

RESPONSES TO THE PAPERS OF  
BARBARA BALLIET  
AND MICHAEL JOSEPH

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These two papers are explosions that clear the mind of preconceptions and stereotypes. Balliet and Joseph tear away the surface of the sign of the book, the sign of historic truth, and reveal the underlying complexities. Balliet shows us an extraordinary paradox. We have been convinced of the universality of the stereotype of the nineteenth-century American middle-class white woman as confined to the domestic sphere, prevented from entering the fast-growing world of the spread of information, an idle player on the cultural stage. We believe that the world of the *Yellow Wallpaper* is all pervasive. In the *Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Gilman describes the virtual imprisonment of a woman to her bedroom to rest and get over her urges to go beyond Victorian standards of acceptable behavior, limiting her to the domestic sphere. In her confinement, she creates a world of hallucination based on patterns in the yellow wallpaper. The room becomes her world and she lives in its fantasy, removed from the real world. It's a powerful image, used in the beginning stages of feminist theory to break into a new era of freedom and potential for women.

Dr. Balliet explodes the universality of that myth. She gives us facts and figures revealing the presence of hundreds of women in the illustration industry, full-time members of a professional workforce with tremendous impact on shaping the cultural constructions of nineteenth-century Americans. And yet, despite their revolutionary presence in the working world of urban industrial culture, they helped to create and bolster the image of the useless woman, idle except, of course, for those minor responsibilities—maintaining the home and bearing and caring for children.

What a paradox, and what an interesting phenomenon—the power of the patriarchy so strong that women themselves bought into it, not seeing

the reality that their own working situations could reveal to them. The world of the print and the book has had women professionals since its origins in the fifteenth century. From the invention of printmaking, women have been involved in the production and distribution of images. Dürer's wife, for instance, peddled his prints at markets and fairs throughout Germany. Perhaps because engraving is an indoor task, the working utensils and ultimate object—the plate—all small in size and easily done at the kitchen table, women were involved in reproducing the paintings of well-known artists like Raphael and others from the start of reproductive engraving. Engraving was a family business, passed down by fathers to sons—and even to daughters. A woman could hold a nursing baby in one arm and push an engraving needle with the other. It was one of the earliest industries entered by women. Barbara Balliet has shown us how this tradition persisted into the modern era and also shown us how blind we are to the issue of women's involvement in cultural enterprise. We simply don't see what has been going on until someone like Dr. Balliet opens our eyes.

Michael Joseph explodes several prevailing assumptions. The first is how the artist making a physical object that resembles a book makes us aware of the problems inherent in the Platonic ideal of the book as we have accepted it. In other words, the physical exploration of book form when books can even be corsets, as in Miriam Schaer's work, has reference to, and changes, the sign: book. We have accepted the book as the bearer of text. The exploration of book form by artists has shown us the power of the physical form of the book, an aspect of the book that our culture has ignored, and how that physical form overrides the text in creating the concept of a book. Derrida explored this issue a number of years ago, but without the evidence that Mr. Joseph presents. Derrida pointed out how the book has rules. We expect a linear discourse, we expect a beginning and an end, we expect language itself. Even though the book may be beautifully bound, even though there may be exquisite illustrations, these elements of the book are subservient to the text. Mr. Joseph breaks open that sign. He shows how the artist's book questions linear discourse, even questions whether the book needs text to be a book. Thus artists through their books have changed the Platonic idea of the book—the physical has had impact on the metaphysical and the cultural sign, moving beyond the temporal, to a world without time.

Another stereotype that Michael Joseph explodes is the artist as the maker of the object, a craftsperson, rather than a philosopher. Quite the contrary,

as those of us who are makers in the arts know. And through the involvement of artists in the book in the last forty years, Mr. Joseph makes us aware of artists as thinkers. Another aspect of the artist's book that Michael Joseph explores is the issue of the original. He points out how one must have copies before one has the original. For instance, as he writes, so eloquently, we don't talk about the moon as original, because there is only one. By breaking the mode of the traditional book, the artist shows us the temporality of the original.