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*The evolution of the artist's book  
in printmaking and transdisciplinarity as its essence*

*Evolucja książki artystycznej  
w grafice i transdyscyplinarność jako jej esencja*

Since the dawn of the printing press, books and print were inextricably intertwined, with the fusion of illustration and text being adjusted to a format similar to the conventional book, predetermined and delimited in its spaces and forms. Thus, illustrations and texts, different languages, came to converge in a unique, hybrid and transdisciplinary process, giving rise to a new creation: the artist's book. The two performed a function of diffusion – a characteristic common to both media – as the images produced by the artist facilitated the dissemination of the knowledge or text.

A fundamental aspect to address at this point is the definition of the artist's book in printmaking, as this concept will permeate this text. The artist's book in printmaking entails a series of specific characteristics/singular features, these including the crafting of the book through engraving procedures (relief or *intaglio*), and/or stamping systems (lithography or screen printing); the complete (or almost) production of the book by the artist; a limited number of copies, signed by the artist himself; and, finally, the binding. Also frequent is collaboration with a poet or writer who provides his texts and/or poems, whereby the characteristics of the artist's book are expanded with a new aspect: typography.

*The precursors the artist's books in printmaking*

The selection of the artist's books in printmaking to describe their evolution is not based on aesthetic affinity, but rather how they served to transform subsequent creations.

The vast majority of print in the four centuries following the advent of the production of xylographic print in Europe, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, were reproductions; that is, copies of pre-existing images: paintings, drawings, etc. It was with the emergence of photography, in 1839, and photographic media, that original print flourished. While reproduced or interpretative engraving corresponded to a documentary and communicative iconography, original or creative engraving stands as an independent work with an aesthetic purpose. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, finding artists who practiced engraving as an autonomous plastic medium, without taking advantage of the image of a painting or a drawing to adapt it into an engraving, is difficult. Nevertheless, we do find some artists who not only produced images exclusively created for the graphic medium, but who also introduced innovations to artist's books in printmaking.

*Apocalypse* (1498) by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) can be considered the first artist's book in printmaking, this *Incunable* (xylographic books prior to 1501) featured several aspects constituting innovations in the publishing field of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, Dürer personally bore the cost of the book's printing, when this was usually covered by a patron; the images/prints are located at the front of the book, and the text in the back; and he was also so confident in the power and quality of his images that he did not feel the need to add colour, this being an aspect that greatly increased publishing costs (Fig. 1, 2).

As José Manuel Mantilla points out:

*The publication of Apocalypse as a book in 1498 brought the young Albrecht Dürer, who at that time was just twenty-*

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Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Virgin Appearing to Saint John*, no date – front page of *The Apocalypse*, (source: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

Il. 1. Albrecht Dürer, *Dziewica ukazująca się świętemu Janowi* – pierwsza strona *Apokalipsy* (źródło: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)



Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, *The woman of the Apocalypse and the seven-headed dragon* (Latin Edition: 1511 – second edition, source: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

Il. 2. Albrecht Dürer, *Kobieta Apokalipsy i siedmiogłowy smok* (wydanie łacińskie: 1511 – drugie wydanie, źródło: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

*seven years old, international success almost overnight. [...] The young man was able to achieve this feat thanks to the generous help that Anton Koberger, Dürer's godfather and a printer of the era, lent him to undertake it, making available to the artist his printing presses, type sets, text patterns [...]. With a limited volume of just thirty-two pages, it was also striking for its large format and its unusual composition for the reader of the time: its suggestive carvings, which occupied the entire page, no longer constituted mere illustrations. Transgressing the tradition of the book, they appeared opposite the text; that is, the typographical characters appeared on the left, while the stamp was on the right page of the book, more important from an optical point of view. It was also larger than the box, and clearly dominated the overall image of the book's dual page spreads [1, p. 168].*

*Le Carceri d'Invenzione (The Imaginary Prisons)*, by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), is a collection composed of fourteen etchings, in which Piranesi's rich imagination transformed the architecture of Roman ruins into prisons, as he envisioned the architecture in a dramatic and fantastic way. His training as an architect and predilection for architecture is evident in all his etchings, but it is in this work where Piranesi lets his imagination soar, depicting

non-existent spaces. His architectural studies endowed him with exceptional training in drawing, enabling him to do so with great skill and fluidity. With an immense capacity for work, he managed to produce over one thousand plates. He was a printmaker – in addition to other trades – who managed to make a living of the sale of his publications (Fig. 3, 4).

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828), better known as Goya, realised that his drawings could easily be rendered into print that were widely popular. His *Caprichos (Whims)* was devised as a collection, or, it might be said, an artist's book. The result of this creation are the eighty plates comprising the *Caprichos* publication. On Wednesday, February 6, 1799 the *Diario de Madrid* newspaper announced the sale of Goya's series of engraving, *Caprichos*, with a text, probably written by his friend Leandro Fernández de Moratín, in which he sought to defend Goya from potential censure or attacks, due to his critical images (Fig. 5, 6).

The text began as follows:

*A collection of prints of whimsical matters, invented and engraved, in aquatint, by Don Francisco de Goya. [...] Since most of the objects represented in this work are imaginary, it will not be fanciful to believe that their defects might be largely forgiven by the discerning, upon*

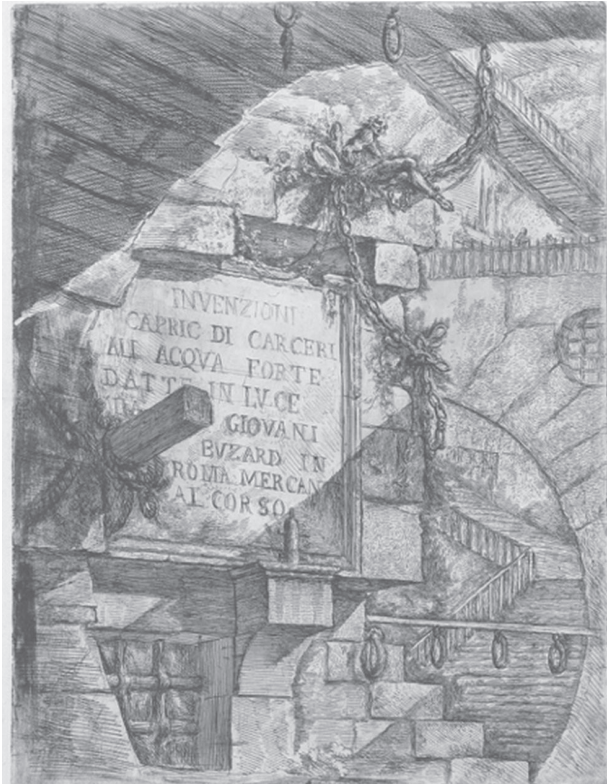


Fig. 3. Giovanni Battista Piranesi,  
*Carceri d'invenzione – Imaginary prisons*, front page: 1749–1750  
(source: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

Il. 3. Giovanni Battista Piranesi,  
*Carceri d'invenzione – Wyobrażalne więzienia*, pierwsza strona, 1749–1750  
(źródło: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)



Fig. 4. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Drawbridge*, 1749–1750  
(source: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

Il. 4. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Most zwodzony*, 1749–1750  
(źródło: The Metropolitan Museum – metmuseum.org)

*considering that their creator has not followed the examples of others, or copied much from nature.*

*And if imitating it is difficult to achieve as it is admirable when attained, he should fail to merit some esteem he who, distancing himself entirely from it, has had to expose his eyes, a forms and manners hitherto existing only in the human mind, obscured and confused by a lack of illustration, or blinded by unruly passions [2, p. 715].*

Thus, it is clear that Goya used engraving as a means of autonomous expression, with images that were designed to be engraved. Iconographically, these were totally different from his paintings, a veritable haven for Goya's socio-political reflections. This made him one of the few creative engravers existing between the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup>, during which engravers habitually produced reproductions or interpretative print.

The first three artists selected – Dürer, Piranesi and Goya – present a correlation between their *modus operandi*, even if they are separated by space and time. These three artists conceived of their body of graphic work as an inseparable whole, a single creation with a single theme, the same procedure, and a sequential ordering of the works that led to a reading of the images just as the artist had intended; it should be noted that each of the print were numbered so that their order was always the same, their characteristics coinciding with those identified with the execution of an artist's book in printmaking.

We shall now proceed to analyse the work of an artist representing a precursor to the transdisciplinary concept associated with the artist's book in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the transdisciplinary artist *par excellence*, an outlying artist during his era; the engraver, sketch artist, painter, poet and self-publisher William Blake.

Thus, it is essential here to clarify the concept of transdisciplinarity, the foundation upon which we believe that artists were based, or the spirit that informed the construction of the artist's book, even if, as creators, they were not aware of it, as such. Transdisciplinarity is a concept intrinsic to the creative production of the artist's book today, and research has been done on artists of previous centuries, who in one way or another also embraced transdisciplinarity.

Though absent, *per se*, from the frequent discussions of the artist's book over the course of history, the concept still pervaded the conception of this type of artistic work.

We are, from the outset, faced with a question: what does transdisciplinarity mean? "Trans" is the prefix denoting that *transdisciplinary*, as a term, suggests something that transcends limits. Its essence, then, is going beyond just one given discipline, whether it be drawing, engraving, painting, sculpture, architecture, computer science (today) etc. It is an approach based on seeking, on defying the rigid confines of disciplines, where the multiple is made one and, at the same time, the whole.

The term *transdisciplinary* appeared for the first time in the 1970s, in the works of the Swiss psychologist Jean

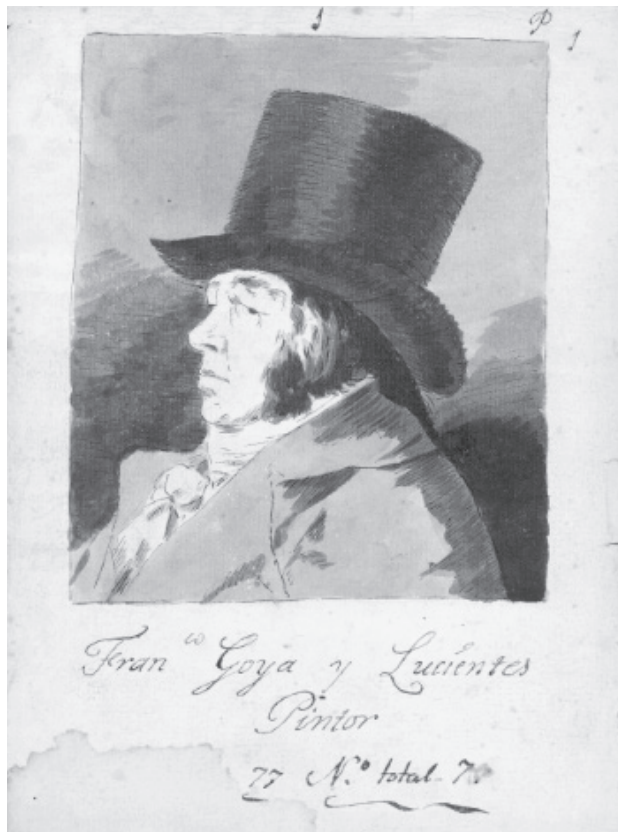


Fig. 5. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Los Caprichos n°1*, front page, 1797-1799 (source: Real Academia Bellas Artes San Fernando – realacademiabellasartessanfernando.com)

Il. 5. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Kaprysy, nr 1*, pierwsza strona, 1797-1799 (źródło: Real Academia Bellas Artes San Fernando – realacademiabellasartessanfernando.com)



Fig. 6. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Los Caprichos n°6 – Nadie se conoce*, 1797-1799 (source: Real Academia Bellas Artes San Fernando – realacademiabellasartessanfernando.com)

Il. 6. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Kaprysy, nr 6 – Nikt nie zna samego siebie*, 1797-1799 (źródło: Real Academia Bellas Artes San Fernando – realacademiabellasartessanfernando.com)

Piaget, the Austrian astrophysicist Erich Jantsch, and the French sociologist Edgar Morin, in which they agreed that it was necessary to identify integrations or reciprocities between the different fields, and to situate these connections within a total system, without fixed boundaries.

One of the proponents of transdisciplinary thinking today is Basarab Nicoluscu, a physicist and founder of the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research and Studies, who has stated that:

*Transdisciplinarity, as its prefix “trans” indicates, deals with what lies between the disciplines and, at the same time, permeates the different disciplines [...] Its objective is to understand the current world, for which one imperative is a unity of knowledge [3, p. 35].*

We perfectly understand the transdisciplinary concept when we think about the breakage of the old mercury thermometers, and how the particles of mercury were dispersed in different drops, if we imagine each drop corresponding to a discipline, a fragment of human knowledge. The disciplines grow more and more distanced from each other, but, in reality, they are fragments of the same whole, and, if they are brought closer to each other, they connect once again.

Transdisciplinary thinking proposes and suggests transcending “yes” or “no”, “it is” and “it is not”, and the possibility of surpassing certain limits. This thought is based on the idea that, for the construction of a common body of knowledge, and work, one should not necessarily be limited to a single discipline. However, let us not think that transdisciplinary thinking isolates the singularity of the disciplines, or that it does not aspire to consider all of them.

The artist’s book is the result of an aesthetic/plastic process conceived, from the beginning, as a work of art in itself. Its creator, the artist, has the power to decide over the how and why of each of the materials, shapes, colours, textures, spaces, structures, procedures and techniques that will be used to produce his final artwork. Hence, this artistic medium constitutes one of the most transdisciplinary for the artist.

In the creation of an artist’s book, as in the transdisciplinary concept, the disciplines merge, with some penetrating the spheres of others. This concept of unity within the complexity of the whole constitutes one of the most obvious formal characteristics within the current production of artist’s books, as the artistic field is perfectly attuned to this concept of unity and complexity between the disciplines.



Fig. 7. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* – *The fly*, 1789 (source: The William Blake Archive – blakearchive.org)

Il. 7. William Blake, *Pieśni niewinności i doświadczenia*, 1789 (źródło: The William Blake Archive – blakearchive.org)

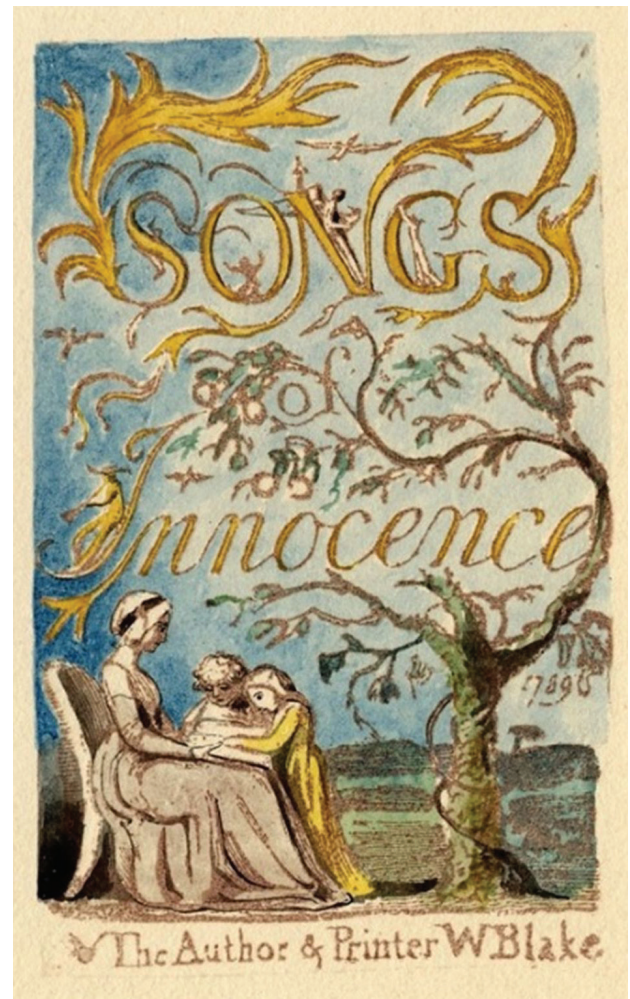


Fig. 8. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*, 1789 (source: Tate Modern – tate.org.uk)

Il. 8. William Blake, *Pieśni niewinności*, 1789 (źródło: Tate Modern – tate.org.uk)

Having established the importance of the concept of transdisciplinarity in the field of artist's books in printmaking, we return to the transdisciplinary artist William Blake, who employed and demonstrated this concept extensively, merging his poetic work into his own aesthetic/plastic creations, including print, drawings and paintings – an approach that was decidedly innovative for his time, the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his books he combined arts of engraving and poetry, mainly, generating a new reflective dimension in illustrated books, at both the conceptual and technical levels. With regard to the conceptual we can perceive how a poet creates his texts and poems, as he himself illustrates it, endowing his works with an aesthetic/plastic result different from others. At a technical level, he produces his illustration through relief etching, also innovating in the execution of this technique, developing a new method based on engraving the copper plate with different heights, or levels, to achieve his aim of producing print in relief, or, conversely, *intaglio*. In this way he was able to craft the plate in both ways, incorporating on the same plate/mould both texts and images, thereby rendering process less costly.

Blake's technique transformed the nature and appearance of illustrated books, opening them up to the possibility of entirely new forms. The artist called these books "Illuminated Prints". A limited number have been selected, as the list is quite extensive. There is *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789), and *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794); in the same year he published the first book of *Urizen* and, one later, *Songs of Los* (1795).

William Blake elevated the artist's book to another creative and experimental dimension, melding multiple disciplines, providing subsequent artists with a vision of the creative amplitude that an artist's book could feature, without creational limits (Fig. 7, 8).

When creating an artist's book today, this new dimension of great versatility liberates the creator from a specific technique or isolated discipline, a constraint that formerly prevailed. It was in this liberal environment that transdisciplinarity emerged, as a concept inherent to this breadth of forms.

The artist, immersed in this context, enjoyed the possibility of transgressing the technical rules imposed by predetermined spaces or techniques, the artist's book

granting him unlimited freedom in the conceptual realm. The impetus behind these transgressions emerged from the preceding three decades, during which society underwent transitions never before imagined, and continued to. Drastic changes encompassing every field of knowledge appeared in every area of society: science, technology, culture, economics, communications, arts, etc. Fields of knowledge related to the role of cause and effect advanced, and fed on each other, in an evolutionary process subjecting humanity to a veritable whirlwind of rapid development and great complexity.

Thus, every work of art, including that in question – the artist's book – reflect the aesthetic dynamics of the ideological and technical period during which it was produced, revealing, with or without the artist's consent, his consciousness, his conception of the world, his aesthetics and the nature of his time. Much of the historical juncture we now face is a consequence of globalisation, a dynamic resulting from the scientific and technological advances mentioned above. Globalisation reveals to us the heterogeneous aspects of the world, which, with the passage of time, often become homogeneous, as we can easily perceive in the most recent architectural constructions, when we visit a big city, notice the people's attire, their works of art, or their codes and conduct.

***Artist's books in printmaking evolution  
produced by technical advances  
and transdisciplinarity***

Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these theoretical, artistic and procedural codes were well demarcated, providing the artist with a clear understanding of the knowledge that he was to master in order to carry out his aesthetic/plastic project, whatever it might be. With globalisation, and advances in new technologies, the technical procedures that form part of the development of an artistic creation have changed considerably.

The consequences of globalisation and transdisciplinarity also include the immediacy with which information and knowledge are transmitted, the loss of borders, migratory movements, the dissolution of space/time limits, etc., aspects present in the social reality and disciplines of the different fields of knowledge. In the same way, these consequences are reflected in the transdisciplinary processes employed in the artist's book, in both its conceptual and procedural contexts.

In the production of an artist's book, it may be generally observed that, in relation to the development of aesthetic/plastic work, images are increasingly manipulated, captured, metamorphosed, and digitalised, generating a constructive process of fragmented, non-linear images in various disciplines; with a result, nevertheless, of unity, an entity, on the whole, a complex and hybrid transdisciplinary process. In this procedural form of production of the artist's book, the transdisciplinary process does not spurn the tradition of artistic procedure, as this is an essential aspect of the transdisciplinary process.

As we can appreciate in this image, the artist has manipulated, captured, metamorphosed and digitalised it, in

a process yielding a fragmented image, bridging the history of art and engraving, but with a result of unity, an entity resulting from a transdisciplinary process.

These are aspects that do not imply a rejection or invalidation of traditional artistic techniques. Rather, the artist's book comes to occupy a privileged place for experimentation and the creation of new concepts existing alongside pre-existing ones.

As we can see: the past, the present and the future, associated with transdisciplinary processes, spark the artist's interest in the transformative potential of the creative and procedural aspects available, capable of producing something superior.

In this way, the images developed by any aesthetic/plastic activity may proceed from different fields and areas of knowledge, such as: drawing, photography, sculpture, painting, metrics, architecture, medicine, biology, zoology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, etc., providing a benefit never before imagined in artistic aesthetics: enabling their evolution.

Therefore, the artist has fused different images from areas or fields of knowledge that once existed separately, combining or transforming them out of a desire to generate new structures, objects, or, in our case, images. That is, in the process of aesthetic/plastic creation the ways of expressing, interpreting and understanding the creative process are no longer rooted in a specific discipline or technique, isolated from other disciplines, as used to be the case. On the contrary, we find ourselves with the opportunity to transgress the limits of technique and, consequently, their respective restrictions. This process of transgression and transformation enriches the creative process, broadening creative horizons. Therefore, great achievements are possible when one makes use of his knowledge of his area, but while observing its problems from different points of view, giving him a perspective that draws on other fields of knowledge.

It is clear that the individual can only transgress the boundaries of the technical procedures of a particular discipline if he understands them. With knowledge, he may be able to solve their internal problems, but this will not suffice to enrich them. It is only from a different perspective that he can expand his solution and creation possibilities, making the discipline to which he is dedicated increasingly transdisciplinary, with coexisting fundamental concepts of hybridisation, contamination, appropriation, miscegenation, crossing, etc.

The stress on transdisciplinary processes in aesthetic/plastic production reflects the frenetic era in which we live, with a whole avalanche of factors affecting our lives, socially, technologically, psychologically and ontologically, both with regard to contemporary concepts and techniques and traditional ones.

These processes are generators of elements that are borrowed, appropriations, contaminations and crosses between the technical procedures and the aesthetic to be developed, as they create forums for the coexistence of known languages, engendering a perception of these objects totally differentiated from the way we perceive and relate to traditional media or techniques.

To conclude, we believe that during periods of conceptual revision, such as the one we find ourselves living in today, with transdisciplinary processes, creating a new aesthetic in the production of artist's books means being able to understand and integrate what is understood on a new artistic level of knowledge and internalization.

It means introducing new configurations, new forms, and these new creations are born of the internal motivations of each artist, which will make possible the linking of technical and technological knowledge with aesthetic joy and the

promotion of transdisciplinary processes in the aesthetic/plastic creation of the artist's book. The more unique images are produced, the more their aesthetics and procedures are explored, the more the artist's book will be the subject of construction and deconstruction, these considerations being the result of deeper reflections on transdisciplinarity and its contribution to the aesthetics of the artist's book.

Translated by  
Dolores Herrador Molina

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### Abstract

This article deals with the aesthetic evolution of the artist's book in printmaking and its close connection to the graphic procedures resulting from the printing press and the current transdisciplinarity of the various areas of knowledge. Each stride of technical progress in the field of graphic arts spawned a transformation in the aesthetics of the images comprising books, as they served to enhance the graphic quality of the aesthetics presented.

**Key words:** artist's book, transdisciplinarity, printmaking, print

### Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy ewolucji estetycznej książek artystycznych i jej ścisłego związku z procedurami graficznymi oraz obecnej transdyscyplinarności różnych dziedzin wiedzy. Każdy postęp techniczny w dziedzinie techniki warsztatowej powodował przemianę estetyki obrazów tworzących książkę, przyczyniając się do poprawy jakości graficznej prezentowanych działań artystycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** książka artystyczna, transdyscyplinarność, grafika warsztatowa, druk



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