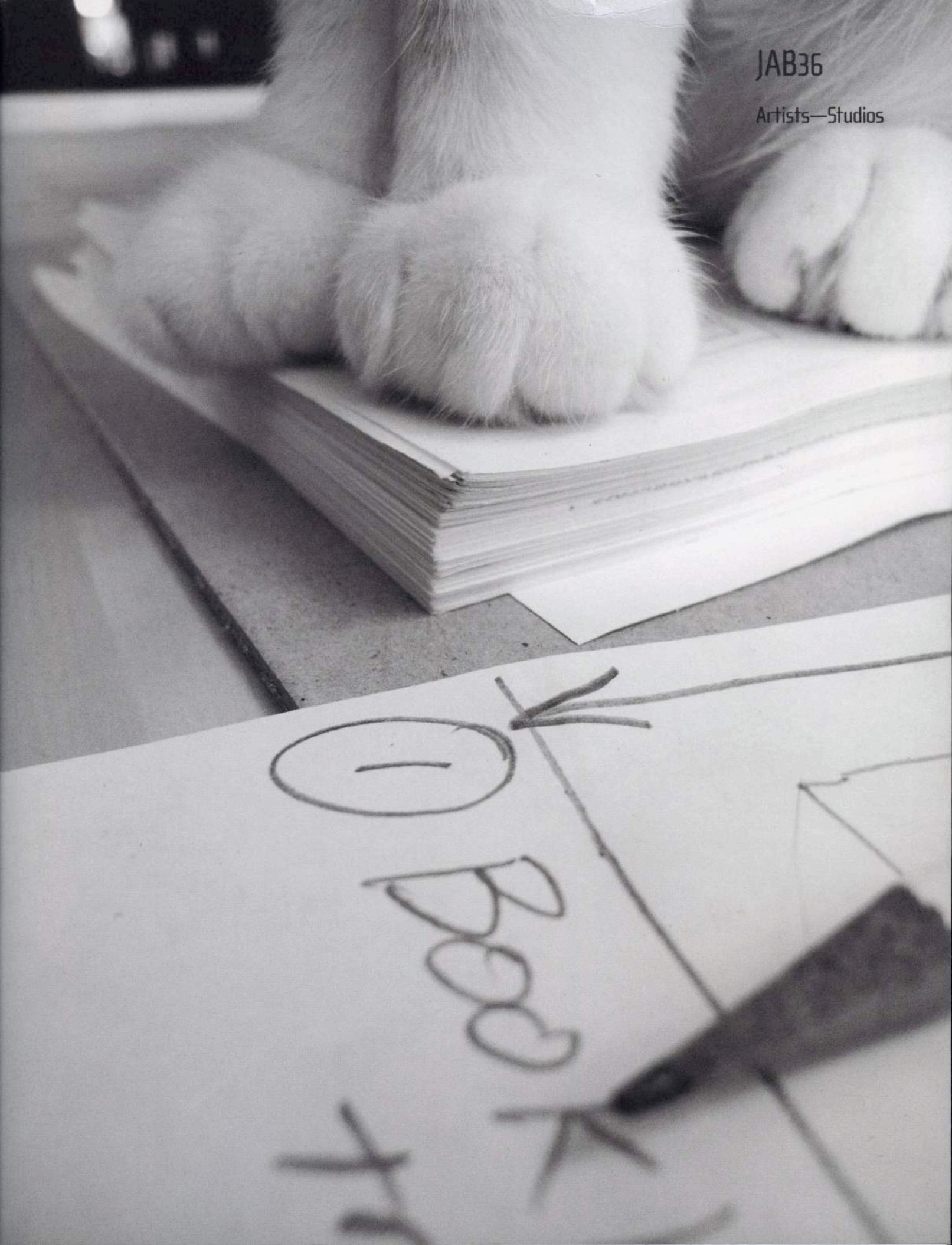


JAB36

Artists—Studios



CHAOS THEORY

ONE ARTIST'S SEARCH FOR DISORDER IN THE UNIVERSE

Miriam Schaer

This is a tale of two studios—the best of studios, as Dickens might have scribbled, and the worst of studios. A place in which I hoped for wisdom and practiced foolishness. A reflection of belief and an inventory of incredulity, a black hole and the soul of entropy; yes, a refuge AND a mess. But let me tell you how I got here

For many years, both before and after I had my own studio, I thought of myself as a “wandering art girl.” I produced work and exhibited constantly. Some of the work sold, but the earnings were not enough to live on. So I cobbled together a living by teaching—teaching book structures, that is, to almost anyone. I taught little kids, middle and high schoolers, undergraduate and graduate students, juveniles in lock-up, artists and artists manqué, adult hobbyists, and other teachers. I worked as an adjunct at the Pratt Institute teaching the Art of the Book, as a teaching artist in New York and New Jersey public schools; and as a leader of workshops and intensives for such organizations as the Center for Book Arts and the Lower East Side Printshop in Manhattan.

I led professional development seminars for educators in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Maryland; and served as a visiting artist at a seemingly endless series of universities both here and abroad. Almost all my teaching focused on book arts, with a dash of printmaking. Sometimes, I felt more like a vaudevillian tap dancing through Education’s great variety show. “Teach Book Arts and see the world, who knew?” wisecracked my husband, equally puzzled by and admiring my peculiar career.

Disorderly as it seemed, my rarely-the-same-week-twice schedule came with the benefit of flexibility. If I had an exhibition coming up, I could carve out a chunk of time and prepare. If I was invited for an international residency, I could schedule my other teaching duties around the residency dates.

My first studio was in the corner of our little living room in a fourth-floor East Village walk-up just off Avenue A. Cramped and poorly illuminated, it was a kind of Murphy studio. When people came over, I folded up whatever I was working on and the space reverted from a so-called studio to a so-called living room.

It wasn’t until later, after my husband and I moved to Park Slope in the mid-1990s, that I was able to build an actual, functional studio. We bought a long, narrow coop apartment that had been broken up into a warren of small, dysfunctional rooms. Open the door to its tiny, dark-blue bathroom, for example, and the door smacked into the toilet halfway around. But the price was affordable enough to allow us to hire an architect to reconfigure the place and include a dedicated studio.



ROOM OF MY OWN

Even new, untainted by my own work, the presence of a separate space, a room of my own, felt like a gift. To achieve it, we sacrificed the apartment’s front parlor. We extended the room’s 14-foot length to 17 feet and added shelved closets at the interior end. Twin bay windows overlooking a tree-lined street that afternoon sunlight illuminated occupied the other end. Except for fresh paint, the windows remained untouched.

I am by nature a collagist and a collector. Anything that catches my eye might wind up on a shelf. “Nature and Miriam abhor a vacuum,” my husband declared, anticipating the studio’s eventual state. In fact, my studio did act like a vacuum cleaner, hoovering up a miscellany of tools, art materials (real and potential), books, magazines, clippings and files. I had come to books through the curtain of Fiber Arts, and much of my work still relies on varied and eclectic textiles. As a result, my briefly pristine studio accumulated, like a reef spawning corals, semi-organized concentrations of dismembered doll parts, Barbie heads, dresses, bustiers, beads, buttons, pins, thread, fabric remnants, lace trim, broken glass, a flexible dress form, toy furniture, found objects, and many more things that one part of my brain told the other part would someday be of use.

My studio also acquired traditional book art materials: papers, boards, silk and linen thread, glues, paints, solvents, awls, blades, pens, brushes, pencils, and the like. As I have made silkscreens, gum bichromates, cyanotypes, collographs and a variety of image transfers, among other media, I never seemed to know when something I had come across might come in handy. Digital printing too, when that became available.

I always thought of myself first and foremost as an artist who

uses book structures and techniques to create sculptures that included books. After plugging away at a B.F.A. and moving from Philadelphia to Manhattan, I continued my studies through classes at the Center for Book Arts and private lessons with instructors like the artist Tim Ely and the book conservator Jeff Peachey. I also worked in the bindery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the eagle eye of Preservation Librarian Mindell Dubansky, an experience that informed and grounded my binding technique.

After moving to New York and before I began to teach, I worked first as a commercial graphic artist, then as a graphic designer. This was back when artists not working as waitresses prepared mechanicals, actual paper boards onto which all of a publication's text and images were pasted or specified. Cameras turned the mechanicals into sheets of film, and the films were converted into hard, curved plates that snapped onto offset presses.

In the blink of an eye, computers colonized publishing. Mechanicals migrated from paper boards onto flickering screens. I moved to graphic design and learned to live with computers. It helped that my husband bought the very first Mac, the one Ridley Scott promoted by having a well-stacked runner fling a massive hammer into the face of Big Brother.

As a graphic designer, I designed book jackets and book interiors for small publishers, magazine and newspaper ads, collateral materials for a clothing firm; newsletters and brochures; and exhibition catalogs for other artists. From the commercial work, I learned how to incorporate digital media into artist books.

In addition to all the junkier, art materials that crowded my studio's shelves and crawl spaces, I acquired a variety of tools. As I write, the studio houses two work tables, flat files, a board shear, a guillotine, a cluttered cork board, a Kwik Printer, a nipping press, a digital camera, a tripod, lights, a computer (Mac, of course), an archival ink-jet printer, a black-and-white laser printer, and a smartphone, which is essential for planning and communication. Well equipped for making books, my formerly spacious room grew spatially challenged, but it served my needs.



COMMUTING TIME: ZERO

The Brooklyn studio was a good place in which to work. I was able to make almost all my artworks there, prepare for teaching and residencies, conduct related business, and walk over to the kitchen for a meal or a cup of coffee anytime I needed. The rent was built into the apartment's overhead, and commuting time was zero.

On a typical day, I would move back and forth from the computer desk to the worktable. We also had a small backyard that proved ideal for spraying garments with layers of acrylic medium to make them as stiff as boards while retaining their textural qualities. I was also able to use the backyard to paint, by spray or brush, large objects and surfaces, then leave them in place to dry, while keeping the studio and the apartment fume-free.

My needs radically shifted when I accepted a position in 2009 as a lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Arts MFA program in Book and Paper at Columbia College Chicago. As it was a full-time job, I rented a small studio apartment in Chicago's South Loop and began commuting, more or less weekly, between the Big Apple and the city of too-thick pizza. To stay functional, I set up a small satellite studio in a corner of my Chicago flat. My single studio became two, and my tale of two studios became a tale of two cities.

The Chicago "studio" was really little more than a table arranged to provide a place to work away from home base. But I also benefitted from easy access to the bindery at the Center for Book and Paper Arts (CBPA). When I needed a board shear, a guillotine or some other large, heavy tool, I just walked four blocks to the bindery. Occasionally, I searched for my favorite Jim Croft bone folder in Brooklyn, only to realize it was in Chicago or vice versa. Mysteriously, I accumulated multiples of basic tools like bone

folders, awls, brass straight edges, needles, thread, and Olfa and X-Acto knives, which now inhabit both studios.

Even though I now had two studios, I had less time to use them. Colleagues at Columbia College suggested I allocate one hour a day to my studio practice. I had never worked that way, but realized that giving myself an hour to do "something" every day would be a critical investment in my sanity and myself. I also decided to not mentally beat myself up if I missed a day here and there, especially since I would be able to work more than one hour on some days. Time management skills, to my surprise, were becoming part of my toolkit.

ART ON THE FLY

I also found myself working on portable projects I could carry from city to city. For example, I completed in this manner a project I call the Hands of Josephus. This involved transforming a compendium called History of the Jews by the Roman historian Flavius Josephus into a series of five altered books sewn on multiple beaded cords. I would pack pages I was working on in my carry-on airline suitcase and bring them to Chicago or New York, depending on where I was going next.

The first project I made in both cities was a nine-copy edition of a book called Cinderella Ever After. This is a digitally printed heart-shaped book with drum-leaf bindings and covers enveloped by hyper-packed red cords that seem to both embrace and strangle them. I used the laser cutter at Columbia College to cut the heart-shaped covers from bookboard and hand-cut all the inside pages, also heart-shaped. I punched holes in the covers at the bindery in CBPA, and spent the better part of a summer in Brooklyn finishing the covers.

I made a clamshell box for each of the nine copies using both studios. I built the prototype box in Chicago, cut boards for the boxes in CBPA's bindery, then carried them all back to Brooklyn, where I assembled and covered the boxes in red asahi book cloth.

At the same time, I was working on a series called *Baby (Not) On Board: The Last Prejudice?* that examined our societal prejudice against women without children. For some time, I had been collecting negative comments by people about childless women; for example:

- "Children are what make a real family."
- "Your decision not to have children is a rebellion against God's will."
- "Childless woman lack an essential humanity."

When I had enough, I began to embroider the quotes onto items of baby clothing, first dresses then rompers. I carried the embroideries with me as I commuted from Brooklyn to Chicago, and quickly finished the eighteen garments in the series.

With the garments complete, I took the project to a new level with a series of photographs called *The Presence of Their Absence*. At first, I shot portraits of realistic-looking dolls wearing the embroidered clothing. In the photos, the dolls looked eerily like live babies.

I started the shoots in the safety of the studios at Columbia College. Next, I had myself photographed along with the dolls. Summoning my courage, I moved the next shoot to a public school playground and park in South Loop, and a fourth shoot to the flagship American Girl Store on Michigan Avenue. Several photos show the dolls flying in mid-air as assistants outside the frame flung them at me. I enlisted friends, colleagues, students and family members to help with the project, and benefitted from the expertise of graduate student Chelsey Shilling behind the camera.

Back in my studios, I've been experimenting with the photos by tearing them apart and sewing them back together, altered by inserts of vellum and other types of paper. I'm not yet sure where I'm going with this project, but my two studios and the facilities at Columbia College Chicago will provide the framework to get there.



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Miriam Schaer's work has been in numerous exhibitions including the Museum of Art and Design in NY. Her work can be found in collections including the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History & Culture at Duke University in Durham, NC and the Chasanoff Collection at the Yale University Museum. She's a NYFA Artists Fellow and her work is included in the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center's Feminist Art Base. She is a Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Book and Paper MFA Program at Columbia College Chicago.

