

THE BOOK ART OF
RICHARD MINSKY



A History of Egyptian Mummies

by Thomas J. Pettigrew. Longman, London, 1834
Bound by Minsky 1973. Linen, turquoise. 12 x 9
Exhibited at the Zabriskie Gallery, New York, 1974.
Collection of Barbara and Donald Bady, New York.

RICHARD MINSKY
MY LIFE IN BOOK ART

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uncorrected draft

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The Dog Bite

by Barton Lidicé Beneš

Plain Wrapper Press, New York, 1970

Binding by Minsky 1977. 13 x 11 x 2

Skin of unknown origin, endsheets of Amatyl bark paper.

"Binding by Richard Minsky 1977" in pencil, inside back endpaper.

story later in this volume, except to note that the action succeeded on several fronts: it tweaked expectations of fine binding (after all, the leather binding *was* well executed), it demonstrated the vibrant consequences of the conflation of craft with artistic expression, and it drew attention to a practice of early naturalists, which was to shoot the animals they would later painstakingly study and draw.

That underlying social critique constitutes a second key attribute in many of Minsky's works—unlike Duchamp's, whose targets tended to be the art world's power structure. Minsky's strongest voice is heard in works that expose injustice or cry out for change. Sculptural bookworks provide Minsky with a vehicle that draws equally on his expertise as a master binder and his iconoclastic aesthetic. The resulting collisions between craft and art, often infused with humor, irony or an incisive skepticism, produce works that engage a viewer's intellect after delivering an unforgettable visual punch.

Beginning in 1993 Minsky channeled his long-standing commitment to human rights into a series based on The Bill of Rights. He produced ten works in response to individual Amendments, nine of which involve an existing book. He has since developed the works into an edition that sells as a set. Each work embodies Minsky's response to an Amendment through the lens of today's social and political landscape. For example, in response to the first Amendment that protects freedom of expression, Minsky burned a copy of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The book's publication in 1988 led to Rushdie's denunciation in several Muslim countries and the undermining of freedoms of the press, religion and speech.

After burning *The Satanic Verses* and so enacting the threat to the author and his book, Minsky constructed a reliquary (as he called it) to house the resulting charred remains. The structure is adorned with dense and vivid imagery suggestive of fretwork, and stained glass panels provide a glimpse of the destroyed book sealed within. The work arrests one's attention and then compels reflection on how human rights can be curtailed or overthrown when caught

up in the vortex of societal forces.

Minsky's response to the fourth Amendment (which protects against unreasonable search and seizure) confronts threats to freedom that have arisen along with new technologies. Minsky altered a copy of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the 1984 science fiction novel that presents cyberspace as a realm vulnerable to intrusion by corporate, governmental and criminal interests. Gibson's storyline exposes the consequences of that unfettered government interference. Minsky's binding incorporates a metallic shuriken (a star-shaped throwing weapon) on the cover, an image that recurs in the novel. A pink slipcase includes the text of the fourth amendment hot-stamped in hologram foil on one side. The hologram shifts into illegibility when viewed at a distance, as the text scrambles into a pattern suggestive of digital code. That confusion in legibility evokes the biological/digital commingling in the novel's protagonist, who jacks into the cyberspace network through a neural interface. As if in invitation, on the opposite side of the slipcase glitters an embedded Network Interface Card. Time to plug in.

Minsky's transformation of *Neuromancer* marks a lifelong fascination with technology. He continues to be an avid explorer of the Internet and cutting-edge computer software, and participates in the virtual world of Second Life, where he founded a Book Art Museum (naturally).

As demonstrated by the considerable critical success of the Bill of Rights series, Minsky continues to connect micro actions in the economic, political, artistic and social spheres, to macro effects on society. He is the quintessential artistic entrepreneur, a maestro of material and metaphor in book and art hybrids that demand our attention and inspire reflection. Read his story, study his work, and follow his life's compass that has pointed him to true north for over fifty years: let nothing prevent you from giving voice to your truth.

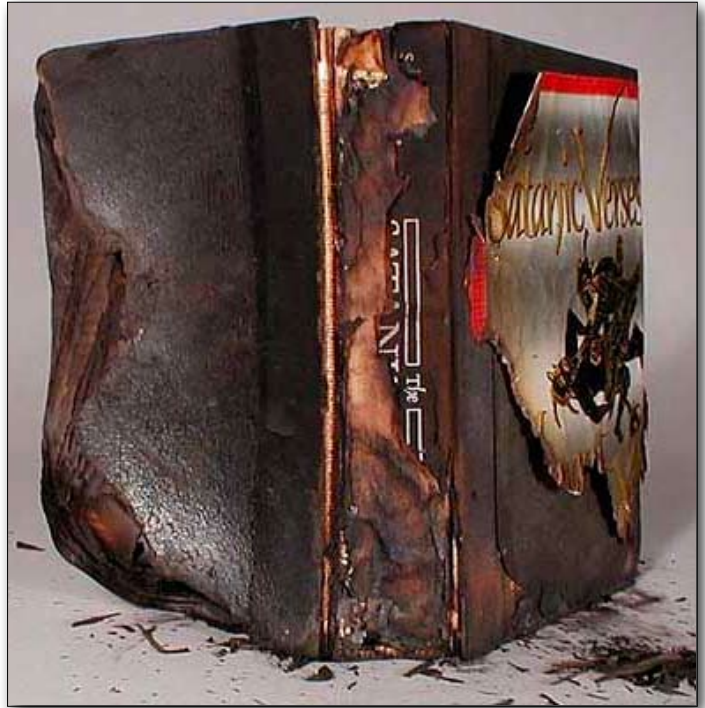
Betty Bright

Author, *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960-1980*

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Upon publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie lost the freedoms of Press, Religion, Speech and Assembly in some countries. The Fatwah issued on Rushdie, and the book-burnings, made headlines around the world. This ancient form of censorship continues in the 21st century.



The first book was burned for the reliquary on January 1, 2001.



The First Amendment

Reliquary for the Ashes of Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses

A sealed book-shaped reliquary containing the burned book. [First American edition, [Viking, New York, 1989]. Ink-jet on paper laminated to binder's board, with polyurethane and UV filter coatings, stained glass, 23K gold leaf, felt covered wood base with 23K gold stamped text of The First Amendment.



The Five Jewels
Covers the entire manuscript in a rich
array of colors and patterns, and is
one of the most beautiful and
valuable manuscripts in the world.



The Crisis of Democracy

I grew up with political awareness. My father was the Founder of Religious News Service, in 1934, which he thought would help reduce prejudice. He had 500 correspondents around the world with teletype machines. My mother held meetings of The League of Women Voters in our apartment, and when my father died, she went to work for the Anti-Defamation League.

But I really started becoming politicized on October 19, 1967, when a junior at Brooklyn College. Anti-war sentiment (Vietnam) had been growing. While the College President was away, an administrator called in NYC Police to break up a student protest of Navy recruiters on campus. Nearly a thousand students came to the support of the demonstrators, and 200 cops came to quell the riot. Forty students were arrested, and more were left bludgeoned and bloodied.

A student boycott followed, and a few days later thousands showed up for a rally led by Columbia University student organizer Mark Rudd. Two large flags were carried across campus, one red and one black, symbolizing revolution and anarchy.

Three years later another event activated me. On May 4, 1970, four unarmed students were killed by Ohio National Guard troops at Kent State University during a protest of the US invasion of Cambodia. This precipitated a national student strike. I joined a guerrilla theater group and performed what used to be called agitprop—agitation propaganda—and later was called street theater.

We took on many charged subjects, not just military/political themes. Racism was an issue. In one skit another player and I would fall down on a crowded sidewalk or in a bank, and a group would gather around us. “Some-

one’s been shot,” yelled one of the standing circle. “Call the police,” Yelled another.” One of them’s a nigger and the other’s a spic,” yelled a third. And the fourth voice yelled, “Never mind, business as usual.” We then quickly dispersed. The whole scene took about 20 seconds.

In 1980 the political scene was changing. I had heard about a book titled *The Crisis of Democracy*. It was written for an organization named The Trilateral Commission, established by Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Rockefeller in 1973 to supplant the Bilderberg group, which Prince Bernhard had run since 1954. In this text the authors propose that there is too much freedom in contemporary democracies, and that it is necessary to curtail personal freedoms in order to preserve the governability of democracies.

In order to learn more about the group I ordered some material from them. Jimmy Carter was a member of the Trilateral Commission. What surprised me was that in the forthcoming Presidential election each team from the two major parties and the “independent” party included at least one member of this club. I bound the book in sheep, gold and barbed wire to reflect the metaphor of the text, and exhibited this book as a political commentary.

The book is more relevant today than when I bound it. Since 1980, the Presidents of the United States, members of this not-for-profit organization before their nomination, worked toward consolidating power in the Executive branch. George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were members, and Brzezinski was Barack Obama’s mentor at Harvard. The terror attack of Sept. 11, 2001 precipitated the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, which had failed to pass during the Clinton administration, but was on hand for the (George W.) Bush administration to speed through Congress [see also p. 33].

This book was originally purchased as a paperback. The surface-dyed glazed sheepskin is abraded by the barbed wire every time the book is opened and closed, exposing the inner flesh that contrasts with the grain of the leather. The action is not so extreme as to cause the book to disintegrate rapidly, but slowly erodes the decorative surface of the skin. The 23K gold title remains bright. The barbed wire springs back to form a reading stand when the book is opened [photo above, as it appeared at the Yale exhibition in 2010 (larger image on p. 6)].

In 2007 I created an updated version of this work to reflect the development of geopolitical realities, with the tougher skin of a goat being constrained by the more dangerous razor ribbon.



The Crisis of Democracy

by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki for the Trilateral Commission.
New York University Press, 1975. Bound by Minsky 1980. 8¾ x 6 x 11
Sheep, gold, barbed wire.

Photo above: installation at the Allan Stone Gallery, May, 1981.
Collection of the Haas Art Library, Yale University.



The Crisis of Democracy

Bound by Minsky 2007. Goat, gold,
razor ribbon.
Jack Ginsberg Artists Book Collection
of Johannesburg, South Africa.



HAGENAUER-WIEN

Unique catalog of works in a private collection,,1982. 10 x 10½. Calf with tooled goatskin inlay panel, foil stamped spine. Catalog of works in a private collection, photos mounted on handmade paper with letterpress descriptions and title page. Above are two studies on paper in pencil, watercolor and foil tooling.

Collection of Vivian Milstein, Nwe York.

The studies are in the Richard Minsky Archive, Yale

This commission stimulated a study of decorative art that led to a series of miniature books with studies of geometric designs, and a series of bindings in leather and in lacquer.



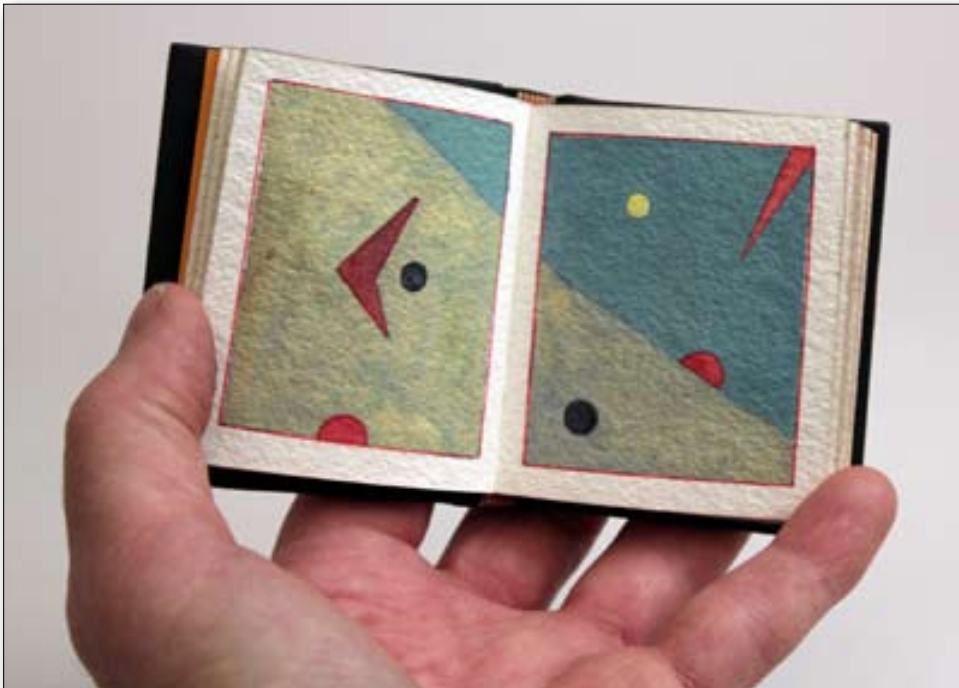


32 Studies

Minsky, 1991. $3\frac{1}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{4}$

Calf spine stamped in gold, acrylic and lacquer boards, three edges gilt.

Below and following page: the studies are acrylic, watercolor and ink on handmade paper.





Sappho's Leap: A Novel

by Erica Jong, Norton, 2003.

Bound by Minsky 2003. 12 x 7

Bound as a scroll. Papyrus endpaper printed inkjet with reproduction of Sappho text from early scroll fragment. Wood endcaps with oil base stain, 23K gold leaf, polyurethane and lacquer. Inset brass bushing for cedar scroll handle, which is contained in scroll center under removable endcap. Wood base with, stain, polyurethane and lacquer. Scroll cover is lacquered inkjet adapted from Greek Krater image of Alcaeus and Sappho.

Collection of Erica Jong and Ken Burrows, New York





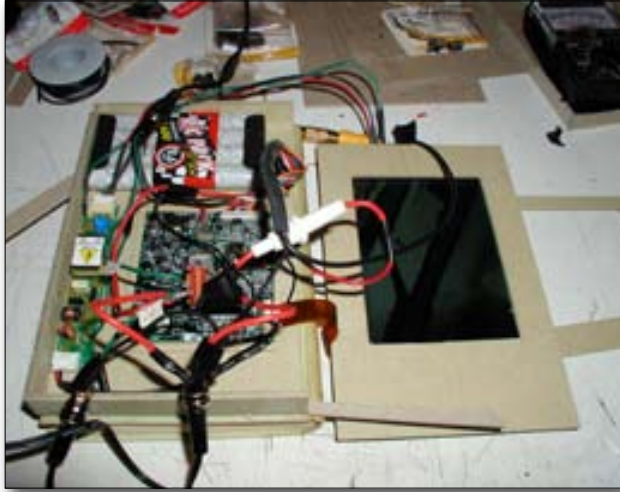
Eating At The Y

by Charles Bible, 1974

Binding by Minsky, 1974. 14¼ x 14½.

Padded satin, foil stamped title on leather label. In order to read the title it is necessary to insert one's fingers in the recess and move the satin folds aside. The book is subtitled "Pornographics by C. Bible," and contains graphically explicit etchings of sexual encounters.

Private collection, New York.



Nineteen Eighty-four

In high school I was an easy target for some of the tough kids. One day a particularly obnoxious one was taunting me, trying to pick a fight, and hit me a few times to get me to hit back. I knew that if I did that he would cream me. But I'd had enough. Since I was about six I had played with electronics, and had built all sorts of things from kits. That afternoon I rigged a zapper with a 300 volt portable TV battery that fit in a jacket pocket,

some capacitors, and lengths of wire that extended to my fingertips. The next day was assembly, when jacket and tie were mandatory.

I saw him in the stairwell between periods and zapped him on the back of his neck. "What the fuck was that," he yelled. "Stay away from me or it'll get worse," I replied, and walked away. Five minutes later my name was called over the loudspeaker to report to the Boy's Dean. That was Mr. Beller, who looked exactly like Clark Kent in the TV show Superman. "Hand it over," he demanded. I took the device off and gave it to him. He gave me a lecture about using my brain for the betterment of humanity. At the end of the day I retrieved my zapper and wired myself.

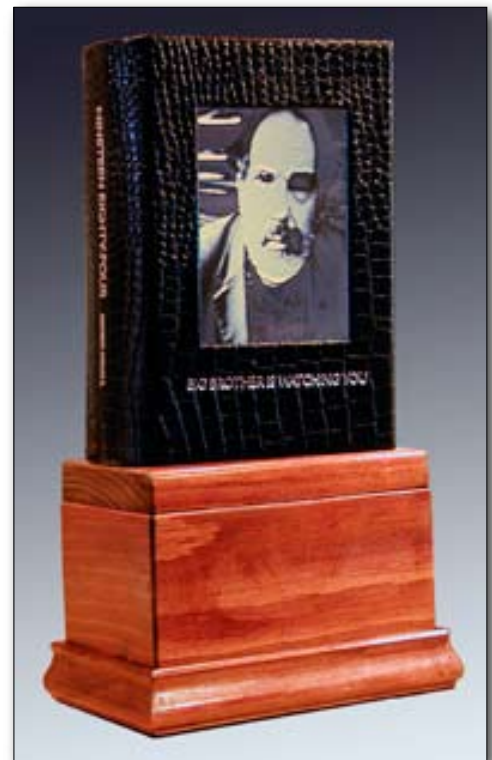
But there was nobody laying in wait for me. To the contrary, all harassment ceased, and the leader of that gang asked me to join them at their lunch table and help them with their homework.

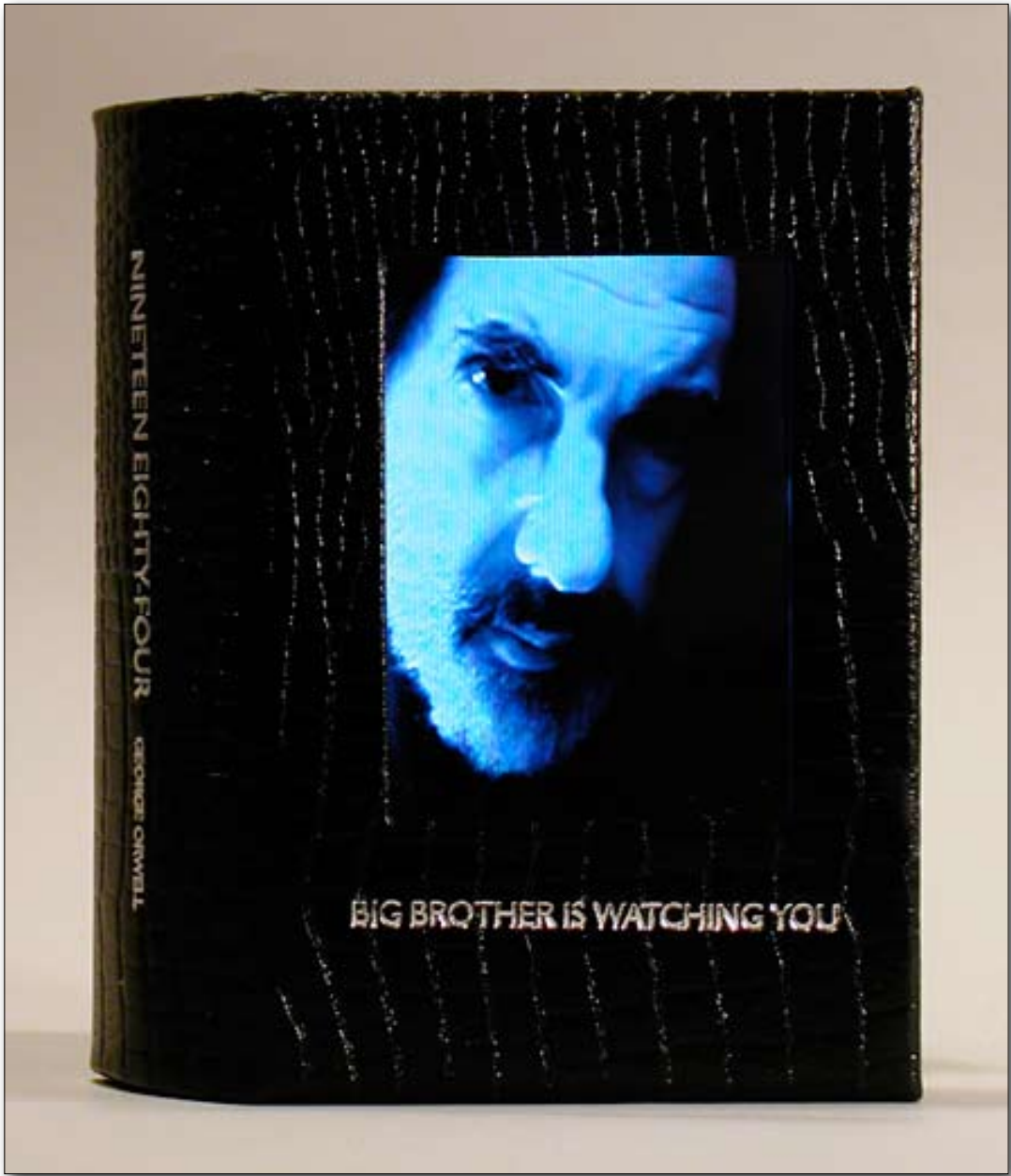
What does this have to do with book art? In 2003, the 100th birthday of Eric Arthur Blair (whose pseudonym was George Orwell) I used those electronic wiring skills in a binding for the first edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [above: the wiring in progress], and in 2009 the zapper became an electric chair for *Freedom of Choice* [page 128].

Nineteen Eighty-four

by George Orwell. Secker & Warburg, London, 1949. First Edition.
Binding by Minsky 2003-2006. 7½ x 5 x 2½
Lizard-grained cowhide, white metal foil stamped title and slogan.
LCD monitor embedded in cover with miniature video camera hidden behind leather with ⅛" hole for lens.

When you hold the book you see yourself on the screen. The original 1949 binding is preserved within the new one. The base recharges the battery pack that runs the system when it is off the base. While on the base [right] the screen power is supplied by a separate transformer to enable continuous operation when the book is on display.







Freedom of Choice

Three Poems of Love and Death by Lucie Brock-Broido

Richard Minsky, Stockport, NY, 2009. 73 x 26 x 24

Installation at the exhibition *Material Meets Metaphor: A Half Century of Book Art* by Richard Minsky at the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University, 2010. Strapped into the chair is Jae Rossman, Assistant Director for Special Collections and Curator of this exhibition.

Freedom of Choice

For the exhibition catalog, the Curator, Jae Rossman [photo above] wrote

This recent work by Minsky pushes his 'material meets metaphor' philosophy to the extreme. *Freedom of Choice* permits the reader to engage his/her full body in the reading experience.

He created it for the exhibition *Somewhere Far From Habit: The Poet and the Artist's Book* sponsored by Longwood University, which debuted at The Pierre Menard Gallery, Cambridge, MA before going to Longwood.

The book of Brock-Broido's poetry is published in an edition of 5, printed inkjet on J. Barcham Green

1976 handmade paper. Copy No. 1, on display, is bound in dark teal goatskin with 23K gold title, chained to an oak electric chair. Copies numbered 2 to 5 are bound in limp leather with gold title, no chair.

For the full experience, the reader can strap on the head restraint with three electrodes, applying one electrode to the leg. An MP3 player on the head restraint plays Minsky's reading of the three poems, two of which concern shotgun suicides and one, an electrocution. On the back of the chair is a cabinet containing a 20 gauge shotgun, a Manila hangman's noose, a wakizashi sword, razor blades, poison and a hypodermic syringe.



For more information, click on
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RICHARD MINSKY](#)