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**Coming to Books: Malmö, Sweden**

CODEX ■ POLARIS

## COMING TO BOOKS A CONVERSATION WITH BOOK ARTISTS IN MALMÖ, SWEDEN

Malmö, Sweden is home to a collective printmaking studio called Konstnärernas Kollektiva Grafikverkstad, the Artists' Collective Printmaking Workshop. Among its members are four women, Christel Hansson, Eva Hejdström, Jeannette Lindstedt, and Vera Ohlsson, who have been working with artist books for many years. This conversation, initiated by the American artist and printmaker Megan Adie in December 2018, describes their personal experience with artist books in a region of the world that has had limited exposure to the form.

Megan Adie: How did you all first come to making artist books?

Jeannette Lindstedt: I started in 2004. I had had it in mind to make books for a long time, but I'd never done it, and as I was going to Japan I had to have some little gift with me. So I made a little token, a little black book called 5x5. It had small prints in it which I made in linocut. When I came home from Japan, a number of us were invited to exhibit at the Ystad Museum [in Southern Sweden], where Thomas Millroth was director at the time. So I made my first big book. It was a case in wood with book cloth on it, that I bought in Japan, and a top to close. There were 11 loose pages in the box. Then I started, this was it. It was really the thing for me.

Christel Hansson: It was the same exhibition in Ystad, we exhibited together, and I started to examine: What is a book? I was really going to the bottom with it. I thought, it's something you hold in your hand, it must be like a hand. It could be a book of prayer. And the thing about it is, you have the movement when you turn the pages, and then I found out the size of it, and the form. It was interesting because Thomas Millroth wanted us to use the rest of the museum. There is a long corridor with 7 doors, and so I had the number of the pages: 7 + 7. I made a concertina, printed on big paper, and folded it. You could take it out to exhibit it. [The format]

was an investigation for me. I hadn't seen so much. It was just things I discovered, the concertina and folding. I didn't know so much about paper grain direction. I think I did it right anyhow!

Vera Ohlsson: I did my first book in 1983 in my art school printmaking department. I did it together with two other people there. We knew absolutely nothing about making books, or how much work it would take us. We decided to do 10 images each, and 10 pages of text, we asked the teacher to write the text and he said yes. We started to print it and it took us half a year to do the printing. I don't really know why we wanted to make a book. We decided to do it without knowing anything. We just got along with it. It was a lot of work but finally when it was finished we sort of missed that work. But then after that I was in exhibitions with Thomas Millroth in Ystad, he had a show titled *Wasserwegen, Water Ways*. We continued to make books and it has been a lot of making through the years. And also the title of my first book, in 1983, it was *Traces (Tecken)* and that is a title that has followed me for many years, I have done many prints with the title *Traces*. Book arts is connected with printmaking but it also connects with book history and paper history, and that has become a more important part of it now for me, I study with some old guys in Lund who are doing these historical book things, for example leather stamping, leather bindings, parchment.

Eva Hjedström: I came into it from a slightly different angle. I studied painting at Glasgow School of Art but I did my own sketchbooks all the time, and I worked a lot with papers, doing collages and things, so it felt quite a natural transition to make. A friend of mine said to me, I think you need to do a book binding course. I went to my first course in Edinburgh, I made a hardcover book and was very proud of it. And I continued to study book binding, both fine bookbinding, and also more innovative book binding and book making techniques. I discovered Hedi Kyle. And I found I can work with artistic content in the book form. At first I was mostly interested in the structures and the sculptural qualities of the books. I did a bit of printmaking when I was a student at Glasgow School of Art, and I'd done printmaking a long time before I'd applied to art school — etching, drypoint, things like that — but it wasn't until I actually came back home to Sweden, and came to KKV Grafik, and I held a course here in artist books and innovative structures, that I rekindled my interest in printmaking. When I think about it now maybe there is a thread that goes back into printmaking. But I also work with collages and things, and simple methods like photocopying. It has developed over very many years.

MA: Do you think that if you had not gone to the UK, do you think you still would have been exposed to artist books? If, for example, you'd stayed in Sweden?

EH: I don't know. I think I had to go to school in the UK.

MA: The UK is a place that has a long and very active history of engagement with book arts.

JL: I'm also a printmaker, that's my speciality, and I went for school for 5 years here in Malmö, after I had gone to school in Copenhagen before, and we never heard about artist books. For 5 years, it was printmaking, printmaking. This was in the 80s. And I went to school in Copenhagen 62 - 66, and we didn't talk about artist books.

EH: I think book arts, or artist books, have been a very underground movement in Sweden. In Denmark it's way ahead of us, in terms of having a tradition of it, but it's not very established here. It has been happening here for a long time, but very few people have been involved with it.

VO: It's very narrow.

EH: Very narrow. Schools haven't been involved with it, or anything like that. So I think the chances of being exposed to it are limited. But I think it's growing, there's an interest for it.

MA: Did you introduce a number of people to artist books, when you came back to Sweden?

EH: No, I think a lot of people here knew about it.

JL: We had courses with Vera before.

VO: They were very simple courses, about grain direction, and a little bit about folding and sewing also. Very, very simple. I didn't want to be a teacher in that field because I thought that there were others who could do it more or better. And actually when you came, Eva, I wanted to go to a course, an evening course, adult education, that you were teaching. But it was canceled, because not enough people signed up. So I asked them if we could have the course here. And here there were like 10 people who wanted to go. So that's how it happened.

JL: After Vera had her course—

VO: It was in 2010 or 2011? I started here in 2009.

JL: Very recently. Vera said [to the KKV members], why don't we do something together? And nobody said anything. And then I said — Yes!! I want to!

VO: We couldn't do something together in the large group at that time because the skills were so very diverse. But [in a smaller group] we decided to do a book at once, I think.

JL: Yes, we did. And we started Monday, and schoop! There it was.

VO: It was not only, *There it was*. It was a hard work.

JL: We decided a very complicated size, narrow and long, and it was a Japanese binding, so it could open, with a book cloth cover, and I'd never done that before. There was glue all over! I hated it! I thought, I'll never manage it! But I did. And I've done many since. And so we did it, and it's very nice book.

CH: I think it's interesting that we were all inspired by Thomas Millroth. He's the only one here in Skåne—

EH: I think in Sweden, actually—

CH: He's the one who was really moving ahead with artist books. He's a collector. But there's also another guy, called Leif Eriksson, and he had a wonderful exhibition in Simrishamn, with all this artist books. And he's wild! It was maybe in the beginning of 1999? He is a collector, but he also made interesting books that were controversial. He has been into this since the '50s. He's an artist, very conceptual.

JL: I remember when Thomas Millroth organized his *Wasserwegen*.

VO: That was in 1998. In Østerlen and Ystad. He also has a lot of contact with the former East German scene. A lot of books in his collections are from them.

JL: We had a later exhibition in the Cloister museum in Ystad, we had a nice exhibition, and had another with at Malmö Konsthallen.

MA: When do you think you first started using the term artist books or book arts? How did you become aware of the bigger world of artist books?

VO: It was from Thomas Millroth.

EH: He's writing a book about it, I think he's been doing it for a few years now.

VO: It's an ongoing story, getting bigger and bigger.

CH: I think it's so interesting with this form, because you can develop ideas—suddenly you can get an idea you wouldn't have in your normal work. Because of that simple word, book. I can be totally free to make My book. It can be a brick book, or a concertina or whatever—and this form can make me free to think, in one way or another. I think it's very inspiring, with that simple idea— I'm going to make a book. And that gives me space, in a way.

MA: What is the state of book collecting in Sweden?

CH: There are no libraries who collect artist books here in Sweden, just private collectors. So now we are starting a small library here at the KKV Grafik in Malmö, and I hope that that will develop into something, I don't know what, but maybe it could grow, slowly. We have many people here who make books, we don't have money to buy books but it could be a sort of library. We don't have so much space, but we should try to get bigger location here, to develop all this about books.

MA: Why are you taking this initiative to do more concerning book arts at KKV?

CH: We are interested!

EH: And I think it's needed, a place is needed that really is serious about putting resources into artist books, and wanting to work onto it.

JL: It's close to printmaking. You can make multiples.

EH: I think it'll be an amazing resource in the future. I think that if you are making books, and if you're making an edition, you want those books to get good homes, come out in the world, be seen, have someone really cherish it and looking at it. I think it's a small price if you give KKV Grafik one copy, you know it's getting a good home here, it will be looked at, and it will not be forgotten. It's valuable.

VO: We can already see that the space that we've got is too small for this, so I really think you have to put up a goal, to make life also more exciting for yourself. And this is a very good goal to have, to develop a book arts place here in KKV.

CH: As a graphic artist making prints, suddenly you can add text. And it grows. So you can express yourself in a wider way. And it doesn't have to be your own text, it can be another's

text. So with text it grows in your mind, it's an expression that is richer.

EH: You can tell stories. You can tell a literal narrative, or something that is quite random. You can tell stories with a picture as well— there doesn't have to be text in it, but there's something about it, as a book, it's more intimate, how it's displayed, the 3-dimensional qualities of it, and how you're actually reading it. You're telling stories either with or without words.

VO: I think it's important to mention that we [at KKV] have an artist exchange with other countries. One is Germany, North Germany (former East) and the place is called *Lukas*. They have also a great interest in arts, printmaking, and text, that's the main subject for them, and has been for a long time. And the other is Women's Studio Workshop, and they are one of North America's biggest publishers of artist books. And it is very important to keep that going.

MA: If you could see into the future, in 5 years for example, what's happening with artist books at KKV and in Sweden?

JL: It's growing.

CH: We have the whole corridor here, with not just one room but several rooms, where we could have for example a nice library with artist books, that we could show people. And then we could have a space for book binding and have workshops with that, so we could have this [gesturing to the presses] part of the location as the "black" part and the other [gesturing across the hall] is the "white" part. Plus the glue room! It's interesting with the printmaking— young people are coming here now from different places, in particular Spain, and they are working here—so it's becoming an international space. If we could have a little more foundation money here we could do so many things.

EH: I think it's a question of actually teaching people about artist books, as something that exists, that has a critical history. It's important, showing what an artist book can actually be. So for young people today and those thinking of becoming an artist, if we had a resource here, of an artist library, you could invite groups up to show them and talk about it and spread information about it. That is very important to do. If you don't know anything about it, how would you become interested in it? We aren't lucky enough to have courses like you have in the States specifically for book arts and printmaking. So I think it's crucial to bring young people in, have a workshop here. Even for kids still in school.

CH: I want to say one more thing before we end. I think it's so interesting to get to know about Codex through making a book [for *Bibliotek Nordica*]. It's wonderful that you invited us to make a book, that there are so many of us that are in this nordic library. I'm very happy with that.

EH: I think *BN* is a great initiative. It's great to show that things are happening here in the Nordic countries as well. Even though it's on a much smaller scale than what's happening in the States, there is definitely something that's happening.

CH: It's easier when this is happening to get people interested here. We have *BN*, Codex in the States, why don't we also have library collectors here? Our interest goes to the States, but it also comes back, creating a circle.

JL: We also need to continue the Malmö Artist Book Biennale\*. I didn't see as many artists as I

would have liked to see there. They didn't even come to visit it, because it was not known really.

**EH:** There needed to be much more information about it. The biggest daily newspaper here didn't even write about it. All this, it really needs to be seen much more, and information should be spread much more about it. We will continue with it. It cannot die after just one time.

\*The Malmö Art Book Biennale had its inaugural year in 2018.

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