

BOOK ARTS

Ideas, artists, books

Boekie Woekie isn't your run-of-the-mill bookshop and Jan Voos isn't your run-of-the-mill bookshop owner. For one thing, the store, located on Berenstraat in Amsterdam near the Shaffy Theatre and a few blocks away from Anne Frank's house, is chock full of Voos's own books. In fact, Voos has 100-plus books to his name. Other names found within the cluttered, cozy warren of books are Grant van Aarsen, Nina Hagge, Colin Sackett, Babette Wagenvoort and Jody Zellen, to name but a few. Who are these folks? Artists. What are they selling? Books created by said artists. And where are they doing it? In a co-operative bookstore that is a most unusual place—a hub for artists, book lovers and the occasional German tourist, selling books (works of art in and of themselves) by artists and for artists.

Customers make their way into the shop from all walks of life. Open the door and be surrounded by art. "The books," Voos states, "don't represent art, they *are* art." Asked which are the most popular items sold, he says the signed and numbered vacuum bags full of dust sucked from the books.

"I had a very popular German television chat show host in the shop," Voos relates. "He wanted to buy a picture postcard. His friend was waiting outside. The Germans call chat show hosts Talkmasters. Well, this guy didn't get a syllable over his lips, being on foreign grounds. He stood there sticking out his hand with the card, a question mark on his face. I lifted my right index finger. He understood, paid and went. Was that now my best or worst customer?"

Founded in 1985 by six international artists (who have since decreased to four due to children, disagreements, death, that sort of thing), Boekie Woekie was created so artistic creations of the founders could see the light of day. "Would be fetched from under the bed," as Voos puts it. Publishing, for them, was a reality test. "Not much public under the bed," Voos continues. Finding a tiny shop in the city centre (Amsterdam has just been awarded World Book Capital of 2008), the six took shifts guarding, showing and, from time to time, selling their own publications, at that time around 150 titles.

Five years later they asked themselves if

they wanted to continue the artistic venture. Indeed, most did. The four who remained found a bigger space, the current location, and took steps to include books by artists outside of their group, thereby greatly expanding their intriguing inventory.

Voos, an Amsterdamer, draws, writes and paints when he's not busy tending the shop. He sees the shop as "an artist's sculptural work-in-progress." When he's not tending the shop he's participating in book fairs. Co-op members attended the Frankfurt Book Fair until 2004 and now make appearances at the Small Publishers Fair in London and the fair Printed Matter stages in New York City.

When he's not tending the shop or attending book fairs, Voos is building temporary Boekie Woekies at Dieter Roth exhibitions. Roth was a German-born Swiss printmaker and mixed-media artist who died in 1998. Boekie Woekie carries much of his work. The creative enterprise (a shop with a few thousand titles that stays open a few months) has occurred as far and wide as Zurich and Basel, Marseille and Reykjavik. And when he's not doing all that? Well, Boekie Woekie keeps a busy schedule of readings and showings at the shop on Berenstraat. And then maybe he'll get a few hours of sleep.

Art, and books, have been Voos's life and livelihood. His parents read, he read. Books were everywhere. He started to draw early in his life. Those drawings were often sequenced. "The pages of books automatically became their vehicle." He learned much more about books as time went on. That is clearly evidenced by Boekie Woekie.

The store itself is a vehicle too, of sorts. A vehicle for artists to commiserate; a vehicle for artists to show their work to their peers and the public; a vehicle to bring to light pieces of art not often found in the cookie-cutter bookstores and austere gallerias; a vehicle for a group of artists to thrive in Amsterdam.

Although, according to Voos, perhaps Amsterdam isn't such a good home for artists. "They have a lot of traffic lights here," Voos says, "but everybody disobeys the rules. If the Amsterdamers would wait at red lights they would have chances to get ideas, but: no ideas, no artists." Fortunately, Boekie Woekie (www.xs4all.nl/~boewoe) helps Amsterdamers wait for just a while.

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