

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Why Grown-Ups Should Play With Artists' Books Designed for Kids

A gloriously tactile exhibit at the Center for Book Arts offers a refreshing sense of playfulness in this age of anxiety.



Alexis Clements 21 hours ago



Installation view *Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book*, Center for Book Arts, 2018 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

These days, as fear, acrimony, anxiety- and anger-ridden monologues tend to dominate cultural discourse, playfulness doesn't seem to make it into many conversations. How

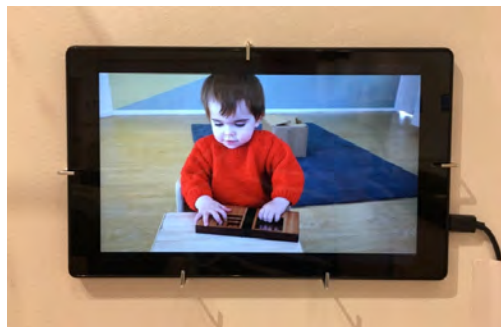
strange, then, it was to step into the quiet central chamber of the Center for Books Arts and find myself alone in a room filled with all manner of artists' books designed with play in mind, many of which were designed specifically for children.

Organized by Elisabeth Lortic, the founder of [Les Trois Ourses](#), a Parisian gallery and workshop devoted to the use of books by artists in the education of children, [Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book](#) is unlike

most exhibits in today's art world. First and foremost, the show is gloriously tactile. Wall texts encourage you to pick up the books, read them, run your fingers along their textured pages.

Secondly, if you are reading this review right now, you are not the ultimate arbiter of these objects' success. In this particular context, their success will be determined by children, who offer much clearer and swifter verdicts than even the tersest adults. This year, I've been helping to organize a queer story time for children in Brooklyn, and no matter how well-intended a picture book or its authors may be, if it doesn't work, the audience will find something else to entertain themselves very quickly and without apology.

As if in answer to this absent audience, a couple of iPads are scattered on the walls of the small gallery, two of which show videos of children interacting with various artists books — offering their opinions in clear gestures, chubby little fingers kneading at fabric pages, eyes and cheeks expressing their interest.



Installation detail of video created by curator for *Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book*, Center for Book Arts, 2018

By and large, these books do not tell elaborate stories; the vast majority don't tell stories at all, at least not as a typical picture book would. Instead, many of these works focus on delight — through the surprise of shapes unfolding, revelations of shifting

scale, new images found by rotating things around, new spectacles revealed as each page turns.

Featuring the work of more than 40 artists, the exhibit features books made entirely of folded paper, books with pop-ups, books that become miniature boats or houses. There are a couple of fabric books by [Ianna Andréadis](#) made entirely from [African wax prints](#), which are riotously beautiful and complex on their own, let alone when considered as tools for counting and learning words. There is an even bigger fabric book created by [Marco Ferreri](#) and [Bruno Munari](#), made with solid-

colored pages adorned with little bits of Italian text, encouraging the reader to project onto the associated color fields, each page removable and reshufflable, the story ever-changing.



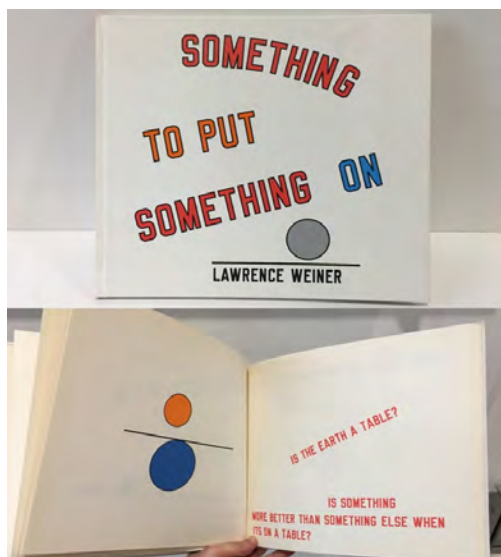
Installation view *Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book*, Katsumi Komagata, "Walk & Look" (1990), part of the "Little Eyes" series

Lawrence Weiner's

"Something to put something on"

(2008) presents a series of playful thought experiments. "What are these things called tables made from?" reads one page, in red block letters."Is something more better than

something else when its on a table?"asks another.It's a wonderfully deliberate nod toward the philosophical potential of abstraction, expressed in so many of these books, and the probing questions children need answered: What makes a thing a thing? How can I tell one thing from another? Plato would surely enjoy and understand the exercise.



Cover and interior detail, Lawrence Weiner, "Something to put something on" (2008)

Walking through the gallery, I couldn't help but think of the recent Louise Bourgeois exhibit at MoMA, which featured many of her fabric books, works I hadn't known about before. Like Bourgeois, many of the artists featured in this exhibit work across multiple media, and they don't necessarily categorize their work as intended

for children in whole or in part. The difference is often contextual, if it exists at all, and, importantly, depends on whether or not the viewer is

able to hold and explore the art object, to let the experience unfold.



Installation view *Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book*, Scott McCarney, "Alpha Book 3" (1986)

I couldn't help but also think of [Maurice Sendak](#), most famously the author of [Where the Wild Things Are](#). Gloriously blunt, Sendak often spoke of not believing that there is a clear distinction between stories for adults and children. He cautioned

against the overwhelming instinct to remove negativity, difficulty, or fear from children's books. "Children are tough, though we tend to think of them as fragile," he said in a *New York Times* interview in the 1980s. "They have to be tough. Childhood is not easy. We sentimentalize children, but they know what's real and what's not. They understand metaphor and symbol. If children are different from us, they are more spontaneous. Grown-up lives have become overlaid with dross."

It's tempting to believe the quiet space of this exhibit is an escape from our current realities, but thinking of Sendak, it seems clear that it's not. Delight and horror are just two of our many responses to the world in which we find ourselves. And children carry on reading and learning and delighting in even the most difficult times. Their sense of the possible, and ours, is informed equally by great fears and spasmodic joys.

[Look, Look, Look...A Playful Book](#) continues at the Center for Book Arts (28 West 27th Street, 3rd Floor, Manhattan) through September 22.