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## Artist Interviews as a Tool in the Preservation of Artists' Books

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*The artist's book is a collecting area that continues to grow in academic and research libraries. While guidelines exist for collecting and cataloging artists' books, there is a shortage of practical models for the care of these often unique and challenging materials. This article presents three case studies in which interviews with the artists informed the preservation of artists' books. In all three cases, the interviews deeply informed the subsequent preservation actions and sometimes upended the conservators' initial assumptions about the appropriate course of treatment. Interactions with the artists helped conservators to understand the materiality and history of the works and devise preservation plans that respect the intentions of each work.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Since the 1960s, the production and acquisition of artists' books by academic institutions have grown significantly. In 2017, McLeland wrote, "During the last fifty years, artists' books have become a well-established and worthwhile area of collection development within libraries."<sup>2</sup> Alongside this growth in collecting rose challenges to collection development, processing and cataloging, and preservation.<sup>3</sup> The physical care of artists' books deserves further attention in conservation and library studies.

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1. Editor's note: This article includes the title of an artwork that includes sensitive language. Its inclusion is not intended to offend but to provide information. Reader discretion is advised.

2. D. Courtenay McLeland, "Artists' Books Collection Development: Considerations for New Selectors and Collections," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 18, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.18.2.80>. <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/article/view/16818/18408>.

3. See Stephen Bury, "1, 2, 3, 5: Building a Collection of Artists' Books," *Art Libraries Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s030747220001912x>; Andrea Chemero, "How Libraries Collect and Handle Artists' Books," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 19, no. 1 (2000), 22–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/adx.19.1.27949052>; Simon Ford, "Artists' Books in UK & Eire Libraries," *Art Libraries Journal* 18, no. 1 (1993), 14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s030747220000818x>; Terrie L. Wilson, "Collection Development Policies for Artists' Books," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 21, no. 1 (2002), 27–29. <https://doi.org/10.1086/adx.21.1.27949176>; and McLeland, "Artists Books."

Publications on the topic often address the importance of custom housing, environmental controls, handling training, and access restrictions.<sup>4</sup> While these actions are crucial, some artists' books demand care that cannot be met by collection care or standard book conservation practices. For example, Metzger and Smith described "food, glass, cigarettes, rubber, fireworks, human hair, and matches" that were used in the manufacture of artists' books in their collection, as well as books with unique and nontraditional structures, shapes, sizes, and format.<sup>5</sup> Just as contemporary artists use an expansive range of materials and formats to examine and sometimes subvert established genres of art-making, book artists apply many of these practices to their treatment of the book. Viewed from this perspective, the challenges posed by artists' books are similar to those found in modern and contemporary art. Thus, contemporary art conservation practices should be consulted as a resource for artists' book preservation.

In her analysis of standards in modern and contemporary art conservation, Beerkens identified three thematic categories of questions that inform major issues in modern and contemporary art conservation: 1) "the actual material of the artwork . . . [including] new materials, non-traditional making techniques, and artistic processes;" 2) "the artist as producer . . . mental owner . . . and first-hand source of information;" and 3) "various issues regarding . . . originality, authenticity, reversibility, reconstruction, repainting, or retouching" that are the tasks of the curator and conservator.<sup>6</sup> Using these categories to frame questions around the care of artists' books can help chart a preservation roadmap, particularly for books made of more challenging materials or formats.

Between 2020 and 2023, conservators in the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation and Conservation Department at NYU Libraries treated three artists' books whose unique material, construction, and condition problems required creative approaches to treatment and storage. These were *20 Slices of American Cheese* by Ben Denzer;<sup>7</sup> *Isaac Newton's Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* by Didier Mutel;<sup>8</sup> and *Roe* by Meredith Stern.<sup>9</sup> Devising preservation plans for the three items required conservators to explore questions that fell squarely into Beerkens' three categories,

4. Chemero, "How Libraries Collect," 22. The authors acknowledge the work of Taichman et al. in *Art Documentation*, which was published during the editorial process of this essay.

5. Consuela (Chela) Metzger and Michelle C. Smith, "Preserving Movement and Meaning in Artists' Books," *Parenthesis: The Journal of the Fine Press Book Association*, no. 41 (2021), 36–49.

6. Lydia Beerkens, "Side by Side: Old and New Standards in the Conservation of Modern Art. A Comparative Study on 20 Years of Modern Art Conservation Practice," *Studies in Conservation* 61, no. Supplement 2 (2016), 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1155336>.

7. Ben Denzer, *20 Slices of American Cheese* (New York, New York: Catalog Press, 2018). This publication applies a longer variation of the title, which differentiates it from another work of a similar title by the same artist.

8. Didier Mutel and Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (Paris: Atelier Didier Mutel, 2011).

9. *Roe* is part of the work by Meredith Stern, *I Can't Believe I Still have to Protest this Fucking Shit: 20 Years of Reproductive Justice Artwork* (Brooklyn, New York: Booklyn, 2022).

as the items comprised non-traditional materials and formats, were acquired from living artists, and their preservation required various stakeholders' input on issues of authenticity, reconstruction, and access.

In each case, artist interviews informed the approach to caring for uncommon materials and structures and helped to balance artists' intents with user access and preservation. At times, their input altered the course of treatment. Preservation plans that grew out of these interactions gave conservators, curators, and artists shared agency in the continued care of the work and incorporated the works' physical alterations into their existence in the collections. This paper outlines a methodology for integrating artist collaboration into the care of artists' books. It also explores the limits of applying standard book preservation practices to unique objects and argues for re-evaluating artists' books based on their material and manufacturing techniques, beyond their categorization as "book."

### Artist Interviews at NYU Libraries

The artist interview process at NYU Libraries benefited significantly from the rich resources regarding best practices for conducting interviews and Jessica Pace's participation in the VoCA (Voices in Contemporary Art) Artist Interview Workshop.<sup>10</sup> Interviews are conducted over video conference and recorded. Interview transcripts are created using the Konch automated transcription platform, and are reviewed and edited by the interviewer using the technique outlined by Debik.<sup>11</sup> Transcripts are saved on NYU's Ultraviolet repository.<sup>12</sup> The Preservation Department shares a consent form with interviewees; the form was drafted with the help of the NYU IRB Consent Form Generator and reviewed by the Library's legal department.<sup>13</sup>

The interviews in the following case studies are defined as "Case Interviews" because they focused on specific works.<sup>14</sup> The interviews were structured around the eight aspects laid out in *The Artist Interview*—"creative process," "materials and technique," "meaning," "context, conveyance and public," "aging, deterioration and damage," "conservation and restoration"—although the emphasis is often placed more on some aspects over others.<sup>15</sup> While structure guided the interviews,

10. Jonathan Debik and Sarah Giering, *The Artist Interview in Conservation—A Guide*. Translated by Sharon Larner. Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5165/hawk/504>; "Archive for Techniques and Materials of Contemporary Artists," accessed June 28, 2024, <https://artemak.art/en/>; Lydia Beerkens and Liesbeth Abraham, *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art, Guidelines and Practice* (Heyningen: Jap Sam Books, 2012); <https://voca.network/artist-interview-workshops/>.

11. "Konch," accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.konch.ai/>; Debik et al., *The Artist Interview*, 25.

12. "NYU Ultraviolet," accessed June 28, 2024, <https://ultraviolet.library.nyu.edu/>

13. "NYU IRB Consent Form Generator," accessed June 28, 2024, <https://pages.nyu.edu/irb/forms/consent/>.

14. Beerkens and Abraham, *The Artist Interview*, 31.

15. Beerkens and Abraham, *The Artist Interview*, 35.

it was applied loosely, allowing space for the interviewee to elaborate and introduce their trains of thought.

### **Work 1: *20 Slices of American Cheese* by Ben Denzer (b. 1992)**

Ben Denzer created *20 Slices of American Cheese* (*20 Slices*) in 2018 and NYU Special Collections acquired the work from the artist in 2020. The volume comprises twenty Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices,<sup>16</sup> adhesive-bound into a hard case covered in yellow book cloth. “20 SLICES” is hot stamped in blue onto the cover; “AMERICAN CHEESE” and the Catalog Press logo are hot stamped onto the spine in the same blue color. At the time of acquisition, no information about the item or its care accompanied the work.<sup>17</sup>

Upon the item’s arrival, staff noted dark biological growth within the cheese, and green mold was noted in two locations on the edges of the cheese slices. (fig. 1.)



**Figure 1.** Ben Denzer, *20 Slices of American Cheese*. [New York]: Catalog Press, 2018. *20 Slices* with mold growth, 2020.

16. Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices is a trade name for a pasteurized prepared cheese product manufactured and sold by the Kraft Heinz Company. The authors use “cheese” hereafter in reference to the individual leaves of the book.

17. Upon arrival, the item was housed in a re-closable plastic bag with silica gel packets. Conservators and collections staff were initially unsure whether these items were part of the work. They were retained until the interview with Denzer confirmed that they were not part of the work.

The work is used frequently for teaching and in workshops and tours, thus storing the book in a refrigerator or a freezer was not a viable option because of the degree to which it prohibits access. The book was immediately placed in a stable 35 percent relative humidity and 65 degrees Fahrenheit environment to discourage mold proliferation. Unfortunately, mold continued to spread to previously unaffected cheese slices. In 2021, conservator Catherine E. Stephens surface-cleaned the book using cotton swabs, brushing, and vacuuming to reduce mold and created an airtight housing containing silica gel conditioned to 15 percent relative humidity. Unfortunately, the cheese continued to shrink and darken. Although there was no visible mold growth after the initial cleaning and rehousing, by 2022, all slices were significantly embrittled and shrunken. Numerous slices changed from warm yellow to a dark brown color. (fig. 2.)



**Figure 2.** 20 Slices with darkened and shrunken slices, 2021.

During this period, conservators evaluated three treatment plans that aimed to balance preservation with access and user safety:

Option 1: Replace all contents with unspoiled Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices. Store the book in a low-humidity environment that allows it to be viewed and taken out when needed. This cycle may be repeated as the cheese ages. Keep additional cheese in cold storage for future use.

Option 2: Store the object in a sealed container and allow it to deteriorate. The disadvantage is that the artwork cannot be handled or exhibited out of the box due to the risk of mold exposure. The mold is likely to accelerate the deterioration of the binding. This complicates switching to Options 1 or 3 at a later date.

Option 3: Replace the cheese with a replica that looks like cheese but is more stable. This eliminates the possibility of mold growth and supports access but changes an integral component of the work.

The use of food as art material emerged around the same time as artists' books, and growing literature on the conservation of artwork made of perishable foodstuff emphasizes the importance of preserving the artist's intent as part of caring for these works.<sup>18</sup> *20 Slices* was no different. While all three options are achievable, they raised questions about authenticity and the artist's intent. For example, is the deterioration of the cheese intentional? If so, what is the expected lifespan of the book? How might replacing the cheese impact the work's meaning? How important are branded Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices to the work's integrity if the cheese is replaced?

### Interview

Jessica Pace interviewed Ben Denzer on December 17, 2020 over Zoom.<sup>19</sup> The conversation was organized around the following aspects from Beerkens and Abraham: materials and techniques, aging, deterioration and damage, conservation and restoration, and conveyance and public—more specifically, *20 Slices* in other collections.

### Materials and Techniques

Pace asked Denzer to discuss the material used in the work and where he obtained it. He spoke about using Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices, purchased in sixteen-slice packs, from the 7-Eleven convenience store located "near the Center for Book Arts" in Manhattan.<sup>20</sup> For *20 Slices*, he selected the most uniformly shaped slices, and bound them together along one edge using E6000 adhesive.<sup>21</sup> Denzer covered the spine with a thin piece of open-weave fabric he referred to as "cheesecloth," and con-

18. Claudia María Coronado García, "Can we use the Concept of Programmed Obsolescence to Identify and Resolve Conservation Issues on Eat Art Installations?" in *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials in Contemporary Art: An International Conference Held in Mexico City, June 3–5, 2019*, eds. Rachel Rivenc and Roth Kendra (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), 39–46; Miriam Basilio, Sydney Briggs and Roger Griffith, "Impermanence and Entropy: Collaborative Efforts Installing Contemporary Art," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 47, no. 1 (2008), 3–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27784619>.

19. Jessica Pace, Interview with Ben Denzer, December 17, 2020. The interview was the first conducted in the Preservation Department at NYU, and was administered via Zoom, but not recorded. Pace took notes from the conversation, which were shared with Denzer, and saved as part of the conservation record.

20. Pace, Interview with Ben Denzer.

21. A styrene butadiene block copolymer.

nected it to the hard case using polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) adhesive.<sup>22</sup> The books were made in one batch in an edition of ten with two artist's proofs.

### *Aging / Condition and Deterioration*

When asked about the book's deterioration and changes in appearance, Denzer stated he was comfortable with the book growing moldy, as long as it was not discarded. He noted that he believes the meaning of the work is not completely up to him and he supports users interacting with it as they choose. However, he stated that work's obsolescence, resulting from deterioration, was not something he intended or desired.

While discussing the original elements used, and whether they were integral to its meaning, Denzer stated he liked the absurdity of it being American cheese, specifically. Denzer said he was comfortable with replacing the cheese, and that replacement did not need to be the same brand. Regarding substitution with synthetic material, Denzer said if the options were limited to using a cheese replica versus the book no longer being seen, he preferred the replica.

### *Conservation and Restoration*

Denzer liked the idea of having conservators "renew" the object because of the performative aspect of the work and liked the accessibility provided by the work being in a library's collection. When asked about conservators using adhesives that were not original to the work, Denzer said he was comfortable with this as a part of future conservation treatments.

### *Conveyance and Public*

During the interview, Denzer noted that he worked with other institutions that held this work and was aware of varying condition issues. Denzer shared the contact information for seven institutions, which made it possible to compare the condition of other copies of *20 Slices*, as well as solutions for storage and handling. Of the institutions that responded to the authors' queries—four university libraries, and one small museum—several struggled with long-term preservation of the work. All institutions provided specialized storage for the object. One used refrigerated storage, and others stored their copies in plastic or archival board containers with packets of silica gel. Institutions that did not refrigerate their copies noted physical changes in their copies, including brittleness and white spots. One copy was discarded and deaccessioned after becoming very moldy.

### *Treatment*

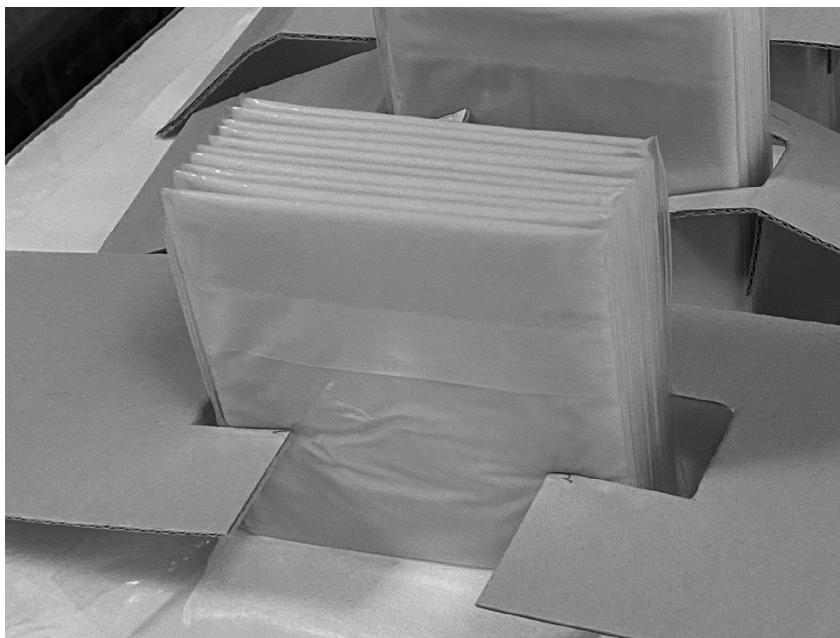
Denzer's perspective on the significance of cheese, his openness to conservation intervention, and his aversion to obsolescence guided conservators to treatment Option

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22. Pace, Interview with Ben Denzer.

1.<sup>23</sup> Conservators also discussed the plan with the Director of NYU Special Collections, Charlotte Priddle, to ensure that treatment and housing supported the object's intended use in the collections.

Pace carried out the treatment, which included the removal of the original cheese from the cloth lining and tissue backing materials, strengthening the spine lining, and attaching twenty new Kraft Singles American Cheese Slices. New slices were stacked in the same orientation as the originals and joined to a piece of Harukaze SM4 backing paper using E6000 adhesive, the same adhesive that Denzer used in the work. (fig. 3.) Using backing paper helped prevent errors in alignment, and provided a tear layer, which will reduce damage to the original binding should the cheese need replacement again. After the adhesive dried, the stack and backing paper were joined to the binding using Jade 403 PVA adhesive and kept under weights until dried.



**Figure 3.** New cheese slices being prepared for attachment, 2022.

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23. Garcia describes this type of treatment as “planned obsolescence,” in which perishable components of an artwork are replaced when they no longer fulfill their intended function in an artwork, much as the way that a lightbulb needs to be replaced when it burns out. See Garcia, “Eat Art Installations,” 44–45.

Lastly, housing was created for the item, consisting of a transparent polypropylene plastic bin with a gasket lid that provides an airtight seal while providing visibility for study and condition monitoring purposes. (fig. 4.)



**Figure 4.** 20 Slices in relative-humidity-controlled housing, 2022.

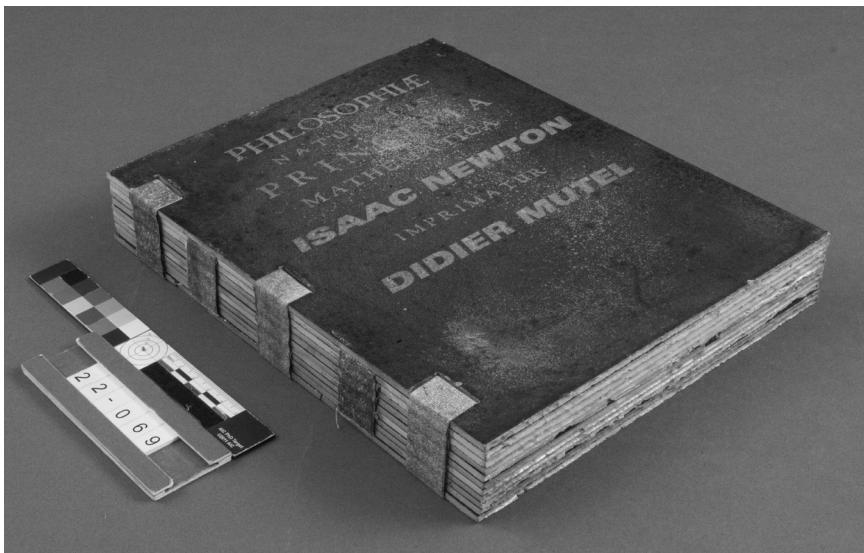
The lower section contains removable silica gel packets conditioned to 30 percent relative humidity.<sup>24</sup> The upper section is a tray on which the book rests, on its back cover, next to a relative humidity indicator. The original cheese used by Denzer—and forty slices of cheese purchased by the University Library in 2022—were packed in Marvelseal 360, an aluminized polyethylene and nylon film that acts as a protective gas and vapor barrier; these slices are currently kept in a dedicated collections freezer.

### **Work 2: *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* by Didier Mutel (b. 1971)**

Didier Mutel's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Principia*) is an homage to Isaac Newton's influential treatise. The book comprises twenty-two leaves of fiberglass-reinforced concrete, bound with woven textile strips colored using aquatint ink. (fig. 5.)

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24. The relative humidity was raised to 30 percent from the 15 percent used in the prior housing, as it was suspected that lower relative humidity might have contributed to the shrinkage of the cheese.



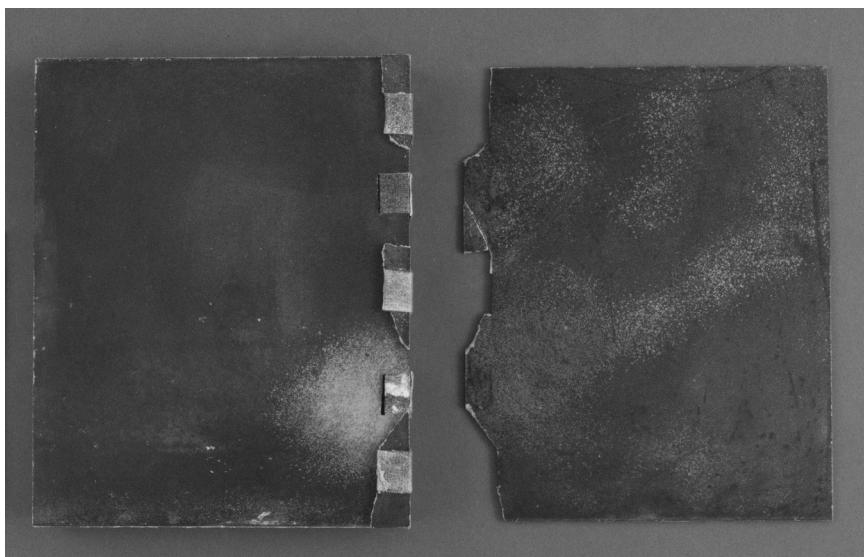
**Figure 5.** Mutel, Didier, and Isaac Newton. 2011. *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. Paris: Atelier Didier Mutel.

Text on the front and back was laser-engraved into the concrete. Individual leaves were etched using the aquatint process. The work is housed in a ray skin (galuchat) slipcase.

Immediately after its acquisition in 2011, *Principia* came to the Preservation Department for custom housing. Conservators made a drop-spine box for the book to allow it to be handled without having to move it in and out of the slipcase. At the time, conservators also noted a small crack near the binding edge of the last leaf, though no treatment was undertaken.

In 2020, the item returned to the lab when Special Collections staff noticed powdering and cracks along the binding of the last leaf. Upon closer examination, the leaf had fully broken along the three textile straps due to the stress the binding straps exerted onto the edges of the page when the work was opened and closed during use. (fig. 6.)

Damage to the object resulted from mishandling and insufficient housing. Unfortunately, prior care strategies underestimated the significance that the object's material and manufacturing techniques had on its use and preservation and instead focused on its codex format. For example, conservators created custom protective housing using a design that was standard for rare and fragile books. However, that design did not incorporate shock absorption material that would have been appropriate for brittle concrete. At the same time, handling guidelines did not account for the additional care and physical support necessary for the rigid leaves or the tight binding structure.



**Figure 6.** *Principia* (detail). Breaks in the concrete leaves, 2020.

At this juncture, the preservation plan consisted of reattaching the broken leaf, stabilizing cracks using adhesives, and, possibly, adding a concealed supportive mount to reduce the stress along the repairs. The plan also included new housing which incorporated impact-absorbing materials. Conservators were interested in interviewing Mutel to learn about materials and manufacturing techniques, which would inform the conservation treatment, including appropriate adhesives for repairing the broken elements. However, a conversation with Mutel identified the need for a more collaborative approach.

### *Interview*

Pace interviewed Mutel via Zoom on February 9, 2021.<sup>25</sup> The interview was coordinated with the help of Priddle, who purchased the book, and Gerald W. Cloud Rare Books, which represents Mutel.<sup>26</sup> This conversation was organized around the following Beerkens and Abraham aspects: creative process, materials and techniques, meaning, deterioration and damage, and conservation and restoration.

### *Creative Process / Meaning*

When asked about the book's concept and how he selected materials, Mutel said he chose concrete for its rigidity, weight, and symbol of strength. The dimensions of his work are based on Beinecke Library's copy of Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis*

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25. Jessica Pace, Interview with Didier Mutel, February 9, 2021.

26. Cloud also participated at the interview to assist with French and English translation.

*Principia Mathematica*.<sup>27</sup> The artist explained:

Mutel [00:00:38]: In that book, Newton has written . . . the law for the whole universe . . . I [chose] the concrete for two or three reasons. First, because it is heavy and also, we are talking about law . . . Moses, laws, the tablet. . . . There is a connection. So, the will was to inscribe on stone these laws. This was very important also to have a book [be] very heavy. . . . And another point. To make leaves not with paper, but with concrete is changing fundamentally the physic[al] approach of the book. Because the leaf, paper, we can fold it. . . that is the point, and we cannot with concrete. . . . And of course . . . it was exciting for me to see if I could find a way to merge all these ideas. And then the book, the *Principia*, there is no text, but I was working with one of the techniques I really like—etching and aquatint—and all these dots of aquatint was like an invitation to go so far in the universe. To discover other worlds . . . to go far, far, far away.<sup>28</sup>

### *Materials and Techniques*

Asked to describe his process for printing on the concrete, Mutel said that he did not use a press. Instead, he etched a copper plate, inked the plate and, while the ink was wet, closed three edges of the plate, poured concrete on top in a thin layer, and allowed it to dry. Mutel chose a commercially made concrete that contained fiberglass, which helped counteract the brittleness. Mutel experimented extensively with this process and showed many of the pieces he still had in his studio. Mutel also explained that he printed the textile binding straps, to give them a worn mottled texture, before he laced them through the concrete leaves and adhered them in place with adhesive similar to PVA.

### *Damage and Deterioration*

Told about the current condition problems of NYU's copy of the work, Mutel was dismayed and apologetic. He discussed the work's fragility: because the experimental binding structure is tight, he showed how the book should only open at a narrow angle, for the user to peek inside. (fig. 7.)

Since NYU owns the first finished copy of the book, Mutel acknowledged that the binding might be more taut than intended. Mutel stated that the fragility meant that one should handle it as they would a religious relic:

27. *Philosophie Naturalis Principia Mathematica* / Auctore Isaaco Newtono. 1726. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2111691>.

28. The interview transcript can be found in NYU's Ultraviolet repository. <https://ultraviolet.library.nyu.edu/>.



**Figure 7.** Screen grab of Mutel, via videoconference, demonstrating with his hands how far the book should open, 2021.

Mutel [00:16:07]: When we carry it we have to pay so much attention—more than even with another book because we are carrying something—I would almost say something holy, “*que chose de saint*.” So, we really have to take it with extreme care. That is part of the of the thing. Otherwise, it will break and break and break.”

### *Conservation and Restoration*

Mutel was asked about the possibility of conservation intervention for the broken pieces. Unexpectedly, he said he did not think what was broken could be repaired, and he offered to make new leaves as replacements. This offer opened a previously unimagined treatment path, as well new considerations. In the interview, Pace and Mutel discussed what to do with the broken pieces after they are replaced:

Pace [00:17:56]: One of the questions it would raise is, how would we refer to the object . . . is it the *Principia* from the original date with added leaves from a later date? Does that change the naming of the object, and can we retain the older, the broken leaves, as part of the object?

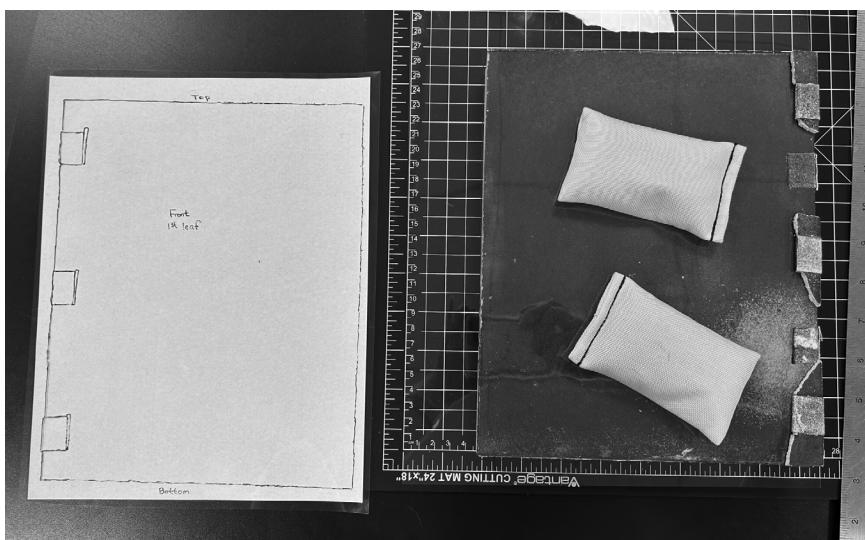
Mutel [00:20:41]: For me, the best is just to keep the broken pieces. I have kept all my broken things. [laughs] . . . So, if I send you a new unbroken piece. I would say that of course, you keep the broken leaves. And we can write a statement just to explain. And you will add this into the box

because it's part of the story of your copy. And by this it will, I would say, make it a little special.

### *Treatment*

After the initial interview, curators and conservators at NYU Libraries discussed Mutel's proposal and accepted this idea. This option was attractive because it acknowledged the artist's relationship with the work and gave him a role as the work changes over time. The result is more structurally sound—and safer to handle—than an object with repaired breaks. To acknowledge its history, NYU Libraries Special Collections retained the broken pieces along with the book. The Preservation Department also documented this change, in the same way as a conservation treatment, so the information could be incorporated into the teaching and display of the work.

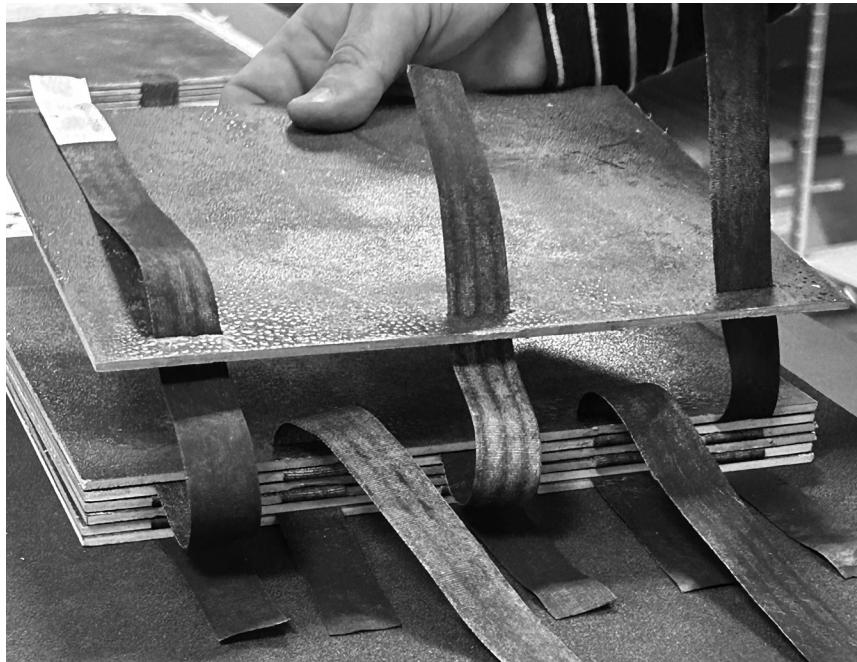
Between spring 2021 and fall 2023, conservators and Mutel collaborated on the manufacture of the replacement leaves and new binding straps. This included discussions about binding structure and materials and sharing templates of NYU's broken leaves for Mutel to create replacements. (fig. 8.)



**Figure 8.** Tracing of the book made in the NYU Libraries' conservation lab, 2022.

In November 2023, Mutel and Cloud arrived at the NYU Libraries conservation lab with two sets of replacement concrete leaves and binding straps. Conservators Pace, Di Gennaro, Laura McCann, Preservation Librarian Lindsey Tyne, and Director Priddle discussed and observed the process. The visit was recorded and photo-

graphed.<sup>29</sup> Mutel first released the original binding straps, then removed each leaf and placed them in order on a table. Using replacement straps, Mutel then laced the individual leaves together, beginning with the two new replacement leaves. (fig. 9.)



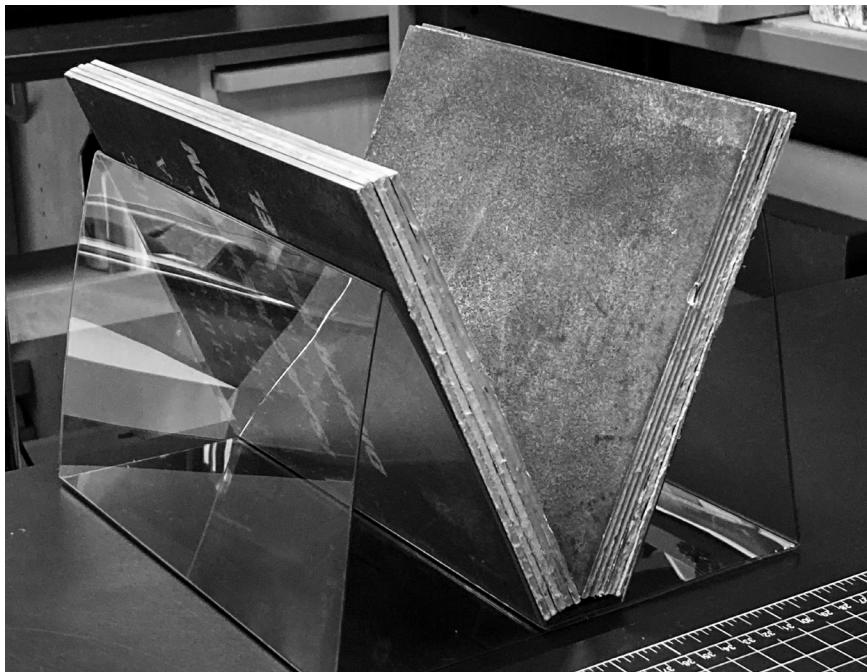
**Figure 9.** Mutel lacing the leaves back together with new straps (detail), 2023.

During the lacing, Mutel occasionally consulted with Di Gennaro about the binding's tension and tightness, which Mutel noted needed to be "tight, but not too tight."<sup>30</sup> After lacing, the ends of the straps were adhered on the spine with PVA.

After the treatment's completion, Di Gennaro consulted with Priddle regarding planned use scenarios for the object. Her feedback informed the designs for a custom housing—with added shock absorption—for all elements of the work, including the broken leaves, as well as a cradle made from polyethylene terephthalate glycol (VIVAK) that provided support and visibility while preventing it from being opened past capacity. (fig. 10.)

29. Charlotte Priddle and Jessica Pace, "Images and Recordings of Mutel Visit," 2023. This documentation resides in NYU Special Collections and Preservation Department records and is for internal use only.

30. Priddle and Pace, "Images and Recordings of Mutel Visit," 2023.



**Figure 10.** *Principia* in its custom cradle, 2024.

As of June 2024, the book is available for use in Special Collections.

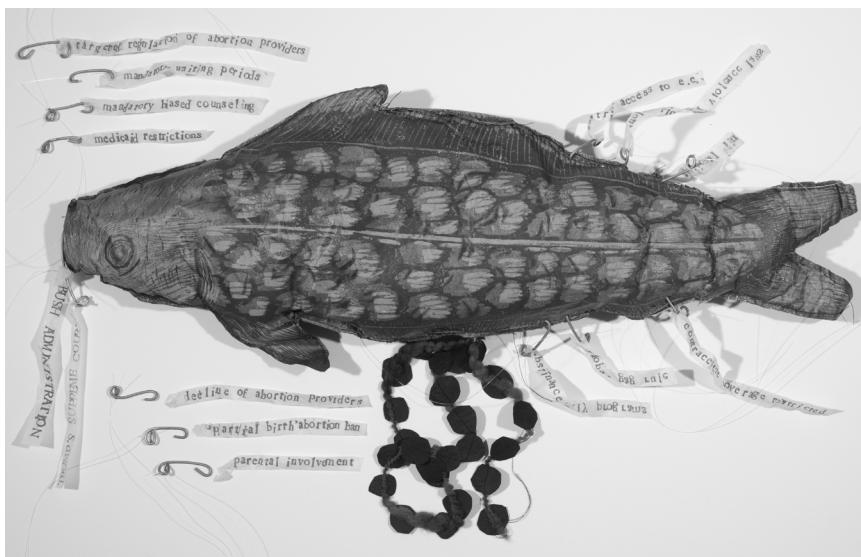
### Work 3: *Roe* by Meredith Stern (b. 1976)

*Roe* (2006–2016) depicts a fish with roe (eggs) spilling out of its body. The work's title refers to the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Jane Roe, et al. v. Henry Wade, District Attorney of Dallas County*. It is made of two pieces of printed paper stitched together and stuffed with polyester fill material. The roe is red and purple yarn and round pieces of black paper. The fish's body is punctured by fourteen metal hooks, to which narrow strips of paper are attached, on which are printed references to legal regulations such as "parental involvement," "mandatory waiting periods," and "gestational limits." (fig. 11.)

*Roe* is part of the larger mixed-media portfolio *I Can't Believe I Still Have To Protest This Fucking Shit: 20 Years of Reproductive Justice Artwork* (2022).<sup>31</sup> While *I Can't Believe* is formatted as a portfolio, it was cataloged bibliographically.<sup>32</sup> The portfolio was sent to the Preservation Department for custom housing immediately after acquisition in 2023. *Roe* exhibited numerous small tears, particularly along the seams, and

31. Meredith Stern, *I Can't Believe I Still Have to Protest This Fucking Shit: 20 Years of Reproductive Justice Artwork* (Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn, 2022).

32. In NYU's catalog, it is listed as "no. 5" under the MARC 505 (Contents) field, rather than as an individual artist's book.



**Figure 11.** Before treatment image of Roe from Meredith Stern, *I Can't Believe I Still Have To Protest This Fucking Shit: 20 Years Of Reproductive Justice Artwork* (Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn, 2022).

about half the hooks had detached. Conservators initially intended to mend the tears and reattach the hooks to stabilize the item. They reached out to Stern with questions about the configuration of the hooks and about materials used to construct *Roe*, which would guide the selection of compatible repair materials. As with *Principia*, surprising elements of Stern's response altered the course of treatment.

## *Interview*

Conservators Josephine Jenks and Pace interviewed Stern over Zoom on August 14, 2023.<sup>33</sup> This conversation was organized around Beerkens and Abraham's aspects of: creative process, materials and techniques, meaning, damage and deterioration, conveyance and public, and conservation and restoration.<sup>34</sup> Part of the conversation also occurred via e-mail between Jenks and Stern, who discussed the work's meaning as presented through signs of aging, deterioration, and damage.<sup>35</sup>

## *Materials and Techniques*

Stern used mulberry paper, a standard substrate, purchased from McClain's Printmaking Supplies. The surface design was applied with oil-based printmaking ink and spray paint. The text was hand-stamped using water-based ink from ColorBox ink pads.

33. Josephine Jenks and Jessica Pace, Interview with Meredith Stern, August 14, 2023.

34. The interview transcript can be found in NYU's Ultraviolet repository. <https://ultraviolet.library.nyu.edu/>.

35. Josephine Jenks and Meredith Stern, E-mail correspondence, August 9, 2023.

### *Meaning/Aging/Deterioration and Damage*

One assumption that conservators made was that the paper should be mended to support the work's long-term stability. However, Stern indicated that some of the perceived condition issues were both intentional and integral to the meaning of the work:

My goal was to have the condition of the fish reflect the condition of "Roe v. Wade"—while I created it, access to abortion was being chipped away . . . so, the fish, as a metaphor for the law, is damaged as well . . . for example, my sewing was done imperfectly, with the thin paper broken in various places, parts of the fish are bent and folded, and the stuffing is hanging out and coming loose in places.<sup>36</sup>

Stern's response revised the treatment to minimal interference with the object's appearance.

When asked about the hooks, Stern said there was no particular order for their placement, and that conservation mends to those specific tears were acceptable.

### *Treatment*

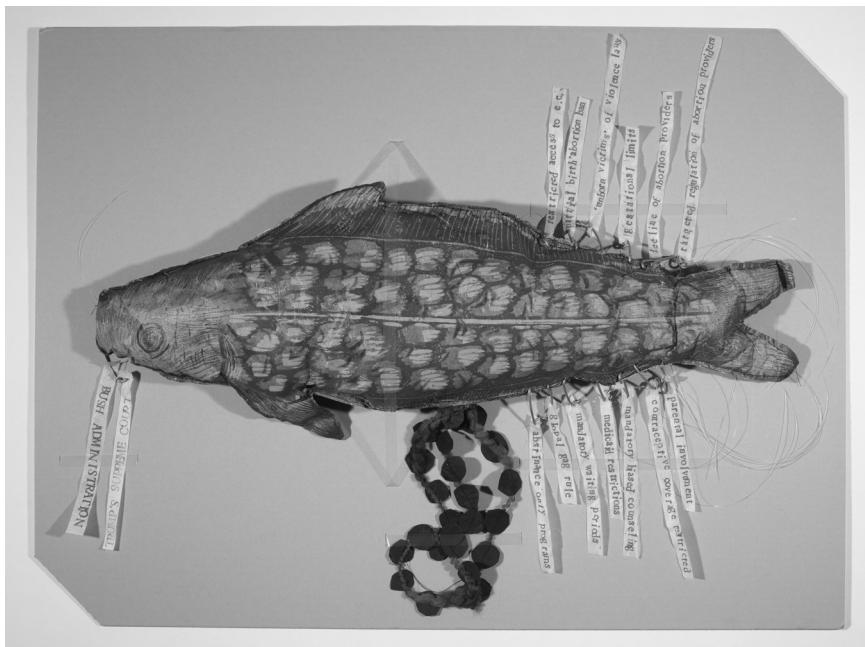
As a result of Stern's feedback, Jenks only mended where structurally necessary and made no aesthetic improvements. To preserve the tears in the fish's body, Jenks reattached the displaced hooks to the stitching edge using black polyamide thread which blended with the original thread. The hooks appear to be attached through holes in the paper but do not apply stress to the fragile paper. Jenks also created new housing using B-flute blue board and transparent polyethylene straps that hold the fish, paper strips, and roe in place. The paper strips were arranged so their phrases were easily legible. (fig. 12.)

Pace and Jenks also asked Stern about the housing design and Stern replied:

Meredith Stern [00:19:28]: The tray is really interesting to me . . . because I've thought about the idea of the fish on the hook. It's how it's freshly caught. But . . . at this point, it's sitting, getting decayed. One idea that was running through my head was, should it be wrapped in cellophane, as if it's being sold in a store, or is it even beyond that level of decay? So, the tray idea is really fitting to me in terms of presenting it as an object in that way. . . .

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36. Josephine Jenks and Meredith Stern, E-mail correspondence, August 9, 2023.



**Figure 12.** After treatment image of *Roe*, 2024.

Her response gave conservators fresh perspective on the relationship between the artwork and its housing, specifically, how the housing can impart new meaning to the artwork.

## Conclusion

Without consultations with the artists, treatment plans for these artists' books had—or would have—caused damage to the work. In the case of *20 Slices*, letting the cheese molder would have led to the book's decomposition and worked against Denzer's intention of maintaining access to this work. *Principia*'s initial custom housing was not designed to address the needs of brittle concrete and therefore did not sufficiently protect the object. If conservators had not contacted Stern before treating *Roe*, the treatment would have obscured signs of wear and changed the work's meaning.

Artist interviews are not common in libraries and archives, which may be due to differences in collecting practices and to the fact that stewards of the traditional codex did not need to engage with the printer or bookbinder to properly care for the material: the intended function was fairly self-explanatory. The three case studies presented here represent examples that intentionally flout the standard codex. By foregrounding the books' materiality as a central component of their meaning, the works require an approach to preservation that draws from practices in contemporary art, wherein the artist's voice and vision are key values in guiding preservation. Although these

examples focus on work carried out by conservators, taking a collaborative approach in the care of artists' books is by no means restricted to the world of conservation. Curators, archivists, collection managers, and other stakeholders often have expertise and relationships with artists that can inform preservation.

Since the first interview with Ben Denzer in 2020, conservators at NYU Libraries have interviewed six other artists whose works reside in the bibliographic and archival collections. The need for interviews arises when there are questions regarding—but are by no means limited to—manufacture, materials, use before acquisition, authorship, and intended function. Interview requests occur when new acquisitions are sent to the Preservation Department by curators or accessioning archivists, or when past acquisitions are being processed. At NYU, conservators first contact the curator to discuss questions regarding the object and the viability of interviewing the artist, since curators are familiar with the artist and in some cases have built years-long relationships with them. The process works best as a collaboration and the authors urge practitioners to pool their knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

While face-to-face interviews are recommended by many sources, this recommendation should not serve as a limiting factor.<sup>38</sup> Interviews can take place via email, video chat, or in person. They might take the form of a questionnaire or be translated in real time from one participant's language to another. The variable and open-ended nature of the artist interview mirrors the rich diversity of artists' books and their conservation needs. By opening a dialog between makers and caretakers of cultural heritage, interviews have the power to capture the unique complexity of artists' books and challenge assumptions about their preservation.

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37. Debik et al., *The Artist Interview*, 13.

38. Beerken and Abraham, *The Artist Interview*, 21.