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BOOKSTORES FOR GAZERS

Especially in the summer, when the sidewalks of the New York art world turn into barren, windswept places, I spend a lot of time visiting what I like to think of as a parallel art world, one that seems almost clandestine.

In this world the galleries don't have the word "gallery" in the name. Many are tough to find, located along anonymous hallways of nondescript buildings. They tend to be on the small side, and some keep irregular hours. But they can be as visually sumptuous as any traditional gallery. And they are democratic places, where the art can be (occasionally, carefully) handled and where someone with means as meager as mine can afford to build a little collection.

To describe them as bookstores — which they are, in the narrowest technical sense — would be a little like describing "On the Road" as a guide to traveling America by automobile. Yes, you can buy books in these stores, mostly books about art or artists, or books made by artists, or books and other things, mostly on paper, directly or obliquely related to the life of contemporary art.

But over the last few years the city has entered a kind of golden age of art-book establishments that transcend the bounds of the bookstore. Relative newcomers like Karma, a tiny publishing-office-meets-shop in the West Village, and 6 Decades, upstairs in a ramshackle-looking building on Canal Street, have joined veterans like Specific Object in Chelsea and, a few blocks away, Printed Matter, the artist-founded nonprofit that is now in its fourth decade.

Dashwood Books, which specializes in new and hard-to-find photography publications, opened in 2005 on Bond Street at the edge of the East Village. And just a few months ago a mysterious dealer named Fulton Ryder opened a truly unclassifiable, appointment-only shop on the Upper East Side. (A recent tour of the shop was granted on the condition that its location, in a dim 1970s-flavored apartment building, not be revealed; its owner's true identity, however, has been an open secret for months — Fulton Ryder is a nom de plume of the artist and prominent book collector Richard Prince.)

What all these stores have in common is a firm belief in the book as art, at a time when the form of the book itself is dematerializing into the digital at a rapid clip. Of course, artists have made great art in book form for decades, centuries even, and New York has gloried in earlier art-bookstore golden ages, done in by real estate prices and shifting tastes.

But perhaps because the physical book is coming to seem more like an object than ever before, the current landscape of shops blurs the line between bookstore and gallery in rollicking, unpredictable fashion. And because the shops are not nearly as tethered to high-end economics as art galleries, the *mélange* of stuff that results, some for sale and some not, can be strange and wonderful, like highly personalized cross sections cut from the culture at large.

Not long ago I wandered into Karma when it was having a deadpan summer show, selling fluffy beach towels, shell pots and balls of twine (large and small) at the same time that it stocked copies of Ed Sanders's "Poem From Jail" (1963; nicely priced at \$30); a special-edition book by the artist Rob Pruitt, with covers made of solid marble (\$500); Baudrillard's "Agony of Power" (a 2010 edition); and "The Illustrated Elvis" (W. A. Harbinson, 1976).

Uptown, inside Mr. Prince's space, it looks as if books have forcibly colonized a railroad-style apartment, setting up forward positions in the closets and even the silverware drawers next to the dishwasher.

It reminded me of the conceptual artist Dan Graham's idea that magazines are like the pods in Don Siegel's 1956 film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," planting ideas subliminally inside unsuspecting homes. The shop and others of its kind also feel a little like late comic twists on postmodernism's death of the author. In Flann O'Brien's classic novel "At Swim-Two-Birds," the characters drug the novelist and take control of their own plots. In many of the places on my book circuit, the books and posters and magazines seem to have taken on an autonomous life as well, communing conspiratorially with one another across decades, subject matter and format.

This particular kind of art-book mind meld owes a lot to Mr. Prince, who has made collecting an integral part of his art career. "I want the earliest copy on record," he once wrote of his compulsion. "I want the copy that is rarer than anyone had previously dreamed of. I want the copy that dreams." The phenomenon is also indebted to dealers and collectors like John McWhinnie in New York and Steven Leiber in San Francisco (both of whom died this year).

David Platzker, the owner of Specific Object, cites as his inspirations both Barbara Moore, whose stores Bound & Unbound and before that Backworks in Greenwich Village, were pioneering (he bought Ms. Moore's inventory), and Dagny Corcoran, whose influential Art Catalogues, in Los Angeles, "is now part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"Dagny was the first one who helped me see books as this sort of revered physical space," said Mr. Platzker at his shop and gallery the other day. "To her, they are so much more than things people should stack on their coffee tables."

Mr. Platzker was just taking down a small show of 1970s pieces by Jack Goldstein — framed, brightly colored 45 r.p.m. records with titles like "A German Shepard," "A Swim Against the Tide" and "Two Wrestling Cats," recordings of nothing more than the things described by the words. "We had the sounds playing continuously during the show, and it was quite nice," he said. "At night you could hear dog and cat sounds echoing down the hallways here."

I had come in with my eye on a signed copy of the book "Dan Graham's New Jersey," which I spotted on the shop's Web site, but I took a look at the \$175 price and a harder look at my annual budget and thought better of it. So I contented myself with admiring, inside a glass case, a pristine first edition of "The Catcher in the Rye," whose dust jacket announced boldly that its author was ... Richard Prince.

As you might be aware, Mr. Prince did not write that celebrated novel. But last year he created a little guerrilla reprint that deviously imagined it to be so. And in a parallel universe where the books are in charge, making the art, who knows? Maybe it is.