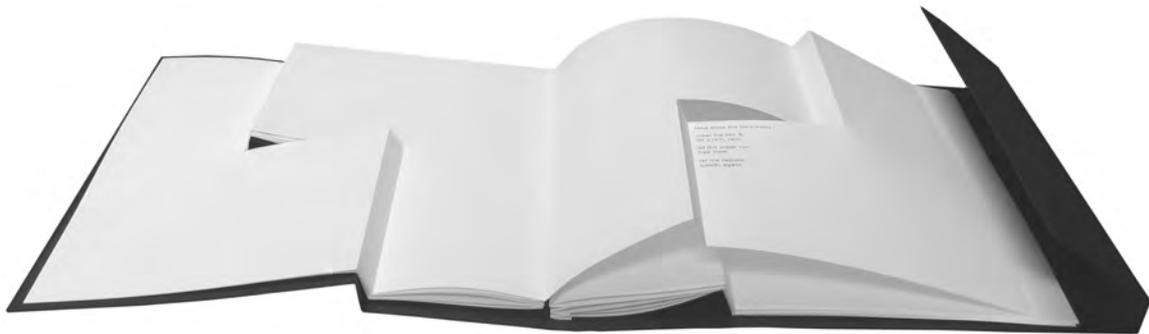


Fact and Fiction

Designed and produced by Victoria Bean, text by Victoria Bean
11 x 30 x 7cm, 4pp, Letterpress printed in an edition of 100 copies
Circle Press Publications, London, 2000



Ten Poems for Pandora

Designed and produced by Victoria Bean, text by Victoria Bean
24 x 25 x 2cm, 12pp, Letterpress printed in an edition of 100 copies
Form cut and folded pages, Circle Press Publications, London, 2005

Words in Process: Arc Editions

Richard Price

Arc Editions is a new partnership between three artists whose works share a focus on the mercurial, wayward nature of language. Victoria Bean, Karen Bleitz and Sam Winston first came together as artists working at Ronald King's Circle Press during its Notting Hill days. As well as working with King on Circle projects they made their own book objects under the Circle Press imprint. Accordingly, these artists have an openness to both traditional and modern techniques in the book arts and are steeped in the history of the British and American artist's book. To mark the beginning of Arc, this article takes stock of their work to date.

At the heart of the artist's book is a three-way relationship between the language of its text (if it has one), the book's visual manifestation and its physical elements. The Arc artists are attentive to all three but perhaps what links them most is their worrying away at, and sometimes glorying in, language's tricksiness. By this I mean both its deceptiveness - language says one thing but may mean another - and, a slightly different quality, its shifting, moving, elusive, restless. Language, after all, is fuzzier and richer than it first appears and, despite grand projects to codify it, it is always on the move - provisional, improvisational, shifting. Almost as much as light and heat, language is a kind of energy.

Bean and Bleitz in particular have an edgy sensitivity to broadly political themes which they find implicit in everyday phrases or, through inspired recasting, redirect polemically. Perhaps unusually in the book arts they have been willing to address topical, public and political issues (don't look to Arc for personal diaries, I-went-here's and I-saw-that's; nor for pure abstraction).

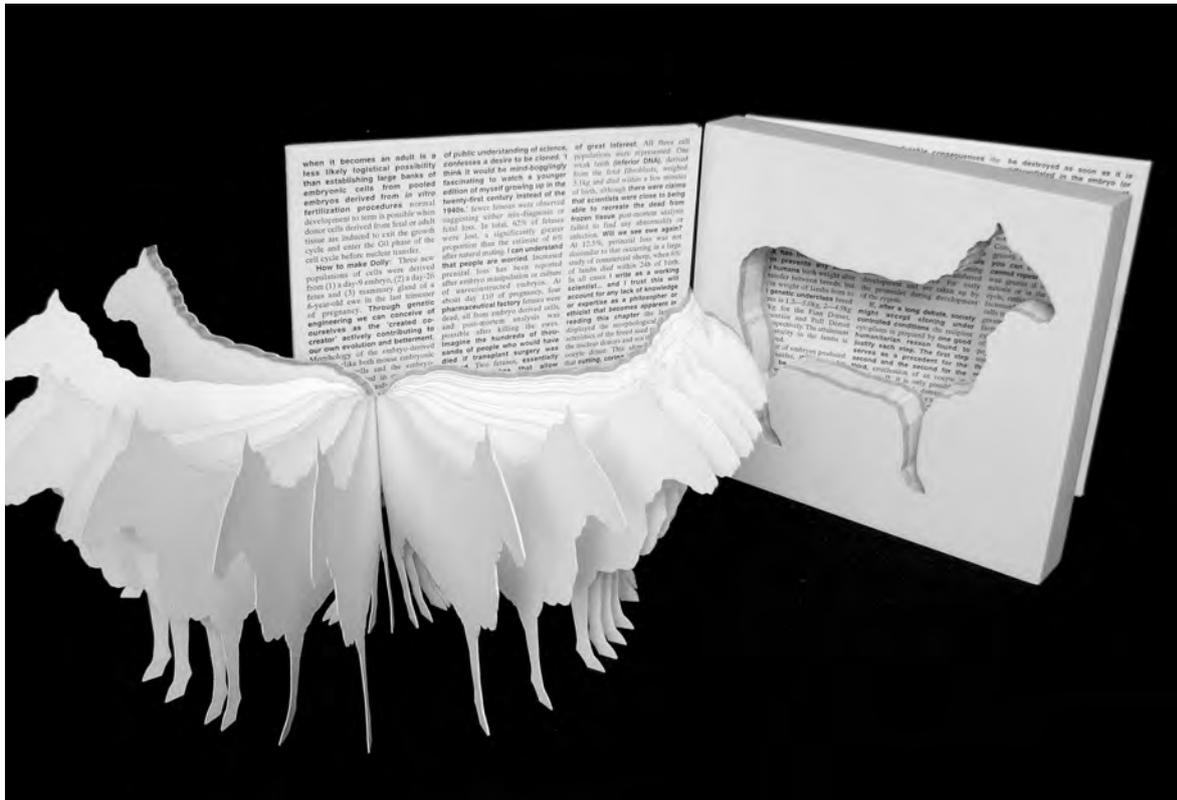
In Bean's *When Bush Meets Blair*, the artist makes play with the surnames of "Bush" and "Blair": under Bean's direction they cross-fertilise to produce "Blush" and, page-by-page, more serious incriminations. A poet and a copywriter for an agency which specialises in advertising for environmental and ethical issues, Bean is especially concerned with media discourse and how easily fragile, complex truths are warped out of recognition by the pre-existing expectations of newspaper and broadcast stories. *When Bush Meets Blair* reminds me of the Oulipo experiments in French literature where a rules-based procedure (here, the decision to use the leaders' names for permutations) is tied to chance (the accident of their names) and then guided by the creative artist (Bean's choice of combinations). A similar cross-matching of language rules onto emotional states is encountered in *Faction*, a book which uses

concrete poetry's transformational rules to start with "Fact" and, after incremental shifts as each page turned, ends, by close, with "Fiction".

Perhaps most delicate of Bean's books to date is *Ten Poems for Pandora*. The structure of the book is cut and folded in such a way as to produce an interlocking suite of pages with a physical fissure in the centre of each page. The poems are printed close to the edge of the 'faultline', recent escapees, perhaps, beginning their first words of free speech: "the evils rush: they barge without apology" one poem begins. The large-ish square pages are slightly floppy and with the need to be careful in disconnecting the top layer from the one underneath it, perhaps the reader is anxious about holding the book and moving from one page to another. I see this nervousness as about opening the series of almost locked-down pages appropriate to the Pandora myth in the face of now jubilant and exhilarated (and sometimes anxious) lives and ideas that move out from each box once it has been opened: "maps a night of illicit handbrake turns / & accelerated joy". It is a dizzy, precarious, risky world now - for all concerned.

Karen Bleitz's books can also have a distinctly feminist turn. This is most apparent in *The Appeal of Pornography*, a book which follows pornography's photographic dehumanisations to a further stage, mixing meat market and fairground kiosk in mocking explicit fashion. Bleitz's rapid response to the birth of the first cloned mammal, the box-like book *Dolly: Edition Unlimited*, is one of her most remarkable works. Named after the sheep "developed" in a laboratory in Scotland, *Dolly: Edition Unlimited* samples the article in *Nature* which first announced the breakthrough as well as early newspaper responses, juxtaposing them before the reader lights on the core of the book: a cut-out image of Dolly which clones herself upon opening slides out of a hole in the case-like right-hand page. The sheep is arguably beleaguered, besieged, encased and concealed by the stories of her birth. Reduced with touching simplicity to a blank piece of multiply folded stiff paper, it doesn't matter to her, the reader imagines, whether what she is incarcerated by is scientific description or journalistic reportage; Bleitz's contrast of text saturation with the spotless, wordless sheep itself is inspired. The multiple cut-out, too, is not only a clever physical analogy for the cloning process worthy of Ian Hamilton Finlay's moving part books, but, rendered as an object traditionally reserved for play, it is a poignant reminder of a lost childhood (Dolly, as clone of an adult, was already born several years old so never had a normal 'lambhood').

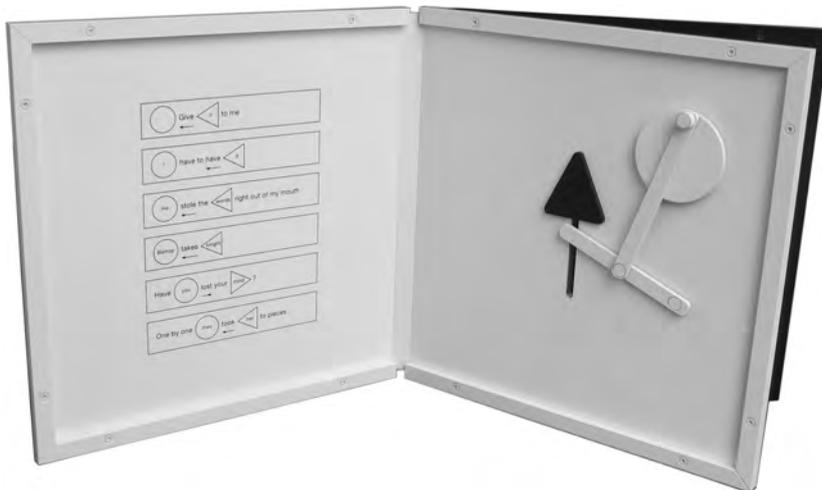
In a sense I've collaborated twice with Bleitz - *giffhorse*, the blind embossed slow-mo animated book that Ron King and I made in 1999 had its



Dolly: Edition Unlimited

Designed and produced by Karen Bleitz

A pop-out jig-sawed book-work on the theme of the cloned sheep, Dolly, with a freestanding herd of forty-five sheep integrated into the form of the book. Text on covers taken from newspaper headlines and *Nature* magazine, printed letterpress. 17 signed copies. 20 x 23 x 5 cm. Circle Press, London, 1997



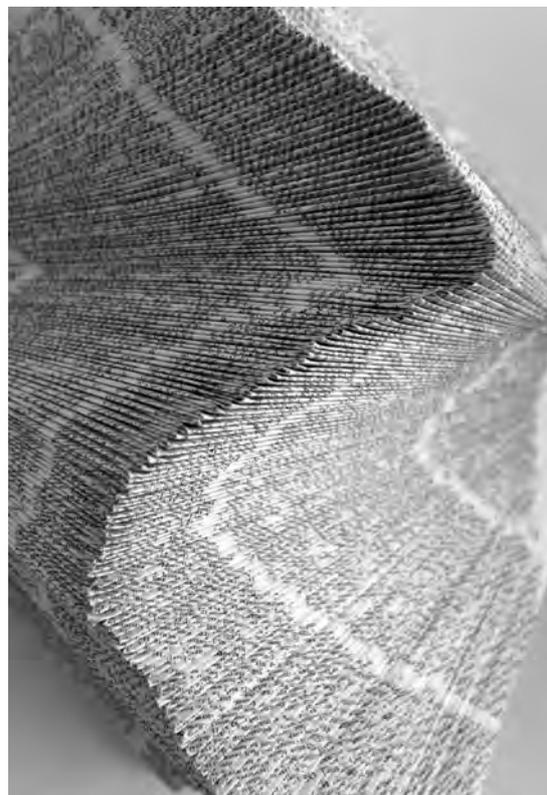
The Mechanical Word Vol. 4 - Hold Up (to have)

Designed and produced by Karen Bleitz, with texts by Richard Price.

24 x 24 x 3cm, 4pp, limited to 15 signed copies. Discs, drivers, levers and gears are used in the books to create mechanical metaphors and to give readers a new, physical tool with which to break down and examine the underlying meaning of words. Aluminium and silkscreened polypropylene with silkscreened polypropylene slipcase. Circle Press Publications, London, 2005

letterpress text set by Bleitz - but the work on which we more creatively meshed is *The Mechanical Word* series of five books. This begins with the notion of a grammar manual's simple sentences whose elements (subject, object and so on) are given particular symbols to help the learner understand the instructed concept. Bleitz writes each panel of instruction using sentences that would be avoided in class: they have the strong undercurrents of sexual politics. The kinetic elements of the book - cogs and cams and other interacting parts set against a field of bright colour - are on the one hand abstract shapes of pure tone, and on the other symbols of the fraught power relationships more than hinted at in the preceding textbook 'excerpt'. Finally a text of mine concludes four of the five pieces, giving voice to the people schematised by the animation. Again, the presentation is not straightforward (this is no poem here, picture there, livre d'artiste) - each poem is laid across the opening in relation to the moving parts of the book and was written to pulse and flicker across the whole screen of the page. For me, Dom Sylvester Houedard, book artist and concrete poet, is a presence behind this element of *The Mechanical Word*. Perhaps it is also related to *Roller*, the book by Roy Fisher and Ian Tyson in which phrases seem to be emitted as much as written; like *gifthorse* this was typeset by Bleitz and both *Roller* and *The Mechanical Word* series deliberately have an industrial structure and finish to them.

So far I've concentrated on the work of Victoria Bean and Karen Bleitz. Sam Winston's work is not political in the way that their work is (though, as I hope I've suggested, they are subtle, unprogrammable artists who are in danger of giving the word politics a good name). He is, however, as fascinated by words in process. His most immediately striking work, *a full folded dictionary* (2004), took a set of the twenty-one volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, stood each volume on its side and, through some 80,000 folds (no glue! many assistants!) produced a remarkable set of polyhedrons. They have considerable sculptural appeal - they're like huge crystals of knowledge, and the curious white stripes they have, a consequence of the dictionary's column spacing, seem like rock striations shot through a word-peppered paper mineral. Textural sensitivity to "hard" and "soft" is played through the inside-outing of stiff binding and more pliable page. When pages are folded on to each other the comprehension of individual word-by-word detail is almost impossible: in close-up it is largely fragments of words that can be seen, at normal standing distance, it is a work of soft grey tones. Few would leave the work without feeling awe in the face of its indicated complexity: with breathtaking simplicity, the scale of the English language is laid anew before its observer.



a full folded dictionary Sam Winston, 2004
The 21-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*
Folded paper, board and book cloth. 350 x 93 cm

I think this is one of the key tensions within Winston's work, and it is one its key attractions: the tension between the astonishing detail of work that proceeds from his interest in language's organisation and the sculptural and visual qualities of the overall product. He is actually a painstaking typographer - in *a dictionary story* (2001), for instance, hundreds if not thousands of individually made text cells, typeset in Quark™, are composed to render individual letters a kind of mobility across the page while the narrative imagines words from the dictionary becoming independent "characters". The latter is the license for various antics and puns: Lawless and Lawful, for example, are "neighbours" in the sense of being close together in the dictionary but also because, in Winston's world, they are alive and so share the same 'neighbourhood' (Lawful, inevitably is "such a boring neighbour").

However, the relative simplicity of the narrative, and the work required to read it down the page, is in stark contrast to the complex beauty of the shapes that other dictionary words are making collectively as they stretch and fall and braid across the tall white column of the page, not illustrating but actually enacting the story and together producing beautiful organic-like patterns of lines.

As with Winston's *O.E.D.*, which is physically folded in on itself words-wise but folded out book structure-wise, *a dictionary story* works in at least two ways at once and in each of Winston's works

the reader sees this striving between the visual or sculptural and the linguistic. The large posters of *a made up / true story* (2005), in which the rules of different genre (timetables, newspaper stories, fairy stories) are deliberately confused with each other, can feasibly be read as texts - if the reader can stand very close to the wall for a considerable amount of time - but are most striking for the organic shapes Winston has made by mapping the different registers of language onto each other. They are as much about comprehending the conceit of each piece, perhaps reading selected elements as one might “read” elements of a painting in detail, but then standing back and looking - and marvelling - at the overall composition.

As I hope this article suggests, the artists of Arc are fascinating independent artists in their own right who have already made book objects of considerable originality. Arc Editions will not in the first instance be based at a single studio but rather will allow Bean, Bleitz and Winston to support, market and distribute their work collectively; it will also bring together other artists and writers to make both collaborative and solo books.

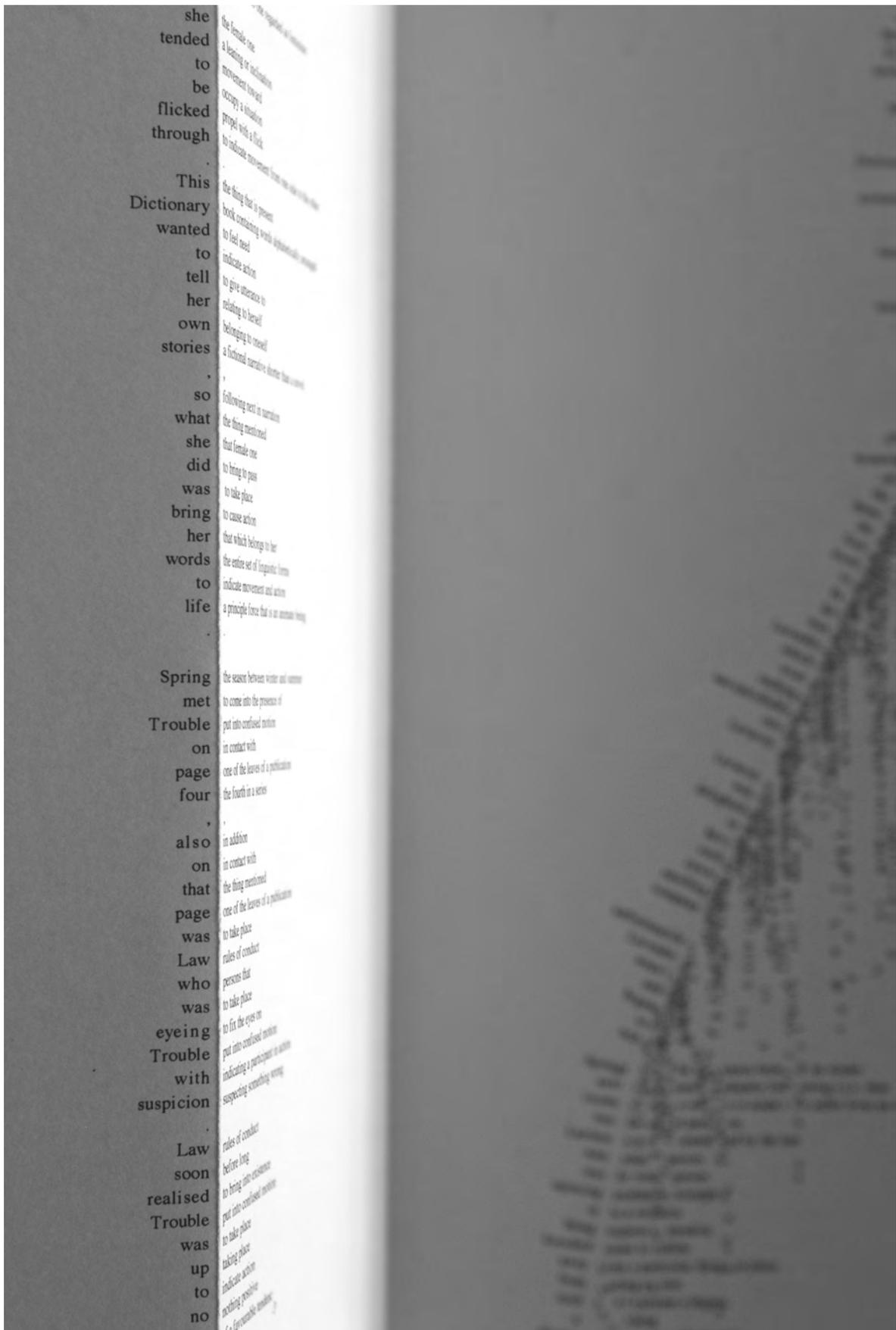
Watch the virtual space at arceditions.com for news of more.



Richard Price's poetry collections include *Lucky Day*, *Earliest Spring Yet*, and *Greenfields*. With David Miller he co-wrote *British Poetry Magazines: A history and bibliography of 'little magazines'*.

He is Head of Modern British Collections at the British Library, London. He has collaborated with book artists Ronald King, Karen Bleitz, and Chan Ky-Yut and with the sculptor David Annand.

Richard Price's first solo book object is entitled *folded* (hydrohotel.net 2007)



A Dictionary Story

Written and designed by Sam Winston. 24pp concertina set in Times Roman and printed offset litho on 170gsm Stora fine paper in white cloth cover with olive-green cloth slipcase, 35 x 13cms. Edition of 100 signed copies. Circle Press, London, 2005
*I was exploring the idea of 'reading environments' and what happens when you become 'lost' inside a book.
I wanted to see what happen if words could take on their own meaning without the help of the reader.*