

CODEX BOOK FAIR & SYMPOSIUM  
Conference Review

## MEMBER EXPERIENCE

by Elizabeth Curren



Author Beth Curren's table display at the CODEX 2015 book fair.

The fifth biennial International Codex Book Fair took place February 8-11, in California; the Symposium was held in Berkeley and the Fair was at the Craneway Pavilion in Richmond. Codex was conceived by Peter Koch and his associates, and first held in 2005, creating a venue in the United States that parallels the opportunities provided by book fairs held in Europe. Participation in the Fair is juried by the Codex Foundation Committee. This year's symposium, held near the Berkeley campus, was open to the public through paid ticketing; it sold out well in advance of the event. The speakers, all artists and book professionals, gave PowerPoint presentations on Monday and Tuesday mornings, followed by question and answer sessions.

Book Art exhibitors were bused to the Craneway Pavilion, once a Ford assembly plant and now an historic landmark located in the industrial section of the Port of Richmond. With floor to ceiling windows along its wharf side, there are spectacular views of the bay and the southeast side of San Francisco. It is an enormous open space and a great deal of prep work, courtesy of the Codex Foundation, had taken place to get it ready for everyone. There was row after row of tables set up; when exhibitors arrived, their shipped materials were sitting at their tables. There were nearly 200 exhibitors representing 17 countries. The range of work was phenomenal: artists' books, fine press, broadsides, tools, handmade papers, and leather.

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Adjacent to the front tables at the Craneway Pavilion was a vertical display of the Pantone Postcard exhibit, conceived and curated by Emily Martin of Naughty Dog Press. Many of the postcards had been submitted by Codex artists, who then posed for photos in front of the display. It was a great icebreaker and a constant attraction. Codex 2015 provided an opportunity to meet up with book friends and to see the work of well-known and not-yet-well-known artists. The books and works were extremely beautiful and they were all right there, table after table, to be examined and admired without the constraints of closed collections and restricted access. It was nirvana.

On Sunday, the opening day, the Fair hosted over 1200 visitors. In addition to the collectors, librarians, and professionals who walked the aisles, there were many very serious book fans: they were curious and asked great questions; they were very careful in handling the books; many had strategies to see as much of the Fair as possible, cruising the aisles and comparing notes. The attendance in the following days was a bit less than Sunday's crush, but it was still very busy. There were a surprising number of school children who were interviewing exhibitors and a plethora of fabulously dressed visitors with amazing hats.

Being invited into Codex 2015 off the waitlist necessitated a scramble to be ready to exhibit at the event. I shared a table with Bryan Kring, of Kring Design in Oakland, CA, whose beautiful work pushed the envelope of the book concept; his pieces are three-dimensional or sculptural and incorporate moving parts. His design assistant, Mitsuko Baum, is passionate about the books. Our table was next to that of French booksellers, Elisabeth Lortic and Annie Mirabel, of *Les Trois Ourses*. They sell extremely fine children's books from their Paris studio, where they also



Top: Beth pointing out contributions on the Pantone Postcard exhibit.

Bottom: View of the San Francisco Bay from the location of the CODEX 2015 book fair, the Craneway Pavilion in Richmond, CA.

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Beth with her work in the midst of the fair.

provide education, outreach, and workshops. Having wonderful neighbors made the Codex experience so much nicer. We all kept an eye on one another's tables, allowing everyone to take short breaks to grab a bite to eat and an opportunity to look at the exhibits. And there were so many fabulous artists' books. It was very instructive to observe how exhibitors designed their tables and displays to show their books to the best advantage within the Codex guidelines. Although the majority of the book artists were from the US, there were quite a lot of international exhibitors who were generous with their time and information about book arts in their home countries.

There were events each evening for exhibitors to attend in and around Berkeley at bookstores, art centers, and galleries. Claire Van Vliet was honored at Codex for her contributions to the artists' book genre; a celebration of the past 60 years of Janus Press was being installed simultaneously at the San Francisco Center for the Book. At the end of the final day, everyone scrambled to pack up their books and displays, get their shipping labels on their boxes, and get out the door. With the Foundation's guidelines, things went pretty smoothly. That night there was a dinner for everyone at the UC Berkeley Faculty Club, and everyone cut loose a bit afterwards. It was a great experience.

I can't wait until Codex 2017.

*Elizabeth Curren is a book artist, writer, and teacher, with degrees in literature from Boston College and in art from the Corcoran College of Art + Design; she is also a proud graduate of the Art and the Book Master's Program at the Corcoran College of Art + Design. She lives and works in Bethesda, MD, where she produces work under her imprint, Camel Leopard Press, and is a proud member of the Guild of Book Workers, the Washington Rare Book Group, American Print History Association, and Pyramid Atlantic Arts. [www.elizabethcurren.com](http://www.elizabethcurren.com)*

Revealing the Handmade Book: Inventing the Library  
Opening remarks to the inaugural Stanford/CODEX Collegium

## MEMBER EXPERIENCE

by Peter Rutledge Koch

*These opening remarks were delivered on February 6, 2015, in the Green Room of the Bender Library at Stanford University.*

The purpose of our collegium today is to formally address the challenge of transmission, of passing-on the culture of the book at its highest level of achievement. We have invited you all here in an effort to provide an opportunity to discuss among ourselves practical and expedient ways to increase the acquisition, display, and study of contemporary handmade books.

Behind this simply stated purpose there is a deeper reasoning at work—to reveal the remarkable books of our contemporary handpress printers, poets, artists, and artisans to as many artists, collectors, scholars, and students as possible in the firmly held belief that exposure to the book as a work of art is both infectious and benign.

To reveal a work of art assumes the real presence of the art object. In order to accurately reveal the object of art, it follows, one must possess an intimate knowledge of the work in question. This is what we call connoisseurship and that demands mastery of any number of aspects of the work to be revealed. Most of us assembled here today and at CODEX are acknowledged masters in our disciplines. Whether it is typographic knowledge, printing and papermaking, descriptive bibliography, printmaking, or photography, it is our responsibility to pass this knowledge on to our clients, students, and apprentices. Naturally, connoisseurship is only possible if we can provide the indispensable haptic-reconnaissance that is absolutely vital to the grounding and contextualization of the work in question.

Without the books in our hands, we have no material basis for the study. It is this revealing of the work that brings us face to face with the idea of a studium codex and to the project of inventing the library.



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Top: Artists and admirers viewing the range of book works on display at CODEX 2015 in Richmond, CA.

When my wife and I visited the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne during CODEX Australia last year, we were impressed with the treasures on display. Some of the most beautiful books and prints ever made were to be seen—including magnificent Piranesi's, unique botanical notebooks and manuscripts from the founding colonizers of Australia, and a copy of the much-revered *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* from the great Venetian printer Aldus Manutius. During the tour, Susan turned to me and asked the rhetorical question: "What will they be showing a hundred years from now—from our period?"

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The development of a "studium codex" is a vitally important element in any plan that expects to build a fruitful bridge between the ancient and modern technologies of the book in an atmosphere of intellectual curiosity about the current state of the art.

The material qualities of the book as object and as an object of art and literature are not necessarily assured a place in today's increasingly virtual electronic "mediated" environments. The mission of the studium codex is not to negate or ignore the media of the moment but to speak out loudly for the complex nature of the object itself and to encourage a deep collecting of the great books of our time.

Thinking about the contents of Borges's *Library of Babel*, a thought that often crosses my mind—I have come to the conclusion that in the very near future, (if not already) the majority of books that have been published in the last century or two (and I mean most, not all) will become an unsupportable mass far too expensive to maintain and keep within ready reach for most libraries. This is, I believe, a complex problem too great for me to comprehend (just thinking about the fate of the 22nd through 33rd printings of *The Atkins Diet* gives me a headache)—however, I am not overly concerned about the fate of such books. They will serve their time in the hands of their readers and when worn or no longer useful, they will once again be reprinted or else repurposed as wall decoration or possibly insulation.

On the other hand, there are books being made today that are changing and sometimes challenging our notions of what a book can be and do.

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We are at each successive CODEX book fair witnessing the emergence of brilliantly conceived and exceptional books that are at once synaesthetic, pan-linguistic, and multi-disciplinary works of art and language. These books are being made in very limited editions in private ateliers and workshops that are often capable of surpassing most of the technical limits of the past century. In certain printmaking and paper laboratories, new technologies are being harnessed to serve the bookmaker's imagination. For example, at the Magnolia Press and Paper Mill in Oakland, Don Farnsworth is currently experimenting on techniques to revive 15th-century paper and felting techniques while simultaneously experimenting with intricate computer-driven laser-cut watermarking systems. This is only one of a number of hybrid techniques and services that this press has to offer; others include flatbed UV acrylic printing and laser-cut itaglio plate and wood block techniques for printing on traditional etching presses. This is but one example of traditional revivals and experimental workshops across the globe.

In a recent transatlantic colloquium on the subject of contemporary artist's books that convened at The Museum of Books and Writing at the German National Library in Leipzig, about 20 museum library administrators and curators from the United States and Germany, including representatives from the Frick, The Museum of Modern Art, The Brooklyn Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and representatives from similar German institutions, were gathered to discuss the problematics of collecting Artist Books.

I interviewed several of the American curators last month about the conference only to learn that their institutions are collecting artist's books but not nearly at the level that the field currently demands. Many of these national and international collections are missing out entirely on a considerable portion of the most important and exciting work on the planet today. I take this as a challenge: How do we engage these collections and their curators in our studium and in our expanded bibliosphere?

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When thinking about the totality of the book, I am reminded of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* wherein he proposed that the zeitgeist left Art (with a capital A) behind as the signal meaning carrier of his time and the corollary that henceforth art (with a lowercase a) will dwell among us as an equal among other disciplines, as simply another branch of the great tree of meaning.

Similarly, the "Total Book" is not a totality that drives mankind by its power to define the essence of our time. It is one among many ways of thinking about the essence of art and the human spirit. In the context of our Studium Codex, however, the total book has a definite meaning. The totality of the Book (with a capital B) is expressible only in the light of its historical context and then by superceding mere transmission of text and image and, like a Venetian chandelier, causing one to wonder at the heft and beauty of human ingenuity fired in the furnace of meaning.

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Top: Peter Rutledge Koch in his studio.

With this thought in mind, I should add that imaging technologies for works on paper are at their absolute best—ever. We can now print in micro-increments that the unaided eye cannot discern and in permanent colors that exceed all previous pigment standards. Advances in laser-cutting technology are becoming increasingly affordable and small experimental workshops utilizing these technological innovations are working in tandem with traditional printmaking workshops to produce hybrid multi-dimensional works that approach our wildest imaginings of only a few years ago. Superannuated photographic techniques are being actively revived, contemporary hand papermakers are focusing fresh research on 15th-century papers, and typefounders are just beginning to revive and enlarge metal type production. New binding structures, sensitive to the subject matter of the book, are being created at an accelerated rate. We are rapidly approaching the ideal conditions for the resurgence of the book as object, and coupled with the best minds of our generation, we are producing books that have never before been possible.

Books made under these highly enhanced and experimental conditions are among the wonders of our present civilization. And they do not exist in a vacuum. Seen in the context of truly great collections, they bring a sense of currency and health to the world of the codex, to the global bibliosphere.

There has never been a better time for the book.

*Peter Rutledge Koch, designer, printer, artist, and author, founded Montana Gothic: A Journal of Poetry, Literature & Graphics, Black Stone Press, and a letterpress printing office in 1974. In 1979 Koch embarked on a one-year apprenticeship with Adrian Wilson at his renowned Press in Tuscany Alley. Since the dissolution of Black Stone Press in 1983 he has published under numerous imprints named to suit different facets of his work: Peter Koch, Printers; Hormone Derange Editions; and Editions Koch. In 2005 he created the CODEX Foundation to preserve and promote the arts of the book and is currently director of the CODEX International Book Fair and Symposium. From 1991 to 2011 he taught the history of the book as a work of art at University of California, Berkeley. His books and artworks have been the subject of exhibitions at The New York Public Library, The San Francisco Public Library, The Widener Library at Harvard University, The Yellowstone Art Museum, and The University of Montana Art Museum.*