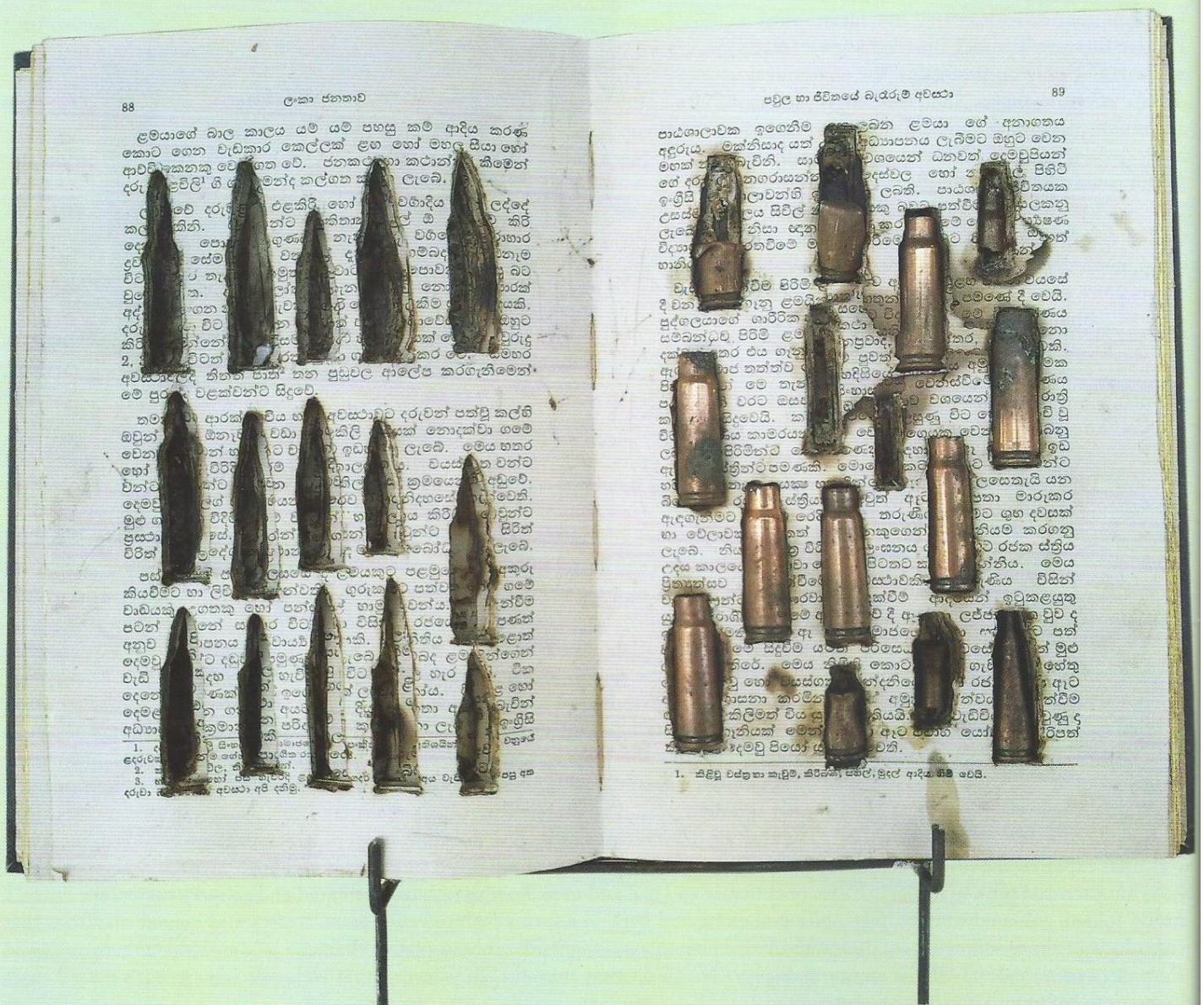
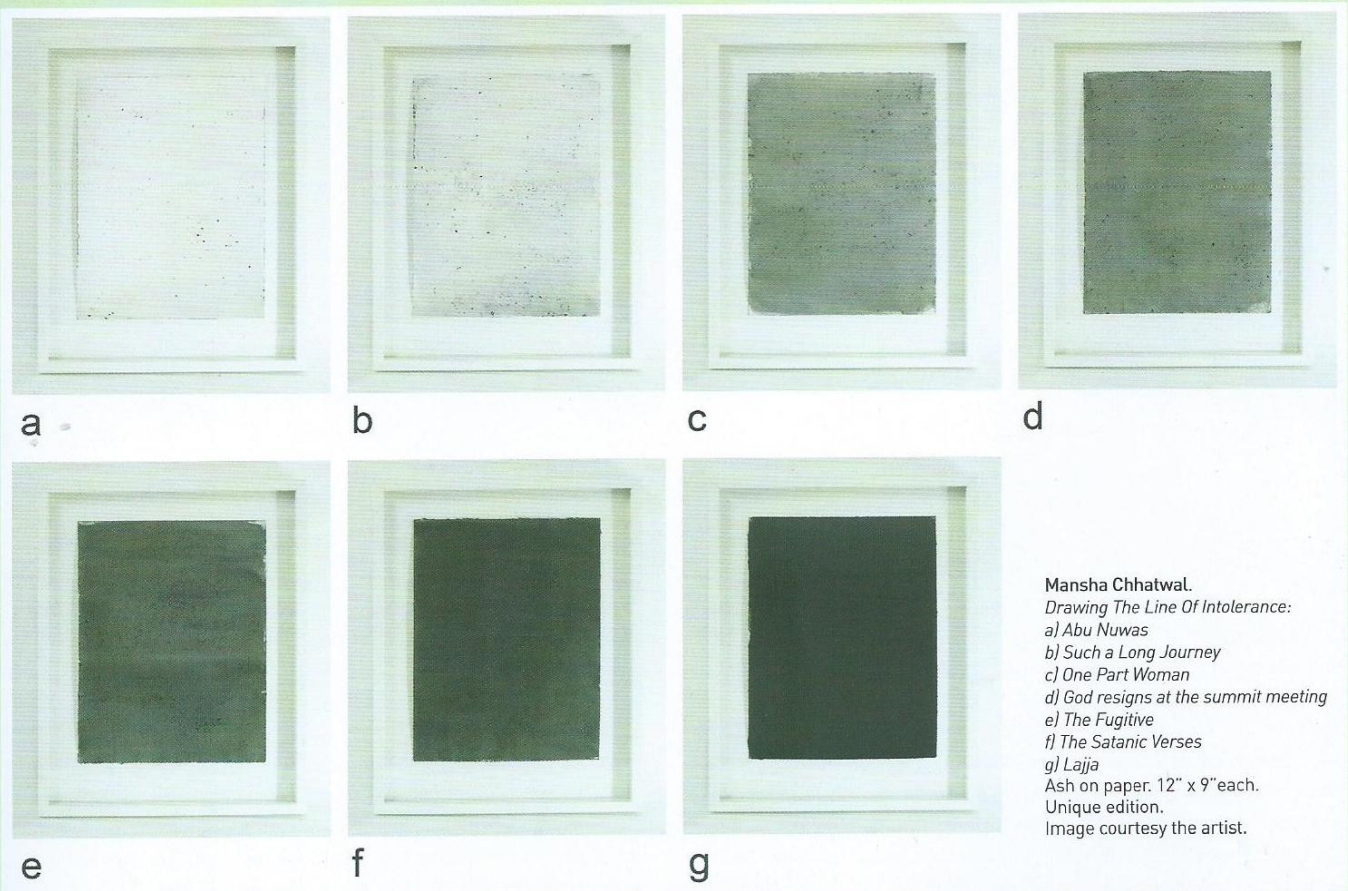


BETWEEN THE COVERS

Amit Kumar Jain leafs through artists' books where words and images come together in fascinating combinations.



Kingsley Gunatilake. *The Bullet Book (Lanka Janthwa)*. Found book, bullet shells, gold leaf. 11.8" x 8.66". 2014. Image courtesy the artist.



Mansha Chhatwal.
Drawing The Line Of Intolerance:
 a) Abu Nuwas
 b) Such a Long Journey
 c) One Part Woman
 d) God resigns at the summit meeting
 e) The Fugitive
 f) The Satanic Verses
 g) Lajja
 Ash on paper. 12" x 9" each.
 Unique edition.
 Image courtesy the artist.

“The Book – a traditional object, which nevertheless is capable of the most contemporary adaptation, yet retains an aesthetic dimension.”

– Mabel Kaufman in *The Book as Art and Idea* (1983)

I remember my first introduction to a work by the Sri Lankan book artist Kingsley Gunatilake. Titled *The Bullet Book*, it was placed quietly in a corner in one of the private galleries in Colombo. Though the book was overpowered by the canvases and sculptures of Gunatilake’s contemporaries, I was drawn towards the traditional form of the book, its contents riddled with bullets the artist had collected, mostly

during the years of the civil war. As I held the book in my hands (with the due permission of the gallerist), I surveyed it from its hardbound cover to its spine, from its yellowed pages to the embedded bullets, examining its age through touch and scent, enthused by the forms left by foxing, eaten away by silverfish. The chapter that the artist had chosen to expose in the book was *The Family Structure* and it silently spoke of the years of loss and pain families in the country had encountered. The author of the book had written on the societal structure of Sri Lanka and Gunatilake had carefully re-configured an important chapter with delicate intervention. The book hung precariously between literary and visual worlds.

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Tanmoy Samanta. *The Cartographer's Paradox*. Recycled book, paperboard, gouache on rice paper. 9" x 15.25" x 1". Unique edition. 2013. Image courtesy Gallery Espace, New Delhi.

In *The Century of Artists' Books*, author Johanna Drucker has called book art as a quintessential 20th century form (1994, pg. 1). Two schools of thought respond to the book in art: first, where it is held as a venerable object, a carrier of information, a tool for knowledge construction, and second, where the form of the book takes more prominence, leading to multiple interpretations and editions, making it a tool for commenting on existing texts. It is the latter that makes the study of book art more complex, as the book becomes an active zone of experimentation, susceptible to multiple variations by the same author. It is this version of the book this essay is concerned with.

There has been a constant tug of war between what can or can't be categorized as book art. The author-artist will often celebrate the form of the book and the state of flux that it is believed to be in. However, this constant flux makes it impossible to understand book art by a single definition. There are also questions that relate to its ownership: is it the author of the book or the artist who creates it, or both? Or do we also include the hands that go into its production – the engravers, printers and binders? Are these books meant to be unique or in edition, do they need to be printed on archival paper or can photocopies stapled together constitute a book? Does the book need to be structurally present or can an artist use torn sheets

under this category? Are printed and published multiples by independent presses included? Is it a field meant for artists only or can graphic designers, sculptors and photographers participate? These are some questions that complicate the genre of book art.

The show *Reading Room: Book Art from South Asia* has attempted answering these questions over its five editions, with a focus on the form of the book itself. With each subsequent edition, the *Reading Room* has remained in a state of flux, and has included photographs, individual pages of found books, self-published books by designers and even ashes of burnt books. As the curator, I have toyed with the idea of the authored title of the exhibition while at the same time relinquishing all ownership of the exhibition by crediting everyone involved in this exhibition. Its original theme has been maintained by choosing the appropriate venue, the highlight being an old Jewish library during the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014-15). The exhibition, like the works featured in it, was planned to resist the art market that had forgotten the 'beauty' of the book. Both the book and the exhibition became agents of activism and touched upon the acceptance of book art in our gallery infrastructure and collecting habits, with very few exhibitions on the



subject. Till date *Reading Room* has been held in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kochi, Winchester School of Art, England, and at Saffronart, New York. Each edition has had newer artists who were engaged with using the form of the book to comment on political, social and personal agendas.

Clive Phillpot, who served as the director of the library at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has used the phrase “Mongrel Nature” for artists’ books, as they are “distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation and literature all come together” (1998, pg. 33). This, in fact, comments on the constant state of flux, book art operates in, meandering through various art histories and disciplines. Anne L. Burkhart has extended this argument by adding that there is no “single form, production method or conceptual framework that embodies what an artists’ book is (2006, pg. 249).” The book, thus, as art object, embodies a diversity of form, approach, content and style, which in turn, leads to how it is interpreted, understood and critiqued (Ruhanie Perera, 2014). Thus, in most common texts, a book can be interpreted with reference to its auratic nature (the traditional form of the book), innovations (working with the texts within the books), conventions (structural changes to the book itself) and appropriations (altering the book through

interventions like cutting, pasting, folding, collage, etc). Conventions and appropriations often merge and are seen in most examples of book art.

The acquisition and further study of book artists in *Book Art: Iconic Sculptures and Installations made from Books*, published by Gestalten, initiated a journey to identify key artists who were working in the medium. It was over discussions with collectors in Mumbai that I first chanced upon the appropriations of Banoo Batliboi – a self-taught paper artist – where she had transformed old passports of a couple into a renewed object. She applies a careful, mathematical approach to her work to create subtle organic forms in her book sculptures, her folds diluting the meaning that was originally a part of the book. The passports that once documented decades of travels of the couple now represented a quiet introspection of the years gone by. Batliboi’s passports were what Claire Bernstein called “radical extenders of form rather than natural vessels”. Her *Plush* series, which included leather-bound books embossed with 22-karat gold from the Franklin Library, has investigated the auratic nature of the book by retaining the originality of the form and the cover while appropriating the pages with folds that can be undone to restore the book to its original form.

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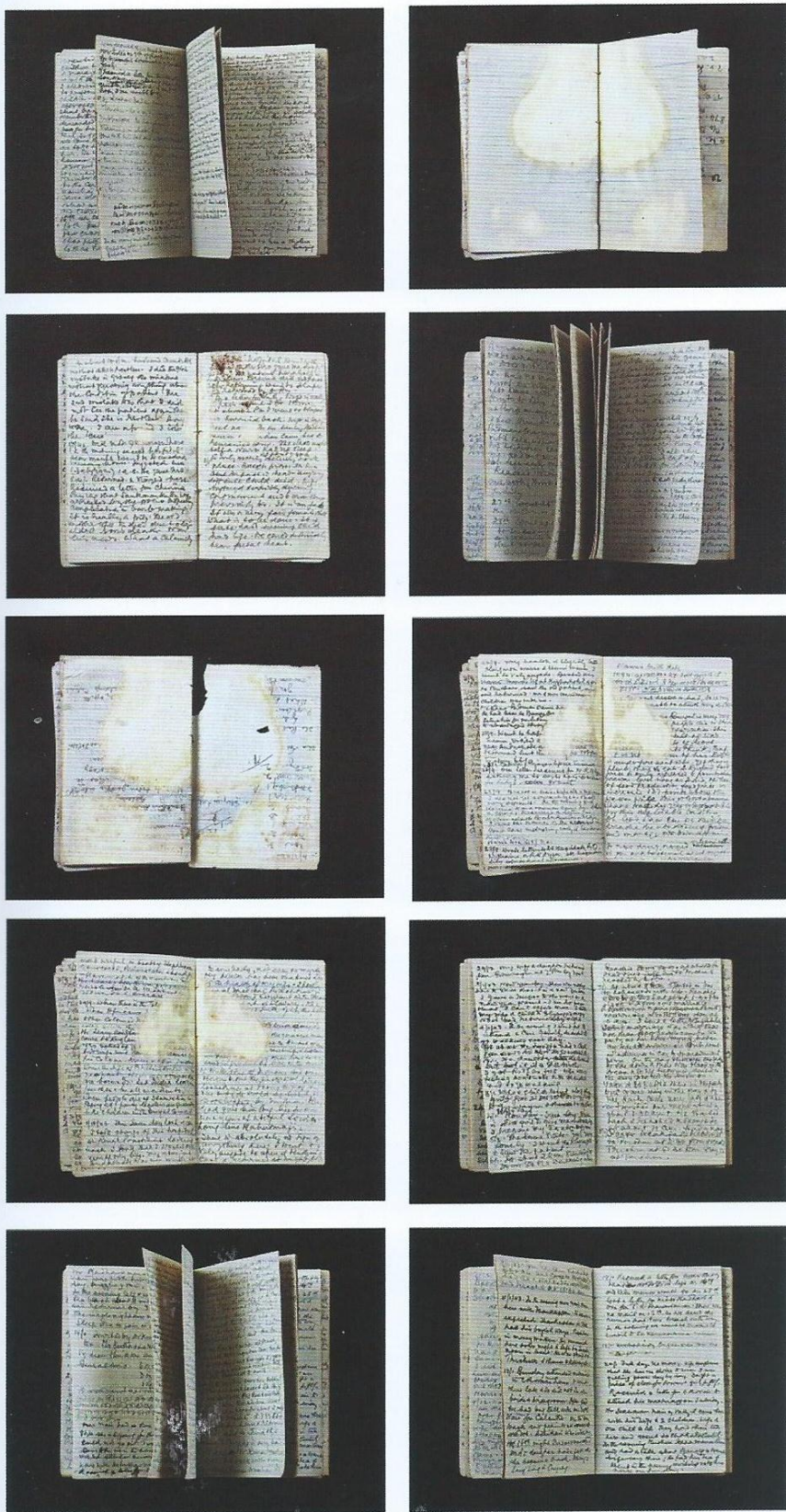
Sathanand Mohan. *Chronicle*. Digital photographs of pages. 12" x 16" each. Set of 25. Image courtesy the artist.

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Unlike Batliboi, who was inclined towards the form of the book, US-based Nepali artist Youdhisthir Maharjan's paper works can be categorised under textual innovation and appropriations. He is driven by the title of the books he collects, from which he patiently cuts the letters, words and sentences, to question language and its meaning. His work often engages in laboriously repetitive processes that are performed meditatively to transform the meaning of his found books. He transforms the book into either singular sheets or scrolls that make the viewers come up close in a solitary odyssey of self-searching. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Maharjan pushes his own limitations of working with single sheets to create a scroll that extends to 2500 inches. His selected book is Nelson Mandela's autobiography that talks of his journey as a freedom fighter. By painting the sentences in the book with white acrylic, and yet highlighting each punctuation mark between sentences and further connecting them with a continuous line, Maharjan repaints the text into a visual journey of Mandela's struggle.

The flexibility of the book to cross over disciplines has been of great interest. The book is often experimented with in the sphere of graphic design, which results in self-authored books or as in the case of Mumbai-based Mansha Chhatwal, the conversion of the structure of the book to such an extent that it is beyond recognition. The book has been at the centre of several intolerant acts – it has forced Taslima Nasreen to flee her country and take refuge in another or compelled Indian writers who have taken the bold step against censorship and returned their Sahitya Akademi awards. Book burning has become increasingly popular as an act to silence writers such as Perumal Murugan and Chinese author Shen Congwen (1902–1988).

Chhatwal, in her conceptual works *Drawing the Line of Intolerance* and *Aftermath*, scrutinises the act of book burning and the threat and violence therein. In her year-long investigation, she read controversial tracts such as *Lajja* by Taslima Nasreen,



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Such a Long Journey by Rohinton Mistry, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, *Madhorubbagan* by Perumal Murugan and *Taiwan ron* by Kobayashi Yoshinori and performed the act of book burning after reading them, transforming them into ashes, which found renewed existence in her artworks. Chhatwal incorporates the grayscale, a colour chart that she used as a graphic designer to comment on the varied scales of intolerance books have created while the rocks in *Aftermath* become a symbol of protest during events of civil unrest.

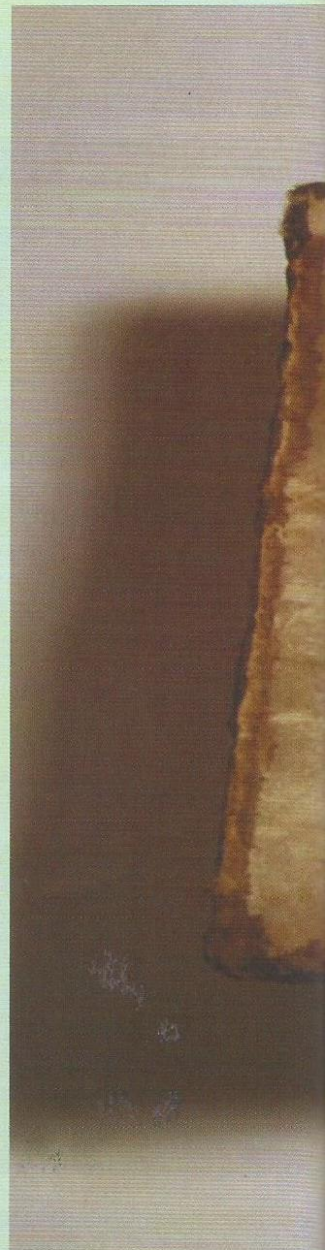
Unlike Chhatwal, Delhi-based Tanmoy Samanta considers a publication as the end of a book's purpose. For him, the book is raw material that can be appropriated by using multiple techniques like pasting, cutting, painting, stitching and collage, while maintaining its original structure. Samanta, like many other artists, uses the book as an extension of his paper works and canvases that often remain outside the reach of viewers. The book can be picked up, touched and negotiated with. Looking beyond the title of the book and inspired only by its structure, Samanta echoes *Reading Room's* objective of creating a book that floats across genres, categories and borders in his work *The Cartographer's Paradox*, especially, as it competes with its online presence.

Be it auratic or textual, conventional or appropriated, the book continues to serve the narrative mandate in all these forms. However, there are many artists who prefer to use it from a journalistic point of view, and in the process, summon its traditional use to narrate a story. An artist's sketchbook may fall into this category as it provides a survey of his career through sketches and doodles, documenting important thoughts through words and images. Sketchbooks, such as those of Rabindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, are important records of commentaries or personal stories, and are part of important collections.

Bangalore-based Ravikumar Kashi has revisited the format of the book consistently over the last two decades;

the process and the content of his art has adapted to changing times, and also venues. He has been one of the few Indian artists to have exhibited in multiple book art exhibitions globally, some of which include the Book Art Biennial in Minnesota, USA; the European International Book Art Biennale; Personal Histories International Artists' Book Exhibition, Australia; and the 8th Festival of the Artist's Book and of Small Editions 2015, Spain. His works focus on the relationship between text and image and have taken the form of sketchbooks; he has taken recourse to the use of paper pulp to create book sculptures, to making photographic narratives and to converting the book into various forms. His recent works have been influenced by his training in the Hanji paper technique from Korea. This involves using a variant of the handmade paper with multi-directional grains. *Everything He Touched* is a book that Kashi has made using this technique. The book depicts daily objects used by Mahatma Gandhi which are now enshrined in museums, many at the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, and signify or embody the philosophy of the great leader. Though simple in its layout, the book foregrounds the tension between Gandhi's teachings and current political and social structures.

Vadodara-based Sathyanand Mohan's work titled *Chronicle* is a photographic journal. Mohan has documented his grandfather's journal written between 1942 and 1944 while he was a member of the Indian National Congress and was involved in the Independence movement. Through 25 well-composed pictures, Mohan has documented the family heirloom, and has explored the complex relationship between language and identity, bringing to the forefront a freedom fighter's ideological take on independence and the family. This work specifically made me readdress 'book art' as 'the book in art'. Does a work like *Chronicle*, which is primarily a photographic work, fall in the category of book art? Since the book itself is the source of the work, I would reckon that it does, especially when the artist has managed to retain its three-dimensionality on a flat surface.



Ravikumar Kashi. *Everything He Touched*. Conte, ink and photography transfer on Japanese Raka stained handmade paper. 14.5" x 12". 2012. Image courtesy the artist.



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Delving into similar subjects – freedom struggle and the family – is one of the most popular book art activists of the region: Sri Lankan artist Kingsley Gunatilake, who has used the book to address the civil war that raged in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 2009. His works can be categorised under assemblage, i.e. adding objects (found or specially made) to an existing structure. Thus, in most cases, the structure of the book will be maintained and other objects will be added to it. Gunatilake maintains the political structure of the book by working on tracts that have spoken about the politics of war. He has inserted empty bullet shells and G. I. Joe toys that were found in local markets into books, and commented upon the political and social changes in Sri Lanka. These interventions in the texts are Gunatilake's commentary on how the war has been embedded in every possible social pyramid. His books, Gunatilake says, are cartridges where ammunition is kept. He adds, "Communication in my books has been burnt by incandescent bullets that reflect the rage of violence."

Thus, the book and the artist have often found themselves as agents of activism in South Asia. One of the most important distinctions between book art and commercial publishing is that the book art format allows for independent thinkers to publish their thoughts. Books that are provocative often do not find any support from publishing houses or sponsors. Visual thinkers often publish limited copies of their books, keeping in mind their own means, outlining their own reach. Drucker has defined independent publishing as "independent from commercial constraints and motives... linked to that of the artist activist" (1994, pg. 7). It is for the same reason that in today's connected world and through innovative printing techniques, the book becomes an important tool for underrepresented voices.

Herstories, an independent publishing project by Radhika Hettiarachchi and Shanika Perera, was born out of the fact that the historical narrative of post-war Sri Lanka was being written as a nation-building project, making the triumphal militarization of the post-war phase mostly a 'his' story and in the process completely isolating women's suffering, strength, survival and hope. With the aim of bridging the gap between the two, 270 narratives of women were collected from the southern, eastern and northern provinces of Sri Lanka, providing a different perspective on the 26-year war. These narratives were documented on hand-written letters; visual narrative tools like collective memory mapping were used and shown across the country through various exhibitions. The book was the outcome of multiple discussions with the project coordinators who reinterpreted the stories through graphic mapping, transporting the multi-lingual text into a global visual language. Unable to find sponsors who would publish the limited edition book, the artists finally decided to print a few copies.

Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations* comments on the collector of books, who unpacks his library with a sense of anticipation, almost nervously waiting for its sensory experience to take over that intimate moment. He writes, "One of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned at the marketplace and bought it to give it its freedom." (1950, 1969, pgs. 59-67) Most book artists, including those mentioned above, are book collectors who regularly visit flea markets and stores to rescue books and give them a new life by re-categorising them. While there have been debates globally if the form of the book is coming to an end, you cannot gainsay the fact that it still has takers everywhere.

Book art as a form has primarily developed in the second half of the 20th century, with the number of artists and collectors on the rise. The Tate has close to 5,500 artists' books in their collection, while the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has more than 10,000 artists' books in their collection. The Center for Book Arts (established in 1974) in New York has been constantly working towards the promotion of book art through exhibitions, talks and workshops. The Minnesota Center for Book Arts has been organising the Book Art Biennial since 2009, an event that has now become an important meeting place for book artists. The CAFA Art Museum in Beijing presented *Diamond Leaves*, a survey of artists' books in the 20th century in 2012. The South Asian appetite for book art is still young and there is enough scope for more critical theory on the subject as well as its inclusion in exhibitions.

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