

Susanne Padberg **Dialogue Between East and West, Tradition and Innovation,
Demonstrated by the Work of Six German Language Presses**

It is always difficult – and risky – to make such large comparisons without generalising too much and falling into stereotypes. However, as a book art gallery owner who has been traveling across both Europe and the USA for almost 20 years, I have gained insights into both the artistic production and the reception of book art on both continents, at least parts of it.

The question of whether there is a unified ‘European’ identity is difficult to answer – at least beyond the economic union and the noble idea as well as historical roots. We must keep in mind that Europe consists of 47 states where 24 official languages are spoken, and the cultural and political differences between Western and Eastern Europe (particularly Central and Eastern Europe) still remain significant, making full unity elusive.

While book art in Western Europe is often characterised by artistic freedom, aesthetics, tradition as well as formal and material innovation, Eastern European book art has been shaped by political history and motivation, limited resources, and a strong connection to national identity. Both regions have rich traditions of artistic book production, shaped by distinct historical and cultural contexts. Contemporary book art in Europe reflects the continent’s diversity, with a constant dialogue between East and West, tradition and innovation, scarcity and abundance.

And of course, there are fundamental and profound cultural differences between the USA and Europe, which also manifest themselves in the book arts and in fine press. One reason for this can be found in the Enlightenment and Romanticism and their very different effects in both cultures. The USA’s roots in Enlightenment ideals explain its focus on progress, rationality, and pragmatism, while Europe’s Romantic heritage speaks to its deep connection to history, culture, and existential exploration. This split is reflected not just in fine press and book arts but also in broader cultural attitudes toward art, tradition, and individualism. Both Enlightenment and Romanticism emphasise individualism, but in different ways. The American approach to individualism is often more tied to Enlightenment rationalism, focusing on individual rights, freedom of expression, and personal achievement. European individualism, especially in the Romantic tradition, is more introspective, emphasising the emotional, artistic, and existential aspects of the individual. For contemporary book art I would say it rather encourages self-reflection and reflection on form and material!

In the world of book collecting and fine press, the differences between Europe and the USA are also pronounced. In Europe, compared to the USA, there are very few academic collections integrated into educational institutions. The collecting of fine press books and book arts in general here focuses more on budget- or tax-funded libraries and museums, as well as private collectors. However, in recent years, Europe has seen an increase in artists’ book fairs, fostering international networks and collaboration.

A personal example illustrates this development. When I moved my gallery from southern Germany to Vienna in 2013, I was contacted by an Australian book art expert who wanted to create a guide to the Austrian book art scene. I quickly realised that many artists and collectors hardly knew about each other, a

wonderful assortment of lone fighters. Fortunately, this isolation has changed in recent years.

An important question in this context is whether the term ‘fine press’ has the same meaning in Europe as it does in the USA, or whether it describes a different category of book art. The answer depends largely on the national traditions of book art, which vary significantly across Europe, depending on the tradition where it comes from: German ‘Pressendrucke’, Arts and Crafts, Dadaism, Art Nouveau et cetera. Despite these differences, certain European characteristics can be identified.

In general terms, in the US, ‘fine press’ refers to a tradition of book printing that emphasises craftsmanship, quality materials, and artisanal production. It focuses on the physical creation of the book, often in small, limited editions, using traditional techniques like letterpress printing and hand-set typography. The emphasis is less on mass production and more on the artistic and technical excellence of the individual book. In contrast, European book art (the preferred term) is characterised by a close interplay of text, image, and form. The works often seek to question and reinvent the book as a whole. This contrasts with the American fine press tradition, which tends to focus more on craftsmanship and fidelity to the text.

The second important question is whether the category of ‘fine press’ exists in Western Europe as it does in the USA, and if not, what defines the current understanding of book art; after having provided this brief overview, I aim to illustrate this with a few examples by examining aspects such as the treatment of text, the book’s form and reflection on it. In the following pages, I will demonstrate how these topics are explored through the work of six German-language presses, noting that some German book makers also work in other languages, **an approach that reflects** a more open-minded attitude toward both physical and cultural borders.



Below: Jule Claudia Mahn: *Elude*.
Archival pigment print, letterpress printing, photopolymer plates, linocut, foil blocking. Two opposite interlocked book blocks with open stitching / folder, 64 pages, 12.8 x 8.5 inches. Edition of 16, Leipzig, 2021. Verwandte Objekte. (The outer case is shown on the jacket of this issue of *Parenthesis*.)

Jule Claudia Mahn (Germany, former GDR): *I Am Here* and *Elude*. Mahn creates works in which text and form interact in a complex way. In *I Am Here*, two lives or two perspectives on one life are told. Two inextricably linked books tell of two lives. Or, two books offer two perspectives on one life. Each book can be read separately. But the view of things and their evaluation changes when leafing through and reading them in parallel. The viewer meanders between the worlds, separated by a wide grey strip – a wall, a road, the unresolvable in-between.

Here are the situations of the same family’s constellation: life before and after the fall of the Berlin wall, with the gaining of freedom and the loss of identity and security; the story of a broken, traumatised family, materialised in the two books – separated by a wall, and open to choose the perspective.

In *Elude*, Mahn addresses themes of memory loss and identity. The story is conveyed through semi-transparent pages and a



Bottom: Jule Claudia Mahn: *I Am Here*.
Letterpress printing, photopolymer plates, linocut, foil blocking, swiss brochure, folding slipcase, 88 pages, 12.4 x 6.5 inch. Edition of 20. Leipzig, 2024, Verwandte Objekte.

rhythmic arrangement of text and image, creating a labyrinthine reading experience by opening the book you become the text. When opening the book, you pull the text into two parts and the theme of the book is immediately realised: the slow memory loss of an old lady. In addition, on closer inspection, you can see that the letters are gradually falling apart. The picture part following the text part has the same structure, but the cut graphics overlap each other, resulting in a supposed picture, which, however, is arbitrary in its composition.

The disappearance begins unnoticed. Gradually, but steadily, connections to people and events are cut. On semi-transparent pages of varying widths, house facades, water, ventilation shafts, fences, and other set pieces of urban space overlap and rearrange themselves in ever new ways. The individual rhythm of scrolling on both sides results in a multitude of possibilities for wandering through the terrain. At the same time, a feeling of disorientation arises, because in the end one will have to find one’s way back.



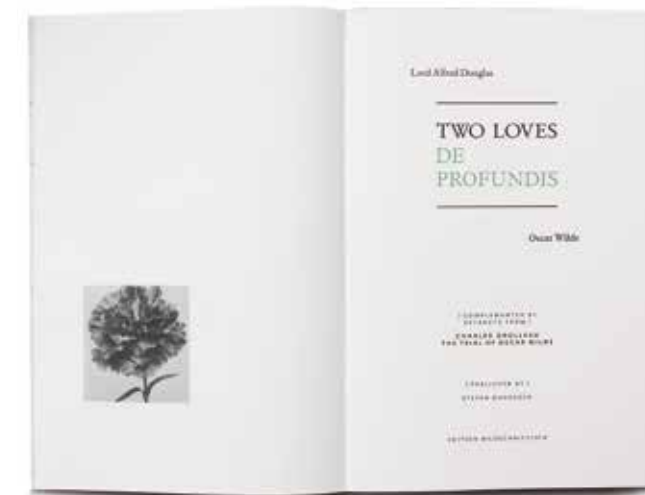
Stefan Gunnesch, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Flowers of Evil). Charles Baudelaire. Thread stitching on fanfold, layered card-board cover with cut-outs giclée print, digital print and eight hand-coloured plant illustrations. 100 pages, 9.85 x 12.6 inch, Edition of 18, Leipzig, 2022. Edition Bildschriftlich.

Stefan Gunnesch (Germany): *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *De Profundis*. Gunnesch merges classical literary works with visual and typographic design. In his interpretation of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, metaphorical 'flowers of evil' are juxtaposed with hand-coloured plant engravings, giving them new meaning in poetic collages. Even though the 'Flowers of Evil' in the book title are to be understood metaphorically, visually they are juxtaposed with concrete plant engravings taken from *Pokorny's Naturgeschichte des Pflanzenreiches für Höhere Lehranstalten* (Natural History of The Plant Kingdom, 1894).

The printed plant engravings are coloured by hand with pigments from plant fibres. Between the text pages are four picture chapters in the form of individual booklets, stapled within the book's concertina. In the collages shown within, each plant is closely assigned to one of the eight guiding concepts (two per booklet) and staged. At the centre of each booklet, a text collage is printed that juxtaposes phrases from Baudelaire's original text to connect both plants/terms in new and unexpected ways. The book can be pulled apart by its leporello form, so that the text 'To the Reader' becomes visible in one piece. A complex and self-referential form that matches the text perfectly.

Gunnesch's edition of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* offers a similarly delicate visual interpretation of literary works. The portraits of Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas are hidden on fold-out pages, emphasising the intimate nature of the text. The abstracted portraits of Douglas and Wilde are placed on a fold-out page that separates the poetic part in the front from the

Stefan Gunnesch, *Two Loves/De Profundis* Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde. Hardcover with thread stitching. Inkjet print, original drawing, gilding, 92 pages, 7.7 x 11.4 inches, Edition of 13, Leipzig, 2024. Edition Bildschriftlich.

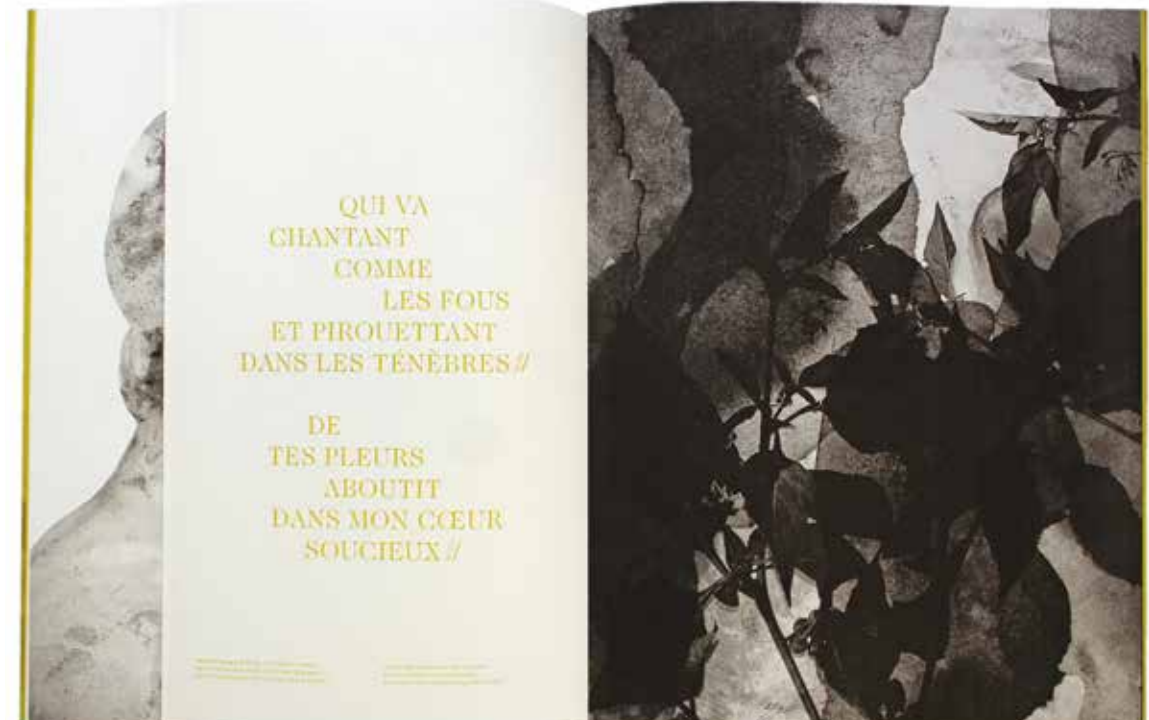
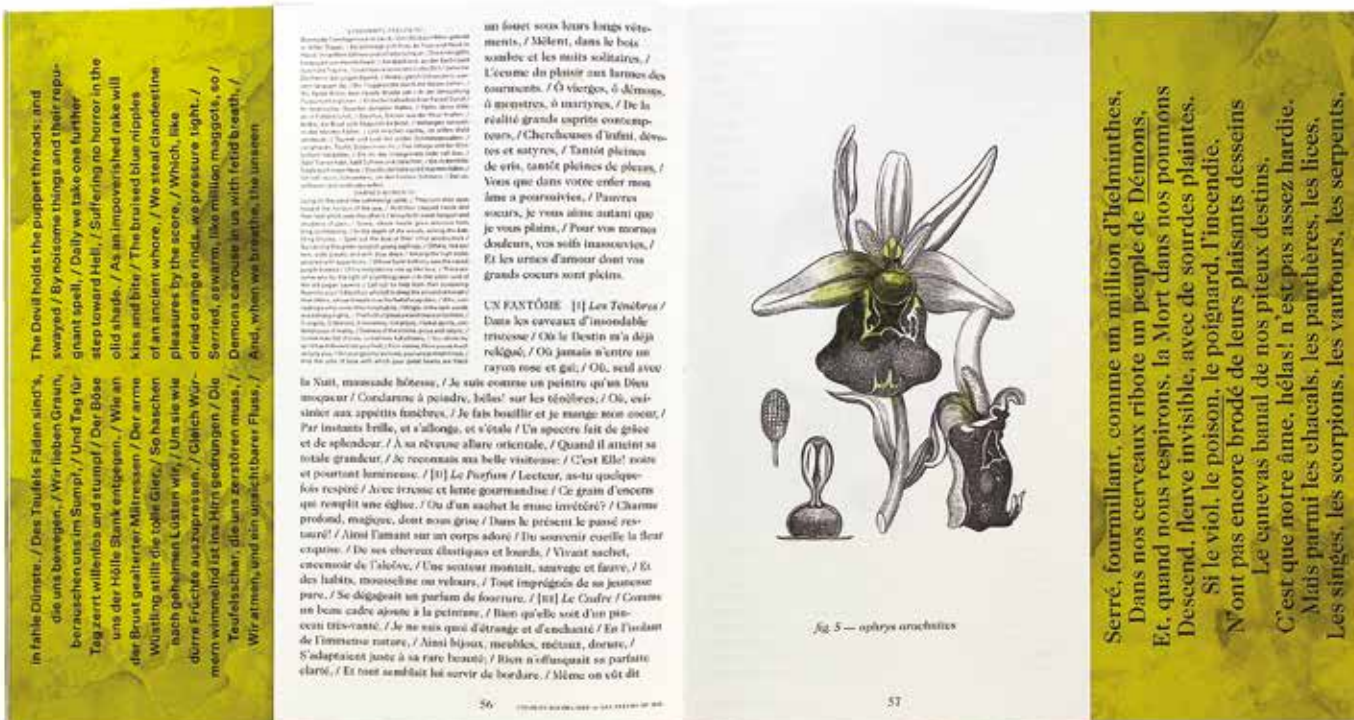


more factual, analytical part in the back. It seemed appropriate that these portraits are placed on a fold-out page, as they are therefore hidden and this intimate space is only revealed when the page is eventually opened.

This page is finished with an gilded drawing that is unique in every book. The line drawings adapt floral elements and grow out of themselves (a reference to the carnation pictures), but when condensed they become a barrier that confines what lies beneath.

In the poetic textual part of the book, fragments of Wilde's *De Profundis* are printed together with lines from the poem 'Two Loves' by Douglas. The result is a typographical encounter, a dialogue, an interpenetration – which cannot, however, come together completely.

The second part of the book contains a different juxtaposition: the entire text of *De Profundis* is contrasted with records of the Wilde trials (text by Charles Grolleau, 1906). Thus, on the one



Wolfgang Buchta and Konrad Planegger (This page) Martin Luther (1534) – *Buch Hiob* ('Book of Job'). Etching, colour lithographs, dry point, offset printing, water colour, 2 pages gilded, hardcover, 64 pages, 15.4 x 11 inch. Edition of 20 plus 4. Wien, 2016.

side there is Wilde's view from inside the prison, on the other the outside view of Wilde in the courtroom. The poem 'Two Loves' plays a particularly important role, as it was not only a hidden confession of love by Douglas but was also presented as evidence against Wilde during his trials.

The size of the book's type area is based on the dimensions of Wilde's prison cell in Reading Gaol. Graphic elements are developed from it, suggesting a decorative frame of social etiquette, a stage for two lovers or walls that do not let the inside out. A pale green runs through the book as a signature colour – based on the green carnation that Wilde often wore on his lapel. The green is complemented by gold, with sections of the book as real gold leaf.

Wolfgang Buchta (Austria). Buchta's interpretation of *The Book of Job*, based on Luther's 1534 translation, combines various printing techniques, adding visual depth to the biblical text. Equally impressive is his edition of Dylan Thomas's *Difficult Regions*, where layers of reworked copper plates create a uniquely textured depth, with earlier drawings shining through.

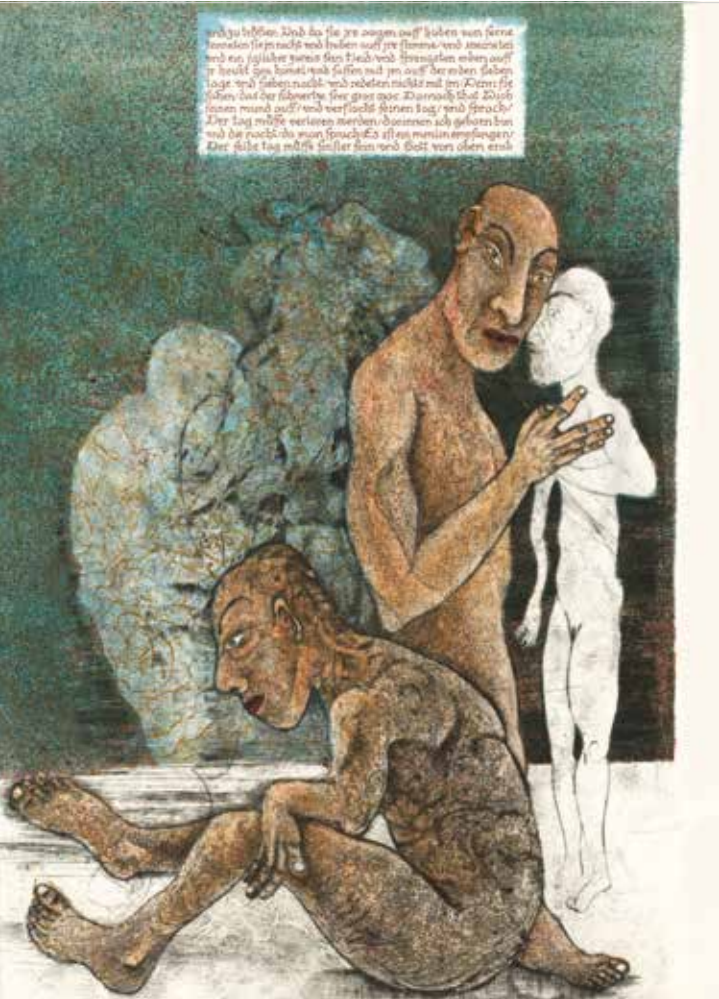
Wolfgang Buchta wanted to create *The Book of Job* with the Viennese artist and colleague Konrad Planegger: two figurative artists in dialogue. Following Planegger's death, Buchta continued alone using the already finished stones and drawings: intense pages with abstract hints of Biblical scenes, the text from the Luther translation of 1534 appearing as handwriting and images in a combination of different printing methods.

Image-tight graphics of reworked copper plates and earlier drawings shine through to form an unfathomal depth. It is one of the trademarks of master printer Wolfgang Buchta – for each book he develops a specific system of handwriting, which he applies to the copperplate. The positioning of the text is fully integrated into the image composition. Hardly any two pages are alike in terms of structure. Parts of the prints are then highlighted with original painting.



Burgi Kühnemann (Opposite page, top left) Brothers Grimm, *Das tapfere Schneiderlein* ('The brave little Tailor'). Architectural drawings, overpainted and watercolours and inks. Cover is a made from a heavy black synthetic material. 48 pages. One-of-a-kind. Frielzheim, 2008.

Burgi Kühnemann (Germany) is famous for her unique ('one-of-a-kind') books in which she reworks and rewrites found books. Painting and writing happen simultaneously, often her expressive pages are reminiscent of typography from the Baroque period, where the writing takes on shapes of its own and reinforces the pictorial expression. In this case Karl Lagerfeld plays the part of the 'brave little tailor' from *Das tapfere Schneiderlein* by the Brothers Grimm, and his considerable celebrity personality is incorporated into the narrative. A subtle, multi-layered contemporary fairy tale drawn with a sharp line and equally sharp wit. The story of the 'emperor's new clothes' comes to mind. Architectural drawings of the Palace of Versailles are included with unexpected 'windows' cut into the pages that can be opened to provide new references and an artificial hand-writing carefully adapted to the style of architecture.



Harms, Anja (Below, bottom) Christian Morgenstern, *Im Reich der Interpunktion* ('In The Land of Punctuation'). Linocut, letterpress, concertina, 24 pages, edition of 25. Oberursel, 2022.

Anja Harms (Germany) Christian Morgenstern's poem *Im Reich der Interpunktion* is an amusing read with its cheerful rhymes and fairy-tale protagonists. However, it is, in fact, about murder and manslaughter. Periods and commas ally against semicolons and allow the minus sign to kill them. After that, the dash kills the commas as well – what is left is a world 'cleansed' of the unpopular and different. Where the punctuation marks struggle, individual initials become reliable image generators. This book combines one black letter at a time with its own colour. As you flip through the fanfold, a gradient of colour emerges to accompany the action of the poem. The punctuation marks – the protagonists of the poem – gather in silver and black. The text of the poem, set in harsh *Futura*, which stands in stark contrast to the diverse shapes and colours: the lightness of the rhymed sentences meets the dark content.



Hyewon Jang (Below) *17C.AAF* Leporello with booklet stitched in. 3.1 x 18.9 (opened 35.4 x 18.9) inches. Edition of 11. Halle, 2019/2020.

Hyewon Jang (Korea/Germany) Jang studied at the famous Burg Giebichenstein Art Academy in Halle, and her constantly inventive, precisely ordered book forms, often incorporating expressionist German poetry, are outstanding. Encouraged by the Herzog August Library's Artist's Book Prize, which Jang was awarded in 2018, she began a series of library-related books.

17C.AAF is the title of the book that was instigated by the surfing of bookshelves in the same way one surfs the World Wide Web. The result is a complex double fanfold (constructed like a Jacob's ladder) with stitched-in booklets that suspend linearity and place visual and content-related information side-by-side, and supportive of each other. Illustrations, excerpts, quotations and texts from different periods and contexts are visually connected with each other. Hyewon creates a refreshing friction that invites the viewer to reassemble the words and the fragmented images anew. For me this is the most entertaining as well as the most astute utilisation of paper, image and type. But above all, it is an inviting media transfer in the form of an artist's 'book' that invites us to consider: how do we use books, libraries, and the World Wide Web?

