Designing the Artists' Book: How Graphic Design Impacts the Photographic Portfolio

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Introduction

In graphic design, a large portion of the work produced consists of physical pieces. These pieces are often interactive and tactile. It is very important to be able to master the creation of physical pieces in the field of graphic design, as it showcases other skills including editing, pacing, and craftsmanship. Physical portfolios are a way to demonstrate the skills to potential employers and can often be more impactful than a digital portfolio. For my thesis, I explore how the artists’ book format and graphic design can be used to enhance and add meaning to a photographic portfolio by creating an artists’ book using my own photographic portfolio.

The Digital Disconnect

In today’s time, photography portfolios are often viewed digitally due to the shift from analog photography to digital photography and the prevalence of computer technology. The artists’ book format creates an interactive element with photography that is not typically present when showcasing photography in traditional galleries or museums, or digitally. The printing aspect of photography will come into play because oftentimes what you see on a screen is completely different than the printed version of a photograph. The light and color of the computer screen is different than the natural lighting and color of a printed piece.

Methodology

I will be creating an artists’ book for my photographic portfolio as the creative project of this thesis. Research book binding, paper, printing, folding, materials, costs, artists’ book formats. Use established graphic design practices and methodologies such as:
- Typography
- Typographic Hierarchy
- Layout/Structure Design
- Designing for print

Scope

- Use of graphic design and the artists’ book format as a photographic portfolio.
- Show how the physical format of a portfolio can be more impactful than a digital format.
- Focus on other elements that affect the overall design:
  - Paper
  - Type of binding
  - Folding
  - Materials available
  - Size

What are artists’ books?

Artists’ books are a medium of artistic expression that uses the format of a book to showcase a work of art. They are often created as one of a kind ‘unique’ objects or are published in limited editions. There are limitless formats and designs that a book artist can utilize to reinforce the message of the subject matter. The flipping of the pages, interactive pieces, and overall look of the book are important factors to consider. Artists’ books have been a creative outlet to showcase works of art ever since the rise of book arts publishing in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, although the appreciation of the book as an art form can be traced back to the origins of illuminated manuscripts, early Islamic books, Japanese and Chinese scroll books and hieroglyphics on paper. Artists’ books started to become recognized as a distinct genre in the 1970s and remained popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and now are an element of study programs in art schools worldwide. With the constant development in technology, the artists’ book format continues to be evolutionary and the possibilities for further diversification are endless. Artists’ books have several aspects that aren’t present in other forms of artwork or traditional portfolios. Usually, they are interactive pieces that help form a closer connection between the audience and the art. The physical format of the artists’ book allows the viewer to experience the work in other ways other than visually. Each viewer may perceive the message of the book differently based on how they experience it. If these books are published in small editions, they give the audience a chance to bring the work home, something that is much more difficult to do with an online digital piece. Artists’ books challenge the typical way art is viewed, as the pages of a book are meant to be flipped, while art pieces are usually meant to not be touched.

Accordion Fold

In the early stages of my research, I began thinking of how the artists’ book format could impact the presentation of a series of work that I was working on at the time. One such format is the accordion fold. The accordion fold is a very common bookbinding process that involves folding a sheet of paper back and forth in page-width increments. This technique allows for a variety of different ways to fold the paper, and the audience can view it by either spreading the book out like an accordion or hold it together and flip through it like a normal book.
For the creation of my artists' book, I began by creating a collection of photographs that I would like to include in the book. There are both horizontal and vertical photographs which meant that I would need to determine which size would cater to both, so I decided on an 8x8 inch square format. This way, the images can be relatively the same size and have the same impact.

When it came to bookbinding, it was important to consider that this was going to be for a photography portfolio, so it should be easy to read and look at the photographs. I decided on Massimo Vignelli’s Sandwich Binding, which is a panel of chipboard, or any other material, on the front and one at the end of the book glued to the endpapers. The spine is made of cloth, generally white, with the title hot-stamped on it. The final look is that of two boards holding a stack of white pages. The main reason for using this binding is to enable the book to open flat, which is particularly convenient in cases where one photograph is spread across the two pages. Since I want some sort of interactive element to the book, I decided on having fold-out image spreads as well.

Since this binding would not allow for removal or additions of new images, this artists’ book will be a collection of my photography work completed while studying here at Brockport. The book will have three sections that show the range of photography work I have done which includes digital, analog, and alternative photographic processes. The book will include information about each photograph such as location, date, and camera settings, as well as paragraphs explaining each photograph and its process.

Sources: