

# ELLEN SHEFFIELD: Page by Page

## About the Artist

A visiting instructor of art at Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, Ellen Sheffield is a graduate of The Ohio State University, Case Western Reserve University, and the Cleveland Institute of Art. She is the owner of Unit IV Arts, and her work was recently published in *1,000 Artists' Books: Exploring the Book as Art* (2012).

Selected exhibitions include those at The Word and Image Gallery, Bright Hill Literary Center, Treadwell, NJ (2012), the School of Fine Arts Gallery, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN (2011), and the Pyramid Atlantic Artist Book Fair, Silver Spring, MD (2010). Sheffield has received two Ohio Arts Council Individual Arts Fellowships (2000 and 2002), and her work is represented in the collections of the Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT, the University of California Riverside, and Kenyon College Special Collections.

**“Oh, oh,” said Dick, “See Spot go.”**

**“Here comes Spot,” said Jane. “Here comes Spot to the boat.”**

I learned to read during the era of the “Dick and Jane” primers—stilted syncopated narrative style readers that relied on the method of sight word reading and repetition.

Like all elementary school students, I progressed to readers that were accompanied by vocabulary flashcards where new words used in each story chapter were reproduced (in 72 pt Century font, I later learned) on oak tag rectangles. “Ahead.” “Canyons.” “Goldfish.” Seeing the words isolated and out of context made them mysterious, yet more powerful as coded visual symbols. I was fascinated by the cards and never tired of handling them, rearranging them, and building phrase combinations. Words became things to hold, language as found object, and text as open ecology.

As a visual artist, a maker, and a noticer of surfaces, images, words and spaces, one of my affinities is for fossil records such as dictionaries and encyclopedias where words are alphabetized, indexed, and otherwise removed from traditional narrative structures. As noted in a recent article on artists’ archives, if you look up, “abacus,” “alligator,” or “akimbo” in an old Webster’s dictionary, you will see my college faculty advisor’s illustrations, “providing a visual definition of those words.” Professor Anita Rogoff deepened my text/image obsession.

The books in *Page by Page* are rooted in these early experiences with wordplay and disrupted narrative. They are investigations of letterform perception, of reading comprehension, and of giving tangible form to the poet’s quiet voice. By physically dismantling the book structure and recombining its parts (spine, page, table of contents, etc.), meaning is reframed through layered intersections of art, typography, and page design. This new configuration then becomes the larger field or “page” through which context is revealed or veiled, and our understanding of words and the reading process is altered.

—Ellen Sheffield