

A Confluence of Vision  
By Julie Chen

Collaboration between artists has long been a tradition in the world of art. This is also true in the world of book art, where so many factors come into play in the creation of a single work. Text, image, typography and book design must all function together for an artist's book to successfully offer a meaningful experience to the reader. While it is often the case that the content and design of a contemporary artist's book are the work of a single person, collaboration between artists, writers, and designers is not unusual. There are many levels of collaborative engagement that can take place in book development, from the passive end of the spectrum, when a publisher pairs a writer with an artist or illustrator, to the moderately active, when a book artist chooses the text of a writer to engage with in the creation of her or his own content, to the actively dynamic, when two book artists work together to develop a new work with their own created text and/or image. The work of Lyall Harris and Patricia Silva in *Meeting Places* clearly belongs squarely on the dynamic end of the spectrum with each artist contributing equally to the content development of twelve artists' books.

For this two-year project Harris and Silva came up with a very specific set of constraints that they rigorously adhered to for each piece. The finished works function not so much as creative dialogues between two people, as might be assumed when two artists with strong visions and strong voices join forces, but as the work of a new unified entity that favors neither artist and could not have been made by either artist alone. In a statement about the project, the artists explain that the constraints were designed to force them to "work in an immediate, intuitive and exploratory way." While the process may indeed have been intuitive and exploratory in nature, the resulting books have the feeling of being deeply considered and researched. Although sometimes playful in their use of materials and book structures, the message of each book is precisely articulated. Intimate and personal themes dealing with motherhood and body image are given the same consideration and weight as more political topics such as the plight of refugees. The overall effect on the reader is one of amplified connectivity: The reader connects to the visual and written narratives presented by the artists, starting with the personal and leading outward towards the global.

The individual books in *Meeting Places* present content in various formats but do not rely on gimmicks to entertain; instead, the reader's attention is drawn to consider the cultural meaning of the forms used, thus making each material detail an important part of the content of each book. Book 1, *The Things that Ride out Time*, is a simple French link binding composed of pages that have also been hand-sewn along the fore edge. Hand-stitching is further used to partially outline photographic

images of objects that appear on some pages. Upon closer inspection the sewn-together pages are hiding additional text, handwritten in Italian, which can no longer be completely accessed due to the sewing. The simple act of sewing becomes a quiet yet powerful force which both foregrounds and conceals in a project ultimately addressing those “things” that remain at the end of a lifetime. The theme of sewing as “women’s work” is revisited more overtly in book 6: *Without Fault; Sans Défauts*. The content and design of this piece mimics a standard case file folder, complete with metal fasteners at the top edge to keep all the sheets organized. The content consists of a case file for each artist with large front and side headshot photographs combined with judgments about various facial features written on transparent overlays; other text and images linked to gender and plastic surgery appear throughout the files. The companion text to the artists’ headshots lists facts about each “subject” as well as quotes about body image and sewing as a part of female identity. One quote reads:

Nothing can be more pitiable than a female unable to sew, her case being somewhat similar to a male who is unable to read.

While the sentiments in the texts about body image will be familiar to most modern female readers, it is the texts about sewing that brings home the deep level of constraint society places on female identity, but from an unexpected angle. To further this idea, what at first appears to be a traditional stitch sampler is included in the piece; instead, it illustrates various types of surgical stitching, giving the reader an example of material evidence, but with a twist.

As the projects progressed, Harris and Silva reached far beyond their own personal experiences to touch on larger cultural and political topics while still retaining a sense of the personal narrative. Book 7, *Daily Specials*, bound in a menu cover, contains a “welcome” note and printed menus, presumably from a refugee home, on removable cards as part of each page spread. On the back of the cards, and on the facing pages, are narratives presenting the hardships of refugee experiences and lists of countries from which populations are fleeing. This juxtaposition of what is implicit in the familiar menu format—access and invitation to food and culture—with these difficult narratives about people placed in extremely insecure situations heightens readers’ awareness of their own relatively secure position in the world. Similarly in book 8: *Check the Box*, a matching card game format signals the potential for a simple and familiar activity. However, the focus of this piece is the serious and disturbing topic of organ transplantation in various locations around the globe, again foregrounding the randomness of cultural and economic security in an uncertain world.

The range of approaches to both form and content in each of the twelve books in this project is a testament to the power of this medium to communicate ideas through both visual and material channels and to the depth and breadth of the unified vision that these two artists developed over the course of this close collaboration. *Meeting Places* is thus the locus for a confluence of disciplines united in this engaging work undertaken by Harris and Silva.

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*Julie Chen is an internationally recognized book artist (Flying Fish Press) and Professor of Book Art at University of Wisconsin and formerly at Mills College.*