

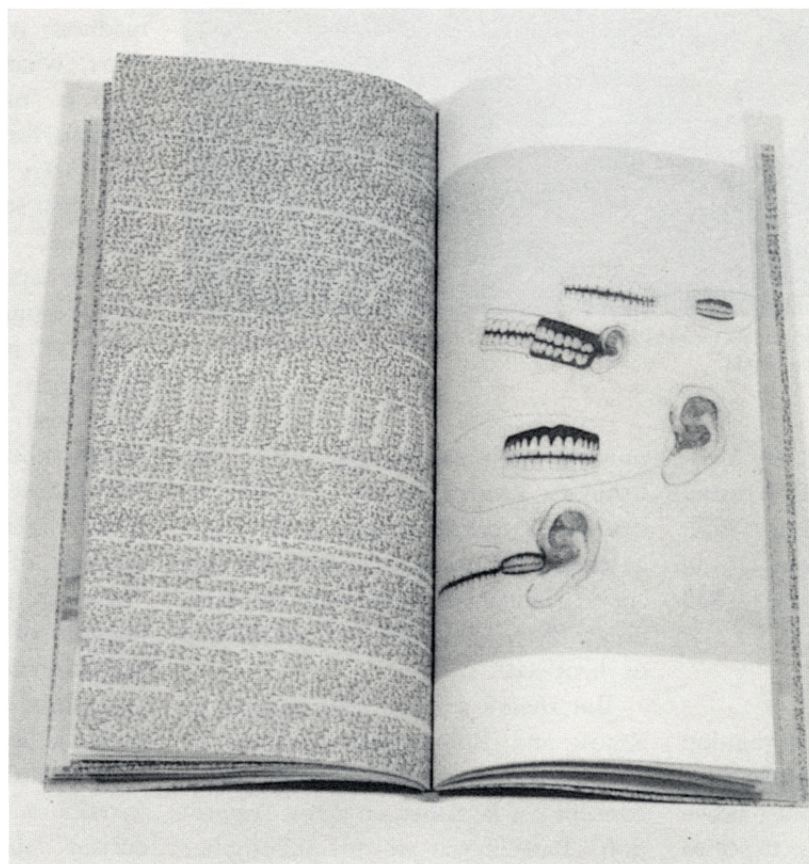
On Paper

Artist's Book Beat

Rona Pondick's first offset artist's book brings to mind a couple of good jokes from the 60s. One is Bruce Nauman's *Hand to Mouth*, a fiberglass casting of the artist's arm, neck, and jaw; the other Jasper Johns's cast-bronze *The Critic Sees*, a bricklike sculpture featuring a pair of glasses with mouths where eyes should be. Pondick, too, has a mordant way with isolated body parts. Connective tissue includes consideration of the roles of appetite and need in art, the tendency of words to blind the observer, and the vestigial function of the artist's hand, with the signatory mark its archaic trace. *12345* (Boston, Howard Yezerski Gallery, 1998, edition of 500, of which 100 are handbound, slipcased, signed, and numbered, \$150 pre-publication deluxe, \$25 regular) reproduces on vellum-type paper a number of recent drawings in which human ears, tenderly depicted but ruthlessly disembodied, are paired with frankly malevolent teeth. These drawings alternate with folded sheets of saffron-yellow paper, many of them densely covered with the numbers 12345. The minuscule digits are handwritten in tidy rows sometimes separated, like paragraphs, by blank lines, and reproduced in silvery ink. They form a kind of visual drone, hypnotic and a little sinister, behind teeth and ears that disport with their own grim humor. The ears, though they proliferate a little alarmingly, are otherwise decorous, being necessarily receptive and inert. But the teeth—big, straight, even, bordered by hard black gums—are actively disturbing. Thought balloons show teeth musing about teeth; there are teeth that suggest zippers and ammunition belts, and teeth to which ears are attached on either side like advanced malignancies.

In recent sculpture and installations, Pondick has covered surfaces with the words "I want" (they appear in a few of the drawings here) as compulsively as she uses numbers in *12345*, emphasizing the passage of time rather than desire; teeth have appeared for almost a decade in her mounds and cascades of roughly ball-shaped sculptures. (Ears once prevailed in paintings by Pondick's husband Robert Feintuch, adding a conjugal twist to the work's internal colloquy). Chattering, demanding, self-gratifying, blind, Pondick's work chews up the viewer's unre-

turned attention and swallows it whole. *12345* is carefully considered in all its alluring details, from the Japanese string binding in the deluxe edition and the delicacy of the reproductions to the synco-pated rhythm of blank yellow, translucent, and heavily inscribed pages. But like poetry that doesn't scan, it is a book that, in lyrical terms, doesn't read. Instead, it balks and bites, and sometimes—more unnerving still—emits a good visual purr.



Rona Pondick, *12345*, artist's book (9-3/4x11, spread), 1998. Courtesy Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston.

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic who writes this column regularly for On Paper.