

RICHARD MINSKY

Recipient of the 2017 GBW Lifetime Achievement Award

The 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes Richard Minsky, who like no one else, has made a deep and significant impact on all book arts over his lifetime. Richard opened up the book arts to a broad audience by conceptualizing and realizing the Center for Book Arts in New York, and exploding the definition of book arts. Hedi Kyle sums Richard up wonderfully by noting that he “is an achiever, but he is also an instigator, provocateur, inventor, visionary, gentleman and charmer.”

In 1974, when he founded the Center for Book Arts, it was the first of its kind and served as a model for the many other centers and similar programs throughout the US and abroad. Significant to that model is that these centers have often provided the primary training and infrastructure for generations of book artists. Richard connected people and skill sets and promoted the Center in ways that foretold our highly interconnected and networked world.

Betty Bright, author of *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America, 1960 to 1980* and Board member at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, wrote that “Richard Minsky’s service to the book arts in America has been profound and ongoing. Indeed, I believe that today’s book arts community would be weak or nonexistent if not for Minsky’s commitment to nurturing broad involvement. The US book art persona of generosity, of artists readily sharing information, innovation and expertise, was first embodied at the Center for Book Arts. It expressed Minsky’s vision that the newly-christened book arts welcomed everyone: artists and writers, librarians and collectors—anyone drawn to the book.”

Hedi Kyle shared that “Richard connected with people of the trade like edge gilders and finishers as well as artists that saw the book as a vehicle for their expression in multimedia or those who transformed books, altered them to make statements, sculptures, and installations. He was also good in promoting the Center, putting it on the map so to speak by attracting gallery folks, museum curators, magazine editors, and, most important, financial sponsors. The Center for Book Arts very much set the tone for others to follow all over the world and Richard without a doubt deserves the credit as originator.” In 1990, Richard took his message of the “book as art” international with the Center for Book Arts project ‘Book Arts in the USA’. This traveling show went to Latin America and Africa on a grant from the United States Information Agency. To this day, the Center’s impact is impressive with about 100 classes taught each year to 8000 students. In addition over 300 exhibits involving over 12,000 artist have been held over the past 40 years.

Miriam Schaar wrote of her own experiences, “Little of this would have been possible without the Center for Book Arts that Richard founded in a storefront on Bleeker Street in 1974. At the time, there were few places to study all aspects of the book arts in the City, even in the U.S. The foundation of study CBA provided informs my work to this day. Through its classes I acquired essential skills and, through its community, I discovered such mentors as Tim Ely, Jeff Peachey, Hedi Kyle, Daniel Kelm and Mindell Dubansky, all notable book artists or conservators. Richard’s open, inclusive thinking about artist books, especially the use of non-traditional materials in tandem with a focus on craft, became part of the tool-kit I developed for my work as an educator and artist.”

Gary Frost recalled Richard’s “flair for teaching bookbinders classical tango or calming those in the ‘flying refrigerator’ with a distracting violin recital.” He also noted the early Center for Book Arts “off-Bowery where [Richard] harbored and inspired the early enclaves of artists’ bookmakers.”

Richard forced (at times jarringly) the idea of the book as a holistic work of art, beyond the constraints of fine press work and design bindings in leather. The book arts and artists’ books would not be where they are now without him and those he initially touched through his work with the Center. From Betty Bright: “He championed early artists such as Hedi Kyle, Gary Frost, Barton Benes, Stella Waitzkin and many others—innovators whom he felt had not received the recognition they deserved. He understood the importance of capturing their voices and their contributions for the historical record.” He inspired and supported newcomers to the field by generously sharing his experiences in lectures and workshops on college campuses, at book arts centers, online, and elsewhere, inspiring many to explore our genre.

In his own work, Richard began pushing boundaries almost as soon as he began binding under the tutelage of Daniel Gibson Knowlton in the late 1960s. He joined the Guild as a book artist, and in 1972 had his first one-man exhibition in the Guild’s exhibition case at the AIGA. He also gained notoriety for his bindings. In particular, his *Birds of North America* caused great controversy in the 1975 Guild exhibit at Yale. Wrote Hedi Kyle, “Richard submitted the *Birds of North America* with a real pheasant skin attached to its cover. During the installation, it was decided to ban the book because it reached beyond the fine binders’ aesthetic and sense of craftsmanship. It also shed a few tiny feathers. Richard showed up in black leather and metal. The gentle ladies, including the Guild’s president, were alarmed.” His response: pull a few more feathers and artistically scatter them in the case, exclaiming “It’s molting.” Asked how this kind of book should be shelved, Richard replied, “You don’t stick it on a shelf next to other books. It’s a work of art, like a sculpture, and you exhibit it like that.” It was with great pleasure that Richard tracked down the binding so that it could be included in the retrospective part of the

GBW 100th anniversary exhibit; as the exhibit would not have been complete without it.

Craig Jensen credits Richard with “pushing binding beyond the finely executed exoskeleton of the book into the realm of provocative, thought-provoking fine art. His work has included single books and installations of numerous books often around controversial themes and subjects. An outstanding example is Richard’s Bill of Rights exhibit, “ten bindings and sculptural housings each representing one of the original Bill of Rights and illustrating the peril to our Republic.” Though first created in 1993 these works, and his interpretation of 1984 with video camera and screen might be considered prescient of the dangers faced by our Republic and the Constitution today. Susan Share wrote that, “In the 1970s and 80s, Minsky was creating sculptural, metaphorical books including *The Crisis of Democracy* wrapped in barbed wire, *Geography of World Hunger* with teeth at the foredge, and *The Biological Time Bomb* with explosives and a timer strapped to the binding. All have remarkable relevance today.”

More recently, Richard’s research around decorated cloth case bindings has built on the interest created by Sue Allen by cataloging and depicting many of these in a series of editions beginning with *American Decorated Publishers’ Bindings 1872-1929*, along with his trade book *The Art of American Book Covers*, published by George Braziller. He is also the author of *The Book Art of Richard Minsky*, introduced by Betty Bright, providing an excellent census and description of his book works. His website at Minsky.com is THE starting point for learning more about his work.

Richard was one of the first three book artists online and has used that platform to share his work and experience with others. Ever pushing the boundaries, he also took himself and the idea of a book arts center into Second Life, an early virtual reality platform. As with his other communities, Richard has shared generously with any and all on Book_Arts-L since its founding in 1994, inspiring many to pursue the book arts more seriously.

Book arts would not be where we are today without Richard’s contributions. He is in many respects a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, always in performance mode (or at least often), but also a consummate philosopher and innovator for the genre. Letters from his peers, fellow book artists, and academic scholars speak poignantly to all sides of his many achievements and contributions to the field and arts as a whole.

Jae Jennifer Rossman, Associate Director for Special Collections & Public Programs at Yale’s Haas Family Arts Library concludes that, “When Richard Minsky learned bookbinding in the late 1960s, the field was based strongly on traditional craft practices. Because of Minsky’s groundbreaking work, art and craft are no longer considered mutually exclusive. Additionally, the book arts have a wider audience today due to the increased availability of classes for the average person at book arts courses that are being offered across the country, based on Minsky’s innovative model from the 1970s. In all of these areas: scholarship, teaching, and the creation of new art work, Richard Minsky shows that he is continually thinking of his work as an artist in a multi-faceted approach, contributing not just new objects, but new ideas, and also encouraging the next generation.”

Or, in the words of Esther K. Smith of Purgatory Pie Press, “Richard started something that grew and sent off spores like a fungus and landed and inspired. One thing led to another—but Richard planted the seed and nourished it... [to] keep CBA growing. In his own brash and unapologetic way—with his thick Queens accent—Richard has long been an indomitable force of nature in book arts, and he deserves recognition.”

This Lifetime Achievement Award is long overdue. Congratulations, Richard!

- Peter D. Verheyen

To learn more about Richard and his work,
visit him online at www.minsky.com.