

# Tracing the Echo, artist books and folios 1978–2001

Dianne Longley

Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide

Traditional in format and sternly bound in sturdy brown buckram, *The Glass Ball* (1978) with its hand-coloured etchings and text on *velin cuve* paper was Dianne Longley's first artist's book. In the course of the intervening decades, Longley has drawn on a cornucopia of printing techniques including intaglio, relief, stone and offset lithography, screenprinting, letterpress, polymergravure and photopolymer plate printing – in sometimes unexpected combinations. Since the early 1990s, Longley has incorporated digital technology into her art practice: *Traversing the Echo* (1996) for instance is a CD ROM with accompanying music composed by Becky Llewellyn, while *Contingent Ambiguity*'s digitally created images, printed as polymergravure prints, is Longley's most recent work. No absolute distinction can however be drawn between the traditional and contemporary, for Longley is a practitioner who views her process as a hybridisation, in which the virtual nourishes the actual and vice-versa. Such is Longley's obvious pleasure in the tactility of her printing process and in the materiality of an exquisite array of papers, bindings and lettering, there seems little possibility of absolute digital domination.

Longley's twenty-eight artist books and folios represent a significant proportion of an art practice devoted to the production of fine art prints. In the survey presented by Flinders University Art Museum, they take a myriad of forms like the miniature concertina book *Quest* (1989), the flat/folded book *Love* (1990), the gouache paintings on vellum of *Theatre of Embarkation* (1986), the delicate tracery of the relief photopolymer prints of *The Golden Rose* (1995) folio, the copper and brass plate of *Unprintable Book* (1986) and the highly coloured digital images and translucent overlays of *Sensory Memorandum* (1998).

A listing of the allusive book/folio titles since 1978 reveals this artist's intense interest in

language – in fact text invariably provides the genesis for her work. It is notable that whilst early books like *Deanin's Dreams* (1981) were dense with text, increasingly words and image collide and interweave or in the case of the award winning *Night Sea Crossing* (1994), the language hovers above the illustrations on transparent pages, in a diminished but no less potent form.

Longley's fascination with chance finds expression in the recurring motif of the chequerboard and the repeated references to games and "the game of life." "Chance governs all, it is fortune, fate and luck. Some court chance but none can avoid it. It can turn victory into disaster and disaster into victory." The endpapers of *Compass of Change* are scattered with dice and dominoes and hands holding playing cards. In *Birds screech at the moment of death* a checked border surrounds a coffin-like form. Within this form a chequered forecourt appears to offer the Mallarmé-like suggestion that life is a lottery. The black and silver checked cover of the 2001 edition of the "symbolic narrative" *Apperception* foreshadows the frequent incidence in that book of the "chequers" motif. Longley describes this motif as symbolic of "the duality of elements." Fire for example is viewed as a force of not only destruction, but also purification and illumination. In the alliterative *Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups* (1999) which assumes the form of a boxed set of playing cards, the game has become literal.

Essentially a book of aphorisms with highly coloured digital prints, *Compass of Change* (1996) affords an insight into many of Longley's preoccupations. "Forms change," says Longley, "but the essence is not annihilated."<sup>2</sup> Throughout the decades her narrative has remained consistent. Almost without exception, the books articulate a quest for self discovery – a quest which embraces life, death, love and chance, in which boats, ladders and in *The Glass Ball* a slippery dip, play a

facilitating role. Longley's journeys both literal and spiritual are couched in a domestic iconography of friends, cats, cups of tea et al, which provides an engaging counterpoint to the sophistication of her technical command. View all experience as an opportunity, Longley seems to be saying in her illuminating excursions into a magic realist world of symbolism and mythological beasts. "The players must risk their comfort to discover what is to be known."<sup>3</sup>

*"Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them."*

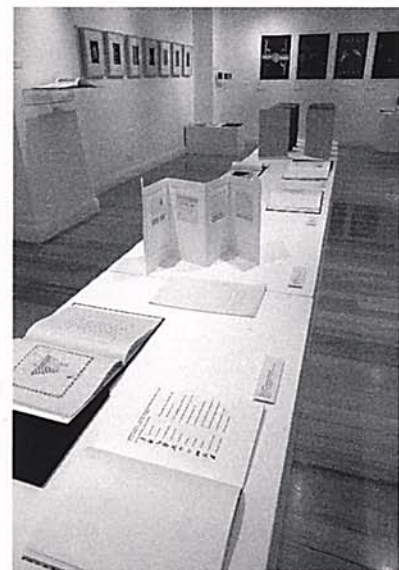
John Milton *Areopagitica*.

Wendy Walker is a writer, art critic and dance aficionado of the Latin American variety

Exhibition ran 4 August – 8 September 2001

## Notes

1,2,3 Dianne Longley, *Compass of change*, pps.6, 46, 8.



Installation  
Flinders  
University Art  
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## DIANNE LONGLEY

*Tracing the Echo, artist books and folios 1978-2001*

Catalogue printed for Longley's exhibition at Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, SA; 40 pages, including 8 pages in colour, 21 x 27 cm; essays by Pamela Zeppelin, Stephanie Radok, Olga Sankey; with descriptions and illustrations of the artist books.

\$18.00 including postage and GST in Australia, \$22 including postage overseas

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