

CODEX POLARIS TEXTS

A collection of texts about books from
Denmark · Finland
Iceland · Norway · Sweden
with Faroe and Åland Islands

Bibliotek Nordica

CODEX ■ POLARIS

NOTES ON BIBLIOTEK NORDICA

It is an exciting time for artist books in the Nordic countries. Although individual artists have long been working in the field, there hasn't been much visibility or awareness of the medium. Collections in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden include printmaking, but rarely artist books; commercial and independent book designers are thriving, but have little interest in hand-made publications. Institutions and fairs have been started over the last few years, but are isolated from each other. Recently, however, this is starting to change, and a broader interest in making and collecting artist books is beginning to take shape. Among the individuals and groups working toward this goal is Codex Polaris, co-founded by the British-born artist Imi Maufe. Raised and educated in a country with a strong and active artist book community, Imi, who lives in Norway, was aware of the need for a resource of works made by artists in the Nordic countries. She envisioned a portable library that can be shown to the international community, but also be made available in the national libraries of each of the countries represented in the collection, so that artists, curators and collectors could freely browse the books on their home turf. The project is intended above all to be a means for making personal and professional connections, bringing people together with similar aims, who are working in a shared medium.

The artists in this collection were all requested to make an edition of books to contribute to this common project, with no specific theme, apart from the suggestion to use their local language, geography and culture as a starting point for the works.

What was received is an outpouring of talent, techniques, text, and an incredible generosity, in the form of hand-printed, hand-bound works of art. The diversity of approach is astonishing. Rather than looking for similarities or themes in the work itself, we are curious how individual

artists might think about their nationality, heritage, and identity as citizens and residents of the Nordic countries. What is their politics? What birds and plants do they see on a walk? How is their personal experience different from what it might be if they lived in Athens, Hong Kong, or Sao Paolo? The answer is explored through the personal vision and practice of a diverse group of artists, living and working in the Nordic region.

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An artist book exists as a portable work of art; as an antidote to technology, or its champion. They are time-based, narrative objects, with text, or without, made as multiples, or unique. They are meant to be read in many ways: via their content, but also their structure, materials, and workmanship. The book has not disappeared from popular culture, nor have fine art objects like paintings and sculptures. Artists who paint may also make books; a book may be considered a sculpture. An artist interested in rhythm, pacing, and narrative may gravitate to making books because of the range of possibilities for exploring those aspects of art-making.

We do, of course, all suffer the joys and disappointments of the digital age. While it is possible to find strangers and make a community on the internet, bonds are made in physical participation toward a shared goal. If Bibliotek Nordica was created out of a desire to see artist books from the Nordic countries collected in one place, it quickly became clear that the larger accomplishment was the community of artists being formed by the project.

The Nordic countries, in the popular imagination, are joined by a design aesthetic, an interest in craft, and a shared conception of having progressive politics, operating within the economic safety of social democracy. We wondered, will the books in this collection share these similarities? Will there be themes that run throughout?

The books are in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, and English. Some contain no text at all. Though varied, several conceptual and aesthetic themes are present in multiple books. Some, including those by Mette-Sofie D. Ambeck, Alt Går Bra, Jennifer Bergkvist, Leif Elggren, and Sarah Jost, have a political message. The books of Leise Dich Abrahamsen and Randi Annie Strand have no text, and are pure visual explorations. There are maps of places, as in Tero Juuti's book, and of memories, as in the books of Ingrid Rundberg and Anna Snædís Sigmarssdóttir. Some, like the works of Bent Kvisgaard and Thomas Bullinger, use historical sources as their content. The landscape is referred to, overtly or implicitly, as in Eeva Liisa Isomaa and Christel Hansson's books. Others explore language, like Eva Hejdström, process, like Alistair MacIntyre and Ulla West, and heritage, like Karen Helga Maurstig. There are abstract books, like that of Vera Ohlsson, and books using humor to tackle big topics, like those of Eric Saline and John Rasimus.

The books, all handmade, include an array of printmaking techniques: letterpress, risograph and digital printing, screen print, intaglio, wood engraving, linocut, dying, sewing and folding. One artist melted moulded ice filled with iron shavings and pigment onto watercolor paper. The books' techniques and formats stretch the boundaries of what can fit into the rigid constraints of the A6 size. Some are single sheets; others fold out to much larger sizes; others still are made up of several elements, housed in a wide array of binding techniques, from the simple stitch to more complex and historical structures.

Their diversity demonstrates the range of experiences present in the Nordic countries. The aim of this collection is not to try and show the similarities present amongst artists of this region, but instead to create a meeting point, a community, and to bring validity to a form that has been up to now largely overlooked in these countries.

Megan Adie
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