"Usually inexpensive in price, modest in format, and ambitious in scope, the artist's book is also a fragile vehicle for a weighty load of hopes and ideals: it is considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience."1 With these words, Lucy Lippard defined the ambitions linked to the enterprise of artists' books—which she characterized as a product of 1960s counter-culture idealism. At the end of that same piece, written in 1976, Lippard said, "One day I'd like to see artists' books ensconced in supermarkets, drugstores, and airports, and, not incidentally, to see artists able to profit economically from broad communication rather than from lack of it."2

The idea of the democratic multiple was one of the founding myths of artists' books in their incarnation as mass-produced works. Artists' books were to counter the traditions of fine press, limited edition livres d'artistes, escape the institutional context of galleries, fly in the face of print and photographic protocol, and circumvent the established order of the fine art system. Few artists' books conformed to the letter of this particular orthodoxy and in the late 1990s artists' books are far more hybrid and varied in form, borrowing eclectically from every conceivable lineage of printing and publishing history. The rubric now covers the full spectrum from expensively-produced limited editions to inexpensive multiples. But partisans of the democratic multiple continue to invoke its image as the one true identity for artists' books. Such advocates rarely address, head-on, the many questions which have plagued producers of these books over the years as they have struggled to cope with the realities of translating the theoretical ideal into practice. The history of artists' book publishing is strewn with the failures of this project in aesthetic, political, and economic terms while being haunted by a rhetoric asserting that only the democratic multiple can save artists' books from the charge of elitism.

There were several tenets which combined in the original conception of the democratic multiple. The first of these was aesthetic: the book was an ordinary object. Its mass-produced format conformed to the then prevailing minimalist idea of a fabricated, industrial product
which offered an alternative to the fine art traditions of the hand-craft-
ed object. As a dominant feature of 1960s aesthetics, this ideal of anti-
artisanal production asserted an anti-professionalism as well. A book
which appeared to be standard in all respects—the paradigm of the
geneo usually cited is Ed Ruscha’s 1963 Twentysix Gasoline Stations—supported the possibility that anyone might be a producer as well as a con-
sumer. Supposedly banal imagery and low-level design were key el-
ements of this aesthetic sensibility, a kind of sham flat-footedness which
belied its own privileged status of production. That such effects were
calculated, highly determined, aesthetic choices intended to create the
image of the anti-professional work, was a point lost in the rhetoric of
the moment.

Aside from the aesthetics of its production, the democratic multiple
 bore the weight of a political charge: it was meant to circulate freely
outside the gallery system, beyond the elite limits of an in-crowded art
going audience and patrons. The assumption that books could circulate
in such a way derives in part from their physical autonomy, their capa-
city to be disseminated into the world as independent objects (unlike
paintings or sculptures which generally circulate with more difficulty
and more attention to their provenance, location, and attribution).
While that idea worked fine in the abstract, in reality it depended upon
creating a system of distribution and upon finding an interested audi-
ence for these works which were at least as esoteric in many cases as the
most obscure fine art objects. To this day there are plenty of viewers
who respond to artists’ books with puzzlement, dismay, confusion,
and/or outright hostility. The fallacy of the supermarket distribution
network envisioned by Lippard was not merely that there wasn’t a struc-
ture in place to facilitate it, but that even if there had been, Twentysix
Gasoline Stations or Suzanne Lacy’s Rape Is . . . (1976) would never have
leaped to the eye and hand of the casual shopper with the same easy
rapidity as the National Enquirer. If the bewildering disorientation,
which the very ordinariness of the artist’s book induces by virtue of sub-
serving the familiar form with an unfamiliar content, is part of these
works’ definition of success, then the accompanying reality is that many
viewers simply didn’t get the jokes or the effects. Like most late 20th
century artwork, the artist’s book assumes a sophisticated artworld
viewer initiated into the play with conventions and their subversion
which characterizes much of the work of the advanced guard.

But perhaps the fallacy least evident in the production of books in
‘affordable” multiples, the supposedly “democratic” form of the book, is
the economic one. The question of affordability has two aspects—
affordable for the producer and for the consumer. Though the democ-
ratric multiple was designed to sell cheaply ($5 to $20), in largish
unnumbered editions (500 to 5000 copies), it was expensive to produce.
The per unit cost might be affordably low, but the up front capital
expenditure was significant ($1000 to $10,000 or more). By contrast, a
limited edition book or one of a kind work has a relatively low up-front
capital expenditure. For artists with access to an offset press and pos-
sessing pre-press production skills, these costs could be reduced to the
price of film, plates, ink, chemicals, paper, and binding materials. But
the idea that even these costs are negligible would be quickly dispelled by
a glance at receipts and accounts. For the cost of producing a single off-
set artist’s book, one can fit out a basic letterpress shop (or build can-
vases for a year, or buy a high-end computer with full graphics capabil-
ity, a scanner, large monitor, and color printer). The problem of finding
an audience and of producing sellable works remains to be solved, but
in the production of the mythic democratic multiple, the issue of afford-
ability is seriously shifted in favor of the audience. In the production of
limited edition or one of a kind works it is shifted towards the artist. In
both cases, the cost of the artist’s labor is not factored into these equa-
tions, but the devaluation of the creative activity in offset printing is a
regular feature of the assessment of value. In the contrast of offset and
letterpress editions a “the machine does it” attitude seems to prevail
with respect to the former while a hand-made aesthetic attaches to the
latter. This is a holdover from the use of offset in the 1960s when the
artists-book-as-industrial-product downplayed the aesthetic qualities of
standard, commercial modes of reproduction.3

Still, there is good reason why the political agenda which moti-
ivated the democratic multiple remains a persistent element of ongoing
rhetoric within the field of artists’ books. A notion of empowerment
aligns with acquiring the skills and means of print production. A.J.
Liebling’s famous quote, “The freedom of the press belongs to whoever
owns one,” continues to resonate even in an era of electronic commu-
nication—or maybe especially. The legitimacy which print confers on
the individual word is certainly confirmed in the era of desktop pub-
lishing and the internet with the help of e-mail and e-mail listsernts.
is very real in general, public perception. Books continue to have the power to introduce non-standard thought into the arena of public discourse through the Trojan horse of an ordinary appearance. Books provide a vehicle for affirmation, information, and enlightenment across a wide spectrum of points of view and belief systems. And this will be true as long as the book remains imbued with its present authority as a cultural icon.

There are historical precedents for using the book for subversive and liberatory activities, particularly among the artists of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Natalia Goncharova, and Vassily Kamensky. In the 1910s in particular, artists made works by any and every available means in editions which were stenciled, lithographed, letterpress printed, handmade, or reproduced on primitive mimeo-type equipment. In editions from ten to five hundred copies, these works were distributed by hand, among friends and companions, or sold very cheaply in order to get them into the world. Like the leafletting activities and independent magazine productions of Italian Futurists or German Dada artists, these attempts to use publishing to spread radical art ideas met with mixed success but satisfied the desire to break through the perceived (and real) limitations of the established audience of fine art patrons and viewers. Ironically, these ephemeral works now sell for high price tags, their author-publishers long gone, and their political impact muted by the fact that the context in which they might communicate this original meaning has vanished. They now function as fetishized art objects, rare and valuable, the very opposite of their originally intended identity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, putting artists’ books into printed and bound form and getting them into circulation proved to be widely different activities. If the project of the democratic multiple is to a significant extent a failed one, it is in part because the means of distribution were so slow and fragmentary that publisher-artists could not recoup their original expenditures—or did so only over a very long period of time. The books didn’t get out. When they did, they sold in small numbers, were paid for at a slow rate with a high percentage of sale price going to commission. While subsidizing one’s production is a normal expectation on the part of most artists, the boxes of unsold stock under the bed or in the basement were a continual reminder that what had gone unsold was likely to remain unread, unwanted, and ineffectual in its place in the world. The exception to this was the work of those well-known artists who embraced the form. The products of blue-chip artists were not always the most interesting works in the field and were frequently hybrid forms doubling as catalogues for an exhibition, publisher-or dealer-driven, rather than artist-initiated works. But these found an audience the way artists’ prints did—as the inexpensive side-line to the mainstream markets. The real failure was that the audience for artists’ books simply failed to materialize. Where were these masses who supposedly hungered for innovative, original, works of portable art in the form of inexpensive multiples? They were probably out buying posters of Impressionist paintings and culture industry celebrities.

In spite of this rather dour assessment of the fate of the democratic multiple, it is important to note that there were and are a number of presses and individuals committed to the idea. There are also a significant number of artists who have modified or transformed their practice over time to reflect their own changed attitudes with respect to the earlier utopian expectation of what the artist’s book might be. There are presses which continue to support the democratic multiple as a principle and a reality: Simon Cutts (in recent years, with Erica Van Horn) has maintained Coracle Press (Norfolk, London, and Ireland) with an unwavering commitment to the affordable multiple since its inception in the mid 1970s. Likewise, Telfer Stokes, frequently in collaboration with Helen Douglas, has run WeProductions (Yarrow, Scotland) with the idea that their books are offset editions whose prices make them competitive with trade cloth and paperbacks. Other artists abandoned the production of such works after a long spell of highly original and creative publishing, such as Conrad Gleber who, with Jim Snitzer, operated Chicago Books for over ten years (mainly in the 1970s). The rising and falling fortunes of Printed Matter Bookstore at DIA, in New York City, whose founding was a product of the original 1970s idealism, can be mapped as a history of the checks and difficulties which have met the mythic concept of the democratic multiple in its many incarnations over the years. The struggle has frequently been frustrating. As an institution with a unique identity in the field, Printed Matter Bookstore has been called upon to serve any number of roles—bookstore, distributor, archive, reading room, community center, and gallery space—while struggling to meet rent, wages, overhead, and payment schedules. The strain of this role has sometimes been a source of the larger
vision of artists' books as affordable multiples since their commitment from the beginning has been to the dissemination of these works.

Many artists who produced affordable editions for years now either supplement their inexpensive editions with high end works in limited numbers, make one of a kind works which sell in a fine art market, or seek a workable compromise between sustained individual investment of time and money and some kind of return. The idea that artists who don't make money are somehow more pure and noble than those who aspire to gain just recompense for their efforts was already dispelled in Lippard's insightful statement. Artists like Phil Zimmermann, Todd Walker, and Susan King—to name only a few—continue to wrestle with the conflicts and paradoxes of offset production, and their own earlier commitment to the affordable multiple. This is not an issue of selling out—there is no market to sell out of or into, but of coming to terms with the realities of production costs and audience. Artworld champions of the offset multiple, John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, and Ed Ruscha, have made their own compromises with their original positions and produced limited edition works with fine art publishers. What has become glaringly clear, in the 30-some years since the democratic multiple was announced, is that not only is it almost impossible to make money as a producer of inexpensive artists' books, but also that it's difficult even to break even. And, to add insult to injury, it has tended to be the high end products which command critical attention because they come into the world announcing their "importance" in their production values (expensive paper, binding, large formats, "hand" printing). But it is still true that many of the most creative, innovative, interesting and exciting work done in this field is in works at the lower-end of production values.

For better and for worse, in the 1990s, artists' books have come of age. There are several dozen artists' presses in the United States, Europe, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand committed to artists' books as their major or sole mode of expression. And there exist quite a number of artists for whom the complexity, density, and specificity of the book form are essential features of their artistic vision (Gary Richman, Susan Baker, Clifton Meador, Joan Lyons to name just a handful of representative American artists). The complete body of their works deserves critical recognition and attention. This is slow to come, but the need for an informed critical debate has begun to motivate the artists' book community to produce a rigorous intellectual assessment of such production. There are various newsletters published in association with Centers for artists' books (Ampersand and AbraCaDaBra, produced in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, respectively). A few journals with broader artworld constituencies, such as Art Monthly in London, have regularly published the work of critic and historian of artists' books (notably Cathy Courtney). On Paper, formerly Print Collector's Newsletter frequently features artist's book reviews by Nancy Princenthal. And most recently, Brad Freeman launched the Journal of Artists' Books (1994 to the present) to foster critical debate in the field.

The downside of this infusion of critical energy is the end of the naive era of books as unmediated and spontaneous expressions. The anyone-can-do-it mood has been replaced with a new professionalism (and that earlier "anyone" has to be qualified—since when the "anyone" was a blue-chip artist the response to their work was very different than when the artist was an individual working in a garage somewhere). The field of artists' books has expanded through programs in colleges and various local centers of activity fostering the production of works which are often unconscious hybrids of various traditions of fine art print protocol, limited edition portfolios, high end publishing, livre d'artistes, and self-publishing. There is formulaic and weak work among these productions, and also much precious, crafty stuff, but there's also solidly interesting work by artists finding their identity within the field—and in this regard, artists' books are now no different from any other artform. And, like any other viable art form, the artist's book continues to reincarnate itself through various mutations and transformations in response to the needs and visions of each generation and each practitioner. The mistake would be to hold out some standard of judgment as universal or as carrying a morally superior position. Too often, the myth of the democratic multiple has been used in this way without looking the too evident paradoxes in the face.

In a recent conversation, Cathy Courtney recounted to me an anecdotal experience she had had reading the latest artist's book from the London-based BookWorks, The Diary of a Steak, while on a train. The book has a photographic image of a hunk of raw meat on its cover with a small sticker where the price tag would appear on a supermarket steak. But the tag says, "I hear my erotic music." A man seated across the aisle, who was clearly perturbed by this, told me that...
said she was reminded once again of the power of an artist’s book to function subversively in the most ordinary of surroundings simply by its transformation of the standard form and format. Or as Brad Freeman has said, “Over its lifetime, the book has the capacity to insinuate itself into unforeseen locales.” And it is in this insinuating capacity that the book continues to serve the original vision of the democratic multiple—as a work which one encounters with no introduction and no warning and which suddenly, oddly, uniquely transforms the viewer’s expectations by its unexpected innovative originality. To privilege the democratic multiple at this point in time is a questionable enterprise freighted with the burden of another generation’s notion of moral superiority and unrealistic expectations. The few artists who do persevere in that direction deserve respect and, in certain cases, serious critical appraisal. But many have also looked this project squarely in the face, made their effort or assessment, and seen fit to rethink its premises. In artists’ books, as in any creative endeavor, there are no rules. Make the books you want to make, the books you believe in. Those are the only books worth producing. The failure of the democratic multiple is not a failure of production, but of reception—another of the many moments in which the efforts of alternative discourse have been eclipsed by the economically advantaged mainstream. Artists’ books have failed to find a place as a democratic artform, at least up until now. But in the future—

2. Ibid., p.45.
5. There are a handful of other bookstores and dealers specializing in artists’ books, but Printed Matter’s symbolic identity and longevity define its particular role.
6. No doubt elsewhere as well, but if there is a significant output of artists’ books in Africa, South America, or Asia, it has not managed to find much distribution or visibility.
7. Which only points out how “mythic” the idea of the democratic multiple was, and how linked to an artworld aesthetic styled as a political gesture: compare the careers and critical reception of the work of John Sutro and Ralph Humphreys.