

**Karen Wirth
Narrator**

**Betty Bright
Minnesota Center for Book Arts
Interviewer**

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BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 28, 2015 I am interviewing Karen Wirth at Open Book in Minneapolis. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota, through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

Karen, your involvement at MCBA has reached across nearly MCBA's entire thirty-year history. You moved to Minneapolis in 1987, and your involvement began immediately in teaching and exhibiting. You also served on MCBA's board of directors as the first practicing artist, signaling a widening board membership. In addition to your artistic practice, your teaching and advocacy have led you to your role today, as the Vice President of Academic Affairs at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. From that perspective reaching across the wider arts world as well as the book arts, I thank you for sharing your broad perspective with me today. So let's start by having you share with us a description of your artistic practice.

KW: It is wide-ranging. It started with thinking about books as a metaphor, that books could contain any topic. However I wanted to approach it there was a home in the book. It includes books about architecture; it includes architectural books; it includes structure and form and language, scale and body. It is both book form, sculpture, installation and public art. It is a whole range, but book is always at the center.

BB. That is a perfect description of the book arts today, ever expansive, and not specific and controlled to one aspect or one iteration. Let's look back to the beginning of your involvement in MCBA in the Center's early days. MCBA was incorporated as a non-profit in 1983, and opened its doors to the public in 1985. We will start around that period. When and how did you first hear about MCBA?

KW: Two stories with that. First one: in 1984, I was living in Berkeley, California for the summer. I had no idea that Minnesota was in my future. A friend introduced me to a woman who had a letterpress shop in Berkeley, and she was describing this new book

center that was going to be in Minnesota, and maybe there was some controversy around it. It was Johanna Drucker, and at the time I had no idea of any of this. So, it was a really interesting starting place.

A couple of years later I was looking for graduate schools, I was accepted into a number of them, and I was doing the visiting tour to see what these places really were like. At the University of Minnesota I visited for the day, and then I was going to go see a studio space that was on Third Street. I took the bus, got off the bus to go to that studio, and I look across the street and see: Minnesota Center for Book Arts. And I said to myself, I could take classes there. And as I was walking across the street I said, no, I could teach there. I walked in the door and in that split second of change of mind, I walked in and there was Jim Sitter. I had no idea who he was or what it was, and it was a Saturday afternoon and there was a class going on. I came in and sold him on the idea of having a different model for teaching classes, and I was going to be there in the fall, and it was really that reception and that conversation with him and seeing MCBA, that I thought, I could really move here. This could be a great place for me.

BB: So, you say as you crossed the street, things clicked. What background or interests positioned you to recognize that, or in visiting with Johanna Drucker, who happens to be well established in our field as well, what had you been doing up until that point to put you in that position to see that?

KW: When I was in Berkeley I was actually taking classes with a conservator at Mills College, and learning many intricate things about binding, so there was this sense of book as object and making. A lot of book exhibitions I saw out there at that time [and] I was curating some shows for the University of San Diego library. So, I already had this kind of far-reaching sense of it, and that was part of the problem. It was in little pieces all over the place, and it was something in seeing Center for Book Arts, a center, a home. When I walked in there was this exhibition space, a class was going on—it felt like everything here is in one place, and it was seminal for me.

BB: You mentioned that you just happened to walk in when Jim Sitter, the founding Executive Director was there. Describe for me the sense of how your own community at MCBA evolved. In other words, who did you meet, in that initial time? What people were around the Center?

KW: Well, first it was Beth Giles, who was the director of the education area at that time, and you, pretty quickly. You know there was a show the following fall that you curated, work by four people, Michael Tarachow, Ann Borman, me, and Scott Helmes: four people with pretty different practices. [“Works by 4: Ann Borman, Scott Helmes, Michael Tarachow, Karen Wirth,” 1988] And that to me felt like an introduction both to the book art community of a new group of people who were coming in, but more largely to the Twin Cities and beyond that: here is a fresh look at book arts, and ways that we are

expanding out into the world. It has always been a really great nexus point for me, MCBA, in kind of gathering and expanding.

BB: So, think about those early years when you were teaching at MCBA. I know you were teaching in other areas, too, but are there any thoughts or memories that capture what it was like to teach in [MCBA's] space?

KW: First, when I stopped by that one day off the bus, a teaching model for books at that point was long-term, traditional book arts classes. Michael Norman was teaching them, and I think they were six, eight, ten weeks long, very immersive, traditional. And what I proposed as I crossed the street were short-term weekend workshops that were very specific to a book form or an idea. And that is still how things are done. So I introduced concertinas, non-adhesive binding, non-adhesive wrappers. In those classes there were a fair number of architects at that time, which already said how this was not a small field; they were looking for different ways to present their work for proposals for projects.

After that audience was built, I remember having discussions about, what else might this be? How do we get a deeper immersion and not just one structure after another? We introduced courses like Form and Content, Structure and Sequence. There was a typography class, there was a history class; I think those were held in the Library at the time. I think of that as a very early forerunner to what is now the Book Arts Certificate, this collection and range of breadth and depth in the book.

In terms of teaching, that was probably the most pointed to me. The community, you know, books are all intersecting and you are in a space that intersects, so there were some classes that I co-taught with a papermaker. They would make paper over there and then they would make a book over here; there was a fluidity that the space or the people allowed and encouraged.

BB: When you say you taught with a papermaker, did you teach with Amanda Degener?

KW: Carolyn Goldberg.

BB: You moved to the Cities in late-1980s, 1987, and you were in an MFA program at the University of Minnesota. Do you have any memories or impressions of the larger arts and cultural scene in the Twin Cities or Minnesota at that time, in contrast to what we have today? Did you have a sense of it or were you really focused on studying?

KW: I was in the MFA program, so I am not sure that that is one that I could say.

BB: From your memory of that period of the 1980s, did you get involved in any other aspects of MCBA? I know that as we move into the late 1990s, MCBA is trying to transform itself; it is trying to get through a bumpy period and to move forward. Were you involved in that period, in committee meetings or discussions about MCBA?

KW: Well, lots of discussions, so somewhere in there I was also on the Artists' Advisory Board, which they had started. There were space issues, there were audience issues, things like, ok, we are started, who is the community? What do we want to be? I think one of the more important conversations was about the canon and that standard question: what is book art? There were many national questions about that, with ideas of either limiting it or framing it within a certain historical context or within a certain technical context. I think MCBA was always trying to push that out, whether or not that was fitting what the norm was supposed to be. But the critical conversation was about the canon. What is it that we establish about the critical discourse around this discipline that will hold it up to every other artistic canon and not have it be something separate from those? I think about the "Rereading the Boundless Book" symposium [in 1994], which was very much about that, conversations about, who are we most serving here? Is it the artists? Is it the school children who come in? Is it people we don't even know yet and who want to expand beyond that? I think it was everybody; it was about this inclusiveness and expansiveness at the same time. And then, space issues—that became an entirely different thing, as there was a shift in space.

BB: Leading up to the change when MCBA moved, before we leave that earlier space behind, can you describe that earlier space? If someone were to walk in the door, what would [they see]?

KW: Looking at it from the bus and the outside, there was a slate sign, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and a pretty imposing brick building that had a center entranceway. The windows were very high, very symmetrical, and it felt like you were advancing into something dark and cavernous. But you opened the doors, and even then, before Open Book, there was a sense of openness about the space. It was white, you walked up the stairs, the exhibitions were in the center, and there was the Founders Wall, the red wall with the press in front of it. On the left side was the office, anchored on the other side by the Library, and I think Allan Kornblum's Coffee House Press was in there at the time of the opening, as well. And the four corners were anchored by the production studios. So it felt like you were seeing the whole of it at one time, but you could also find your place within that. It was a pretty marvelous space, and the same architects did both spaces, Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle, so there was a vision about openness that carried through.

BB: Jeff Scherer designed the McKesson Building space, and Garth Rockcastle did the Open Book space. From walking in, to teaching or working in there—I know you probably prepped for your classes in there—are there any reflections on what it was like to actually work in that space, as a working studio space?

KW: You could hear what was going on in the other spaces, and I liked that. You knew there were papermakers over there. You could hear Amanda [Degener] when she was teaching, you could hear the beater room going, it made it part of that large community. I know the book tables—there was always a discussion about the tables, how high they

should be, the stools, all those things that were idiosyncratic to the maker and what they would prefer. The windows were, again, high, and it was really hot in the bindery in the afternoons on a Saturday. I remember, it got a little tough sometimes dealing with the heat, but it was a pretty great, workable space.

BB: How about the neighborhood? Because MCBA and the McKesson Building, it was the Warehouse District it was called. What was it like to walk up and down First Avenue?

KW: I was living illegally in a warehouse space a few blocks away, so....

BB: How was that? [Laughter]

KW: It was home! [Laughter] It was good until they decided to turn it into condos. You know, it definitely felt downtown, and conversations were very interesting, when we were talking about another space. [Questions included] who will come downtown, who is the audience? Are we limiting our audience by having it here? Should it be out in the suburbs? Should it be in a place that is more accessible? And that was probably the first time I [heard talk] about excluding people, that the place itself couldn't do that. And the new space wasn't that far away, but it is accessible by the freeway and felt maybe a little bit easier to get to the Center. Yes, I was part of focus groups at that point; there were some broad-ranging discussions at that point.

BB: Before we go there, I wanted also to touch back with you. In addition to your teaching, we co-curated an exhibition, we both wrote for a catalogue called *Copier Books*, and I think there was another title that just left my mind, and you will probably tell me...

KW: I can't remember.

BB: And it is not important because we could just look it up. [I was thinking of *Story:Telling*, an MCBA exhibition that Wirth actually co-curated with Wilber (Chip) Schilling in 1998] So we did some co-curating, and you received a couple of Jerome Fellowships, which is such a key program. I wonder if you could share with us what that was like and what those projects were.

KW: The first Jerome Fellowship was for *How to Make an Antique* (1989), which was a collaborative piece with Robert Lawrence, and it was a video sculpture book furniture wonderful, amazing piece. And the second one was a solo award for a book called *Continental Drifting* (1991), which was an accordion book about women pioneers and westward expansion. For both of them, first, what it felt like was there was a sense of, obviously recognition, and having arrived by having receiving those. But it was also in a broader sense that the Jerome Fellowships—there are others—and so this was a peer with all the other Jerome Fellowships. It wasn't something isolating, it wasn't a special thing

for just books. It made it, again, part of a larger community of art and practice and that mattered a lot. And, the catalogues; I think that the scholarship for the regular exhibitions that you did, and for the Jerome. There was that life beyond the exhibition, which is pretty critical. So, yes, Jerome mattered a lot.

BB: What you mentioned about actually living in the Warehouse District, in your neighborhood, as it were. What role do you think MCBA played in that neighborhood, the Warehouse District? When you think about the breadth of it, there was the WARM Gallery, there were a number of galleries. Where do you think MCBA fit in that neighborhood?

KW: I would say...it was only a block away, what was the name of that building; it was only a block away.

BB: We could look it up. [Laughter]

KW: We could look it up. [It was] an amazing building, with Rifle Sport Gallery [and] all of those galleries in the building. [MCBA] wasn't in that building, but it was part of that whole.

BB: Wyman?

KW: Wyman Building, yes! And the New French Bar in that area, it was lively and vital. I would say we were kind of an anchor of a corridor, which all shifted when it became Target Center and a sports area, and then we felt maybe a little bit by ourselves.

BB: Yes, there really was a shift there. Now in the late 1990s, you mentioned that you were on an advisory board. Can you share any memories or stories from around that period?

KW: There were three organizations [considering collocating]; all of them had their leases due soon. It was simultaneous: the Loft, Milkweed Editions, and us. There was a synchronicity there, and we were dispersed, and could there be something that we could do together? I remember community conversations in the bindery, and it was sort of a wish list: if you could have whatever you wanted. It was big and dreamy and kind of crazy, but then also about who were we serving and what is this supposed to be? And so the conversation was both collapsing and expanding—well, maybe we can't do this and this anymore, maybe it has to be more focused in this setting. And those were interesting, just about dreams and what it could be. Also it was, where this might be. There was a space out on Raymond and University, a building that was being looked at, and that is again where, who, and how do people get to this space?

BB: That was when Peggy Korsmo-Kennon had been hired [as Executive Director], and we are going to be speaking with her as well. I thought she told me once that this [move]

was much more imminent than she realized, and this became her role. And when you said, there were dreams, people were [imagining] what they might want, it makes me wonder how many items were on that wish list. It is such a fantastic space that MCBA has now; how many of those items made it through, because it seems like we were pretty fortunate.

Now we are going to spend some time talking about Open Book, because among other roles you have had with a broad range of impact, it is the central staircase that has really become a symbol not just of Minnesota Center for Book Arts, but of Open Book itself. Open Book opened in 2000. But if we just step back a bit, why don't you share the story of how you became involved with the staircase, and what your impressions were of the rough space of the Open Book building.

KW: My artistic practice at that point had been sculptural and artist books about architecture. And I had had enough shows, and enough architects who had been in my classes, that I was somewhat known in that community. I got a call—this was after the focus groups so I knew that something was imminent. I got a call from Garth Rockcastle, who was doing the building, and who asked if I was interested in collaborating on some part of the building. Of course! He had selected six or seven sites in the building, and invited me to come down on a Saturday, tour through the building, and identify what I might want to do.

[Still today from the outside, you can see that] Open Book [is comprised of three] buildings that abut each other and are made into one building. From the outside, it didn't look so good. All the windows were boarded up, there was a liquor store across the street, there was none of this construction; it felt like No Man's Land. And then walking in, the main part of what is now Open Book had been an electronics supply store, and it was a warren of low-ceilinged little offices and corridors. But I am walking with an architect who thinks in terms of volume and sightlines, and he was describing this open space, and it is going to do this, and it is going to do this. And it was pretty incredible to take for me what had been small scale and think about large scale. One of the things he mentioned was a staircase, and there was the façade on the outside, and some other things, and [he said] you have a weekend to think about it. So, I thought, a staircase is most like a book: it is directional, it is functional: scale, body, and here it is a metaphor as well. And that metaphorical connection became the glue for everything.

BB: You said you had a weekend to think about it, not too much time! What was the timeframe as far as the design? If it opened in 2000, was this 1998 or 1999? Because they're raising funds all this time, the three organizations.

KW: 1999. Yes. They were raising funds for their own organizations and for Open Book, so there was this dual process. We had a lot of conversations, sketching. I brought in foam core and was standing up along the edges. [Rockcastle] was pleating paper. It was this fussing with materials to see what would work. But, it was more about the

conversation, about like and not like, moving through this space, and interesting conversations with the Loft as well, because they knew there was going to be text on the stairs, and they wanted to know who the author was going to be, and I was like, hmmm. [Laughter] First, I didn't want the authority of an author. And [I had] to think about some quote that would last as long as this building would. But mostly I knew that [a staircase], and this one in particular, is sculptural and is accessed from both directions, and any sentence [reads] left to right, and it would not work for a stair. So for me it had to be lists, and no matter where you accessed it, it would function as something readable and understandable, so it became a word game.

BB: Correct me if I am wrong, but I remember your saying that you were trying to find the right substance for the panels to write on. Wasn't there a long process to track that down?

KW: Yes, this experience of working [was one of] building architecture rather than a book. You know, you have to make a book function to open well. There are many [issues], but you don't have code inspectors and zone issues that you have to work with, and there were so many things on the staircase that were problem-solving, that had nothing to do with the stair. For example, it is an open staircase, so a blind person could hit their head if there wasn't something underneath it that warned them, that their cane would touch, so that whole peeling up of the floor that became the first step, it was the last of the solutions that were denied by the code person about how to mark that on the floor. Many, many things like that. It is an individual, one-of-a-kind, handmade piece of architecture, just like books can be.

BB: I have a number of questions to follow, but I know you have brought some materials to talk with us further about the staircase. I would love to look at them and have you share any other process or thoughts about what that was like. Tell me about this book.

KW: Maybe I will start with this one, which is the sketchbook, and about those conversations. For example, how might this look in space? We knew there was going to be a large, two, three-story open space. And the staircase was going to fill that and it was going to provide a physical and a metaphorical connection among all the spaces, and we had a lot of back and forth about symmetry and asymmetry. Not being an engineer and an architect, I wanted asymmetry. Symmetry is better to deal with. So, we had a fair amount of conversations with engineers to make sure the torque on this would work and the whole building wouldn't spin around; that two-story steel spine which goes down to the basement—that holds the entire thing up. So these were really just futzing with what might the shape of the stairs be, eventually moving away from other kinds of structures, I was thinking about the railings and how they might be like binding, along one side, like a Japanese accordion on the right side like a long-stitch book.

So, the materials you are talking about, I ended up with a product called Lumasite. Here is the plan for how many panels there were. We ended up designing it so that we would have larger panels on the top and the bottom, and very tight together, which could act as the railings. Normally railings have to be four inches apart. So, this way they were stacked close, as you move up the stairs they start opening up, and also get closer together. By the time they are fully opened they are the requisite four inches apart. So, again, it was the book unfolding, it was about revealing and concealing in space the way a book does, but also, it was about following code. You don't deal with it much.

BB: That is brilliant. And then, you talk about the language you put on it. The language play added to it, which makes so much sense when you are accessing and living in the space the way so many people do. How did you come up with the words to put on there?

KW: Starting with ones that made sense: structure, construction, architecture, so each word would lead into another, so structure, architecture. I have a pretty large collection of strange dictionaries and encyclopedias, and I brainstormed about common words to: printing, books, architecture, structure, writing, anything that was about this building, and let each word turn itself into the next and the next and the next. This comes from a spelling game in second grade, when you have to change a letter to change it into another word, and it is just a lifelong fascination with words as objects and sense of play.

This other book was actually a small edition that I did as part of a fundraiser when we realized that the staircase itself was not just a piece of architecture but it was a symbol and was going to have a very great presence, and that the budget needed a little help. And so there was extra fundraising that was for it. I developed a lovely little, really it is like a production sketchbook that plays off of, here, looking at what the building actually looked like when it started, which is pretty dismal, and then memorializing some of the conversations we had about the stair as serial event, as a path forward, a progression—all of these things were stair and book, and trying to play with materials. So this first kind of iteration, of what would it look like if the panels were pages that you could turn and walk through as well. It was again a scale thing, a kind of idiosyncratic sketchbook into something that became a little more public and then into the large-scale public staircase.

BB: And then the person who actually helped to secure the funds for the staircase is....

KW: Gail See. And it is the Gail See Staircase.

BB: Well, how about if we take a minute now and go downstairs and look at the staircase, and then come back up and finish up here?

KW: Ok.

KW: One of the more interesting things was the staircase was built with four main steel sections: the spine, the first rung, the staircase, the landing, and then the second, that

curves up into the second floor. That was done by Northstar Steel. For installation day, they closed Washington Avenue, which is a major thoroughfare. I think they closed down starting about 5:30 or 6 am. It took them about three hours to move in those pieces, particularly that last “fishtail” piece because of the curve, they had to winch it in, step by step by step, and it cleared the front door space by about an inch and a half. It was amazing to watch that, seeing this thing come to life. I had been out to Northstar Steel seeing it in progress and we talked about the welding, but, here, it finally became form.

BB: And then it was put together, welded in place? How did they get it up?

KW: Put together, welded in place, the concrete poured, then all the railings put in, and then there were the sheets and the Lumasite panels, which I actually worked on. The space was not completely rented at the time, there was extra space, so I brought my grinders and my facemask and I was up on the third floor preparing those panels. Then we put them all up a year before I put the text on, so they were blank. And it is because I knew there was going to be a lot of signage—the donor wall, and directions, and I didn’t know how I wanted the type to look. And I am glad I waited because I ended up doing it in pencil with my handwriting, and so it is this sense of the personal within a public space, cursive writing, which, will people be able to read that twenty years from now, I don’t know, but the sense of movement, pacing, and moving through that cursive writing has, and a sense of the sketchbook, of finding something that you don’t expect. I took all the panels down, wrote on them, put them back up.

BB: That was my next question. So you took all the panels down. Did you carry them to your studio?

KW: No, I laid them down in the lobby.

BB: When did you do it? What time of day did you do it?

KW: During normal work days. Because they had to be up, they were part of the structure. Right! They were the railings, so I needed to do it on-site. Yes, that was fun, it was great.

BB: So, what does it feel like when you see kids running up and down those stairs, or discovering the stairs for the first time?

KW: Watching people interact with the stairs is glorious. I don’t think I have ever had an experience through my artwork like that. It is immediate, it is fun, it is smart, it is big scale, it is small scale. One of the other things that I check, at least once every six months, is to see what else is written on the stairs. Yes, and it is always kids, and in fifteen years at least two or three things are written on there every six months, they have always been in pencil, they have always been in cursive. And it is like they were trying to

engage the game with me so I don't really think of it like graffiti or defacing, but another kind of interaction.

So, some examples of the word game that is on the panels, given that each place in terms of direction is a start and an ending. On the lower part of the stairs, it goes: context, text, subtext, textural, textual, architectural. On the other side: knowledgeable, legible, legibility, ability.

BB: Thanks so much for looking at the staircase. I want to take a few more minutes and step back here, and go outside the building for a second. I am wondering if you could describe for us the neighborhood around Open Book at the time when it was being created and opening up, something more than the liquor store, the infamous Liquor Depot, what else was going on, on Washington Avenue at that time.

KW: I think the most important thing is that the city had identified Washington Avenue from the University into downtown as a technology corridor. And it was an aspiration, so I think there was a cold type business that was somewhere near here, and they had not yet built the Gateway Center of the University [of Minnesota], so it was pretty much an empty road with lots of small little businesses, but waiting for this technology idea to take root. At the same time they had identified Third Avenue as an Arts Corridor, so I think they were looking at this intersection of arts and technology in the downtown area. So, one of the things to push through is that this was seen as an art place and not a technology place, and that was going to skew this nominal plan. I remember having conversations with both Garth and board members about how do we frame this, that book is a longstanding technology from binding and presses forever, and how they needed to expand their idea of technology more than we had to expand into what we were. It was also the time that digital was starting to push in there as well, and MCBA, as visionary, about what can be, there was some good talk with the city about how this could be an anchor for the technology corridor as well.

BB: And then, around the year 2000, do you have any memories about the larger arts and political worlds, or what might have helped affect the environment that also helped to make Open Book happen? You say Garth and perhaps some board members talked with the City of Minneapolis, was there a sense that they wanted some kind of an anchor on that street, or was there a sense of something else going on in the arts and political worlds?

KW: I don't think I can answer that question

BB: It doesn't come to mind?

KW: You can talk to a city person for that. Or Tom Hoch.

BB: Yes, Tom Hoch, an early board member as well. He may be able to help us with that.

KW: Yes, and the theatre district again, there was a lot of ideas about how the downtown area in particular could have a presence, because businesses were moving out, and headquarters were moving out, and how do we get that all back.

BB: Since you have been involved in both sites for MCBA as far the artists' community, do you feel that it has changed significantly because of its presence—not just in Open Book, not just in a new, bigger facility, but in a facility that is shared with other organizations? Do you think that has affected MCBA's community?

KW: I think MCBA has always been inclusive, but it has grown up as well as grown out. If we think about the first building, yes, Allan Kornblum was in there, but it was really about the mechanics of making books. Just as the classes have changed as has the output of MCBA, there is definitely a sense that writing and talking and critical issues and presentations, and the way books are, in the larger sense of the world and culture, all have very much come into play with this Center. This space is amazing and invites this huge range of people to come into it and see it as well.

BB: And then, back to the neighborhood outside, how has this neighborhood, the Downtown East neighborhood, evolved in helpful or challenging ways? It's been now fifteen years since MCBA moved here. There has been a lot of change.

KW: Hard for me to say. I look at all of the construction with the hotels. Developing the river, it is shocking that it went undeveloped for as long as it did. So with the river on one side and the Vikings [stadium] on the other side it is a really interesting corridor to be in, and you know, we are a little two- to three-story building in what feels like to be a much larger contemporary urban setting, and I think it is a wonderful place to be.

BB: Well, I so much appreciate the perspective you bring to our conversation, your involvement with MCBA, and before that—it probably spans thirty years, [because] when you moved out here you were already involved in the book arts. If you take that perspective, and also having served on the Board of Directors, how do you feel MCBA's mission or vision has changed over time, or has it stayed pretty much the same?

KW: I think bigger and better at the same thing. I have never felt that there was something that had to be forced away or forced to be brought in, that, and maybe there is a sense of non-hierarchy that, and this is may be another issue of what is Minnesotan, it is a grassroots kind of state in terms of politics, and that sense of inclusion is very much here as well. So, the invitation to the audience, whatever your starting place is, this is a good place for you to be, and we will take you someplace else with that. It is not exclusionary in terms of type or subject; it is all good. That wide definition of the book as well as the audience, that really matters and that is what makes this place thrive. It allows it to expand and contract when there are tougher times or if this is not working. There is an adaptability in the way that we work together so that everybody contributes,

everybody has a voice. MCBA is good at soliciting those voices to make sure they are heard. Even early, when I was on the Artists' Advisory Board, it wasn't [participation on MCBA's] full board at first; it was three years on the advisory board. But it was this knowledge that more voices needed to be heard at that level, and at that time it felt somewhat like [the Artists' Advisory Board] was also instructing the board members on what are the book arts and what does this place do, and then being the first artist on the board itself, to be that intimately involved with the function and finances and ambitions at the board level was a pretty amazing thing.

BB: Is there anything else you want to say about that experience?

KW: I think, between those two terms there were maybe three different board presidents that I served under. And each one brought something else to it, a different direction they wanted, and built the board differently, so that was interesting to see [while] still holding true to what it was, right? And I have also been through [during] that time, and you will know the number better than me, eight or nine executive directors, if we include the interim directors, and each one also had this, right? There isn't a founder's syndrome here. There was Sitter, who had this great vision and brought this thing into being, and every person since then has made that vision grow and has had a place in here.

BB: Yes, that openness, what we might call characteristically Minnesotan, about how MCBA opened and developed, even if the board was, as some might say, community leaders at first. Still, there was that openness and nonjudgmental inclusion. If we look nationally, what do you think MCBA has been able to offer the book arts in a national or even international sense?

KW: I don't want to diminish the space. I think the signature space is a piece of the message that MCBA puts out there, that this is important, that we have a home for this that has international appeal, that we are willing to put the resources into it and make this great, so the signature place matters a lot. In terms of the national connection, again, everybody who comes here is amazed in terms of how well run it is, the range of activities, events, classes; it is pretty astounding how much comes out of here. I want to go back to that thing I mentioned earlier about the canon, and how that matters, and how much the conversation, even this oral history project is about the importance of this field, and how much it reaches beyond MCBA.

BB: If there is one question left to ask, it is a question about legacy; when we talk about anniversaries [and] it to a certain mark and [look] forward. From today's perspective, what would you describe as MCBA's legacy to the arts and to Minnesota?

KW: I would say Winter Book, which we haven't talked about, and I bet it has come up in other conversations. Winter Book to me is emblematic of everything that MCBA is and can be and unlike what anybody does. That the homegrown writer, binder, designer, printer, all these people who come together do this amazing thing, and I am always so

happy to hear the writers when they see that book for the first time, and see their word made form; it is something they haven't experienced that way before. Again, that kind of grassroots [effort], everybody contributes to this and everybody matters, that to me is huge. I don't even know how many there have been, and they take a different form each time. Even that, there isn't a standard for that, it can be what that book wants to be, and there are people here who can make that happen. That is probably a symbol—that is the thing that most stands out. But I think, as a finalizing statement, MCBA holds true to the history of what the book is, what it was, its importance, but MCBA has always had the foresight to project ahead to what it might be, to anticipate that, to be a little bit of a step ahead, to start building programming and audience around that, so it never feels like it is caught, it is always moving, just like a book, moving through, reading what is happening, and acting on it.

BB: That is a great stopping point, Karen. I just want to thank you on behalf of MCBA's board, staff, faculty and the thousands of people of all ages who are active here. It has been a privilege and a pleasure. Thank you very much.

KW: Thank you, Betty.