

perfectly made books. And despite their complexity, one rises to the challenge because one knows that something is there. Clearly his work comes from the universe of his imagination, one that apparently defies description. Even our very accomplished catalogers at the Library of Congress have struggled with describing Ely's books. In the cataloger's note for one of his titles, a single clear sentence attempts to say it all: "Art work on most pages, includes artist's invented script."

My responsibility as a curator, in this instance, is to understand and transmit as much as I can about this particular work. For me as a reader, there is enough promise, say, in *Optical Aleutians 2* (1987) and *Totem* (1989) to push me to go the distance – to uncover Ely's interests in physics, geometry, and the heavens, and to assume that there is a meaning behind all of it. (Clearly, this notion of transparency, as I am describing it here, is not a formal construct; there is an instinctual aspect to it.) I have learned this lesson the hard way. I often use Ely's books in presentations; specifically because they are challenging, they are useful vehicles to talk about illustration, narrative, and flow. In one such presentation to a group of printmakers, I must have used the word "oblique" to describe an aspect of Ely's work. A loud objection was uttered from the back of the room. "It's really quite simple," one of my guests announced, as she launched into a jaw dropping, spot-on analysis of Ely's entire corpus, including his influences, the history of science, the nature of codicology and text, astronomy, alchemy and more. It was only after she ran the course of this spontaneous dissertation, and I suspect, observing the look of utter surprise on my face that she finally owned up to the fact that she had worked with Ely in the past. Nevertheless, I took the point, as should we all.

The Library of Congress recently acquired an extraordinary work by Harold and Peter Wortsman, *it-t=i*. It is not an obvious book, although its structure and appearance might

suggest otherwise. The piece requires an investment on the part of the reader and a willingness to seek out implied connections – between the two men, between the text and the plates, and between the "me" and the "I." *it-t=i* is a series of prose poems, accompanied by etchings pulled from hand-tooled aluminum intaglio plates. Aluminum allows not only conventional etching tools, but also tools such as stones, chisels, and knives, which can gouge chunks out of the plate like a piece of sculpture. This sculptural feeling actually transmits to the image as it is printed. The book is a stunning collaboration between two brothers, a dialogue between word and image. Each of the ten plates is a response to one of ten prose poems. Both image and text explicate a sense of person, the underpinning of "I." Abstract, individual, and referential, the book is all of these things, and yet the work is fully clear and transparent as to the direction it wishes to carry the reader.

QUALITY

Victor Hammer said it best and most succinctly: "Be honest to your work and do it well." Perhaps it is old fashioned, but I remain one of those people who expects that a book is made for a reason, and that it is made well. The act of creating it is an act of art.

I have no agenda to pigeon-hole the artist's book into the world of traditional book arts or even that of simple craft (although skill and craft should certainly inform one's work). However, there are skills to be gained by understanding what came before your work. Whether letterpress printing, or printmaking, or calligraphy, or binding, not to mention the vast heritage of the antiquarian book, there are skills and practices that will make your work better. There is such an animal as a well composed page, and a good job of letterpress printing, if successful, elevates the text and image to your intentions and marries the book