible fertility of his mind and a guide to creative play. At \$15, I would recommend it to anyone who occasionally finds him- or herself in a creative rut.

Joan Lyons, director of the VSW Press, is the editor of "Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook" (\$19.95). As a history and bibliography of the field, it is unparalleled.