

# Ian Hamilton Finlay's Folding Poems and Concertinas

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On 6 October 1964 Ian Hamilton Finlay wrote to me from Edinburgh:

It was nice to hear from you. Thank you too for the poems, the greening grasshoppers and the concertina one, with my name amid stars. If and when Sue and I get a house [...] we will put this on the mantelpiece (if there is a mantelpiece).<sup>1</sup>

I had met Finlay for the first time in the preceding August, and this meeting confirmed my enthusiasm for his concrete poems, which I had thereupon started to emulate with poems of my own making. As the reference suggests, the aspect of his work that had galvanised me was the creation of poetic structures that could be made to stand independently, in a domestic context like the mantelpiece above the fireplace of a living room. The ‚concertina‘ type, with several folds, commended itself to me as a particularly stable form, capable of standing by itself, even if the paper support was relatively thin.

As a poet who published his own work through the Wild Hawthorn Press, Finlay had been experimenting from 1963 onwards with varieties of presentation that most appropriately matched his intuitions of poetic form.<sup>2</sup> One of these was the ‚poem print‘, or ‚poster poem‘, which gave the work the same proportions, and the same direct visual appeal, as an artist's print, to be framed and hung on the wall.<sup>3</sup> Another was the poem booklet, which

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bann: *Midway. Letters from Ian Hamilton Finlay to Stephen Bann 1964–69*. London 2014, pp. 26–27.

<sup>2</sup> For the listing of Finlay's works in the categories explained here, see the bibliography in Yves Abrioux: *Ian Hamilton Finlay. A Visual Primer*. London 1992 (2nd Edition), pp. 312–317. For a discussion of Finlay's work as a poet and writer see Joy Hendry, Alec Finlay (ed.): *Wood Notes Wild. Essays on the Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay*. Edinburgh 1995; and Andrea Fink-Belgin: *Ian Hamilton Finlay. Werk – Sprache – Reflexion*. Wien 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview on Finlay's prints see: Rosemarie E. Pahlke, Pia Simig (ed.): *Ian Hamilton Finlay. Prints 1963–1997*. Stuttgart 1997.

involves a succession of pages bound together, in the style of a small book, and depended upon the reader's progressive study of the individual page-spreads. Distinct from both of these formats, however, was what Finlay referred to as the 'standing poem'. These were smaller in scale than his prints, and typically involved the presentation of the printed surfaces from a variety of points of view. Like traditional greeting cards, Finlay's standing poems were stable enough to stand on their own. But they made particular use of the variable aspects, for example creating a contrapuntal relationship between the text on one side, and its counterpart on the other, or ordering the text like a triptych, to be viewed from different angles, or in different states of folding (fig. 1).

Although Finlay eventually turned to creating large-scale works of art, and in particular to developing the garden of *Little Sparta*, he never ceased producing prints, booklets and cards that carried onward his production of the 1960s. The bibliographical listing of his publications eventually took the form of four main headings: 'Books and Booklets', 'Cards and Folding Cards', 'Poems/Prints', and 'Proposals' (for gardens). It was chiefly in the category of 'Cards and Folding Cards' that Finlay included the works that followed on from the 'standing poems' of the 1960s, some of which were specifically labelled 'concertinas'. But, as I shall suggest here, the use of the term is not consistent. Some work in concertina form was not so described in the listings. Equally, it must be stressed that Finlay's category of 'folding cards' covers a huge variety of types, extending from a simple greetings card format, to a more specific enhancement of the possibilities of folded paper and card. In what follows, I will discuss almost all the works that are described by Finlay as 'concertinas', and also a number of others that clearly stand out from his vast production as being closely related to the concertina or accordion-pleated form.

*Rhymes for Lemons,*

drawings by Margot Sandeman, writing by Gordon Huntly (1970)

Although not actually listed as a concertina, this is in fact Finlay's most ambitious exercise in the genre (fig. 2). Interestingly, our published correspondence includes both Finlay's own description of his very direct involvement

in the production of the work (classed in his bibliography with ‚Books and Booklets‘), and my immediate response:

Meanwhile I am sending *Lemons*, which I am jolly pleased with ... Do tell me if you like it. I think it is a triumph, really, if one considers all that might have gone wrong, in the conversion of the little heap of drawings (etc.) on mere, thin tracing paper – into the folded concertina (which, incidentally, I am sticking together myself – having let myself in for one-thousand, three-hundred sticks, if I calculate correctly).<sup>4</sup>

[*Rhymes for Lemons*] is a great success – the concertina form, the relation of drawing to writing. I interpret the poetic structure more or less in this way – as the boat(s) is to the lemon(s) (relation of metaphor or rhyme), so the boat's name is to the name as name. In other words, just as the lemon form *rhymes* with the boat, so the name divides into two ‚rhyming‘ terms – by virtue of its original or proper context & its application to the boat. It is a very beautiful and subtle poem.<sup>5</sup>

Finlay's comment on his own involvement is a helpful indication of how this ‚booklet‘ was put together. Margot Sandeman's original drawings on tracing paper were printed in two colours, blue for the lettering, and yellow for the boats. As the work consisted of no less than eight folded sheets, and so sixteen individual pages, it had to be printed in three separate sections, and these were indeed stuck together (most durably so!) by Finlay himself. The total length of the booklet when extended being 200 cm, it requires a considerable space to stand, and may perhaps more appropriately be read in sequence, turning the folds by hand.

*FISHING NEWS NEWS,*

drawings by Margot Sandeman, hand-printed at the Salamander Press  
(1970)

Listed as a ‚concertina‘, this work was described in Finlay's letter to me of 30 September 1970 as ‚a rather pretty, new, wee Wild Hawthorn publica-

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<sup>4</sup> IHF in a Letter to SB, 16 April 1970. See: Stephen Bann (ed.): *Stonypath Days. Letters between Ian Hamilton Finlay and Stephen Bann 1970–72*. London 2016, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from SB to IHF, 26 April 1970. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

tion, in almost as many colours as Jacob's coat".<sup>6</sup> Though much smaller than *Rhymes for Lemons*, with seven individual sheets printed on both sides, extending to 50 cm, it constituted a considerable challenge to the printer, Michael (Hamish) Glen, who had to print each copy several times to achieve the variety of coloured inks (fig. 3). He had however already set a number of the individual 'news' announcements as postcards for Finlay. In each case, the presumably authentic from the periodical *Fishing News* was set beneath a broader heading that connoted a traditional cultural origin, such as the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: e. g.

FROM „THE METAMORPHOSES OF FISHING NEWS“

„FISHERMEN TURN TO MACKEREL“

The poem combined ten of these composite texts with two drawings by Margot Sandeman, which enhanced the marine theme. However, while *Rhymes for Lemons* could be treated as a booklet to be read from left to right, this concertina opened in such a way that texts could be read directly from above when the work was extended in a normal standing position. If posed sideways on a surface the individual 'cards' would appear in sequence, but their texts could only be read vertically.

*The Sea's Waves*,  
lettering drawn by Stuart Barrie (1973)

Both of the previous poem works involve 'folds' in a metaphorical as well as in a pragmatic sense. Finlay's poetic world was throughout this early period the world of the fishing boat, and the wave movement was conveyed not just in the accompanying drawings, but also through the rhythm perceived by the reader in following the visual effect of the process of folding and unfolding. Finlay had perhaps expressed this analogy in its purest form through the design of the small booklet, *Wave* (1969), in which the typographical sign for transposition (~) marked the wave form as both sign and process.<sup>7</sup> He

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Møeglin-Delcroix has commented perceptively that this booklet, though not in concertina form, utilised the Japanese method of having doubled uncut pages, and so achieved

went on to explore in several works the analogy between the sea and the land, using the rhyming words: ‚waves‘ and ‚sheaves‘. The work listed here, which is described as a ‚folding card in folder‘ epitomises the theme of his poetics through a sequence of three stages which begins with an original evocation („The Sea’s Waves“), continues with a sea/land simile („The Waves’ Sheaves“), and finishes with an architectural analogy („The Sea’s Naves“) – the uplift of the heaving water is finally viewed in terms of a church interior (fig. 4). By 1973, Finlay was habitually using the hand-drawn lettering of expert calligraphers to supplement letterpress typography. He was also keen on giving his poems a concrete form by installing them in the garden of Stonypath (later known as *Little Sparta*). Of course, the ‚folding card‘ could not be directly reproduced, but required to be translated into a garden setting. The three stages of this folding card could be found in the three seating sections of an oak tree-bench, placed around the base of a lone ash tree in 1971, with lettering carved by Vincent Butler.<sup>8</sup>

### *Textbooklet 1 (1975) & Textbooklet 3 (1979)*

Finlay’s ambitions throughout the 1970s often exceeded his financial resources. The first of the ‚booklets‘ listed above (all three of which are specifically listed as concertinas) was published at a period when his debts incurred in commissioning works for his garden *Little Sparta* had risen to an alarming degree. The first of these two concertinas (extending over to just over 40 cm, with nine faces, only three of which are used to contain the actual ‚poem‘) is indeed a work of extreme economy. It is likely that this is the same work as the one sent to me with a letter of 11 March 1975, which featured Finlay’s comment: „I enclose a small, new item which can only confirm Professor Rosenthal in his views on my productions [...]“. The reference to Professor Rosenthal’s views can be easily explained. An article by the American critic, M. L. Rosenthal, had appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* of 19 January 1975. This reiterated Ezra Pound’s doubts about the possibility of creating ‚a heroic classical art for this century‘. Indeed there

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the effect of ‚ondulations‘ (wave movements) when leafed through. Her piece on Finlay’s early concrete works is an eloquent reading of their symbolic and material properties. See Anne Mœglin-Delcroix: *Esthétique du livre d’artiste*. Paris 1997, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Bann: Stonypath Days, plate 5.

could be nothing more modest and small-scale than this concertina poem.<sup>9</sup> Yet Finlay never relinquished his interest in such small-scale productions, which invariably added their special nuances to the overall sequence of his works. In this case, the three printed faces all show a descending two word phrase, each being followed by a question mark: „concrete effect? / cross-word effect? / weather effect?“ (fig. 5). The reference is surely to the tradition of concrete poetry, and to Finlay’s own work in the field, which frequently adopted descending columns of letters rather than the conventional horizontal ordering. The ‚crossword‘ reference points to another social context in which that unusual convention also applies, while the mention of ‚weather‘ suggests mimetically the effect of falling rain, which was conveyed typographically in one of Guillaume Apollinaire’s most well-known *Calligrammes* (written 1913–1916 but published in 1918), and revised (so to speak) in one of Finlay’s own concrete poems, entitled *il pleut*.

Finlay returned to this particular format for two further *Textbooklets* in concertina form, which were published four years later. *Textbooklet 3* is a little meditation on typography, again using the vertical ordering of letters as a means of highlighting the newly claimed liberty of the modernist poet. The tripartite text reads: „typography / which used to flow / like rivers“. Only the last two words, on a separate face of the concertina, are permitted to ‚flow‘ in the horizontal direction (fig. 6).

*The Last Norfolk Wherry*, with Michael Harvey (1974)  
& *A Placement*, photographs by Andrew Griffiths (1983)

Both being described as ‚folding cards‘, these two poems illustrate Finlay’s ingenuity in working out his themes with the precious aid of his valued collaborators. The folds are employed to allow the cards to stand, but they also lend a degree of versatility to the presentation of the written text. *The Last Norfolk Wherry* (1974) is neatly constructed from a piece of green card, ex-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 21. Rosenthal’s article, *The British Poetics*, was published in the *New York Times Book Review*, 19 January 1975, p. 6. It was however picking up a judgement that I had made in an essay accompanying Finlay’s exhibition of 1972 at the Scottish National Gallery of Art, Edinburgh: „Finlay’s case is precisely that of the traditional culture forced into the small-scale venture [...]“. Rosenthal commented on my point that this was what Ezra Pound „[...] feared would be the outcome of his effort to create a heroic classical art for this century“.

actly 15,24 x 19,05 cm, which must be folded in half, and folded again, to present three faces that can be viewed from either side (fig. 7). Michael Harvey's freehand lettering establishes a text that is followed from one side to the other, and the answer to the question that it poses – „Who owned the last Norfolk Wherry?“ – is found only when the poem is turned the other way up. A sketch of the wherry boat serves as an initial image to introduce both question and answer.

Dating from almost ten years later, *A Placement* (1983) celebrates the garden which is by now named *Little Sparta* (fig. 8). Its five faces allow for the interspersing of two sepia toned photographic prints of sites in which Finlay has installed his ‚column-bases‘, these being stone bases encircling the feet of young trees, which carry dedications to heroic figures (in this case, the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus and the French revolutionary Saint-Just). Finlay uses the first face of the poem to reprint one of his own texts from a set of *Detached Sentences on Gardening*: „It is the case with gardens as with societies: some things require to be fixed so that others may be *placed*.“ This thought supplies the context for a ‚one-word poem‘ that echoes the mood of reverence evoked by the column-bases: „A PLACEMENT / obeisance“.

### *URN (GARDEN POEM) (1986)*

Unique among the ‚Poems/Prints‘ section of Finlay's bibliography of works is this lithographic ‚folding print‘, which measures 81 x 31,8 cm in its extended form (fig. 10). However, it folds in such a way that, when flat and unextended, only two of the folds are visible. When extended and hung, the five folds effectively punctuate the sequence of repeated words: „urn“ and „col/umn“. This is yet another work that clearly reflects Finlay's immersion in the world of gardening, both from a historical point of view and in respect of the omnipresent challenge of maintaining *Little Sparta*.

As the preceding example of the ‚column-bases‘ of the previous decade testifies, Finlay's columns connote Greek temples, and their religious function, and no less so when they are seen against the background of a modern recuperation of their original purpose by the architects of the French Revolution. The ‚column‘ is there to support the ‚urn‘, and the ‚urn‘ imbues the

structure with solemnity by its association not just with gardens but with the containment of the ashes of the illustrious dead.

*Hommage à David*, with Ron Costley and Gary Hincks (1983)  
& *The Perfect Sentence ...*, with Kathleen Lindsley (1989)

*Hommage à David* (1983) involves three folds, and is described in the bibliography as a folding card (fig. 9). *The Perfect Sentence ...* (1989) involves four folds, and is in fact one of the very few recent poems by Finlay to be described as a ‚concertina‘. Both of these works however rely implicitly on the capacity of the folding form to present the related, but distinct, facets of a poetic statement, involving key images as well as verbal phrases. *Hommage à David* was despatched to me with a brief accompanying note that pointed out the connection with Finlay’s earlier collaboration with Ron Costley; they had published a large print, *The Little Drummer Boy* in 1971. This work is reproduced as a vignette (sketched by Gary Hincks) on one of the faces of the card, thus recalling to mind the fate of Bara (or Viala), the drummer boy whose death in the French revolutionary wars was commemorated in a famous painting by David. Finlay’s purpose in evoking the earlier image in his ‚Homage‘ becomes evident when we note the printed warning that the card was produced ‚For the Committee of Public Safety, Little Sparta‘. In the year 1983, Finlay and his ‚Saint-Juste vigilantes‘ were obliged to fight the ‚Battle of Little Sparta‘, in order to defend the Garden Temple against the rating demands of the Strathclyde region.<sup>10</sup>

*The Perfect Sentence ...* was also published in this decade, which took a very heavy toll on Finlay and his family. In its poignant simplicity, however, it does not allude directly to the intermittent ‚battles‘ but evokes instead the Utopian notion of plain speech as a guarantor of purity. The single sentence snakes along the length of the unfolded card, with the folds taking the place of punctuation, and the expectation for a main verb to complete the ‚sen-

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<sup>10</sup> See Abrioux: Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer, p. 10. Finlay had asserted the right of his Garden Temple to be a place of religious significance, rather than a commercial gallery. The region’s refusal to accept this view led to a confrontation in the course of which an attempt was made to seize works of art deposited in the temple. This was resisted by a group of Finlay’s supporters whom he had named ‚Saint-Just vigilantes‘ in tribute to the French revolutionary leader, Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, who was guillotined under the Terror in 1794.

tence' being met simply by the sketch of a homely jug. By this stage, Finlay was indeed collaborating with ceramicists and potters to produce similar domestic objects, and investing them with ethical and political implications. But he also demonstrates here his dedication to the formal method of the concertina, which becomes so exactly attuned to its message.

*Stephen Bann*

## Illustrations

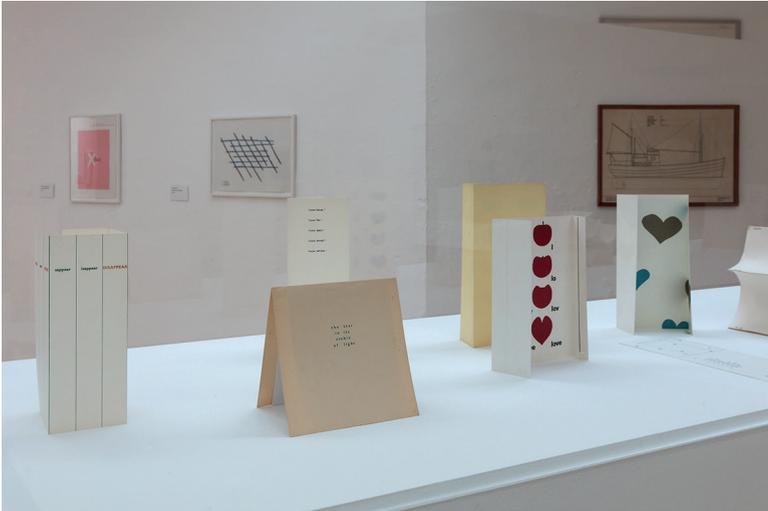


Fig. 1: A selection of early folding cards by Ian Hamilton Finlay exhibited at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (2014/15).



Fig. 2: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *Rhymes for Lemons*, drawings by Margot Sandeman, writing by Gordon Huntly (1970).

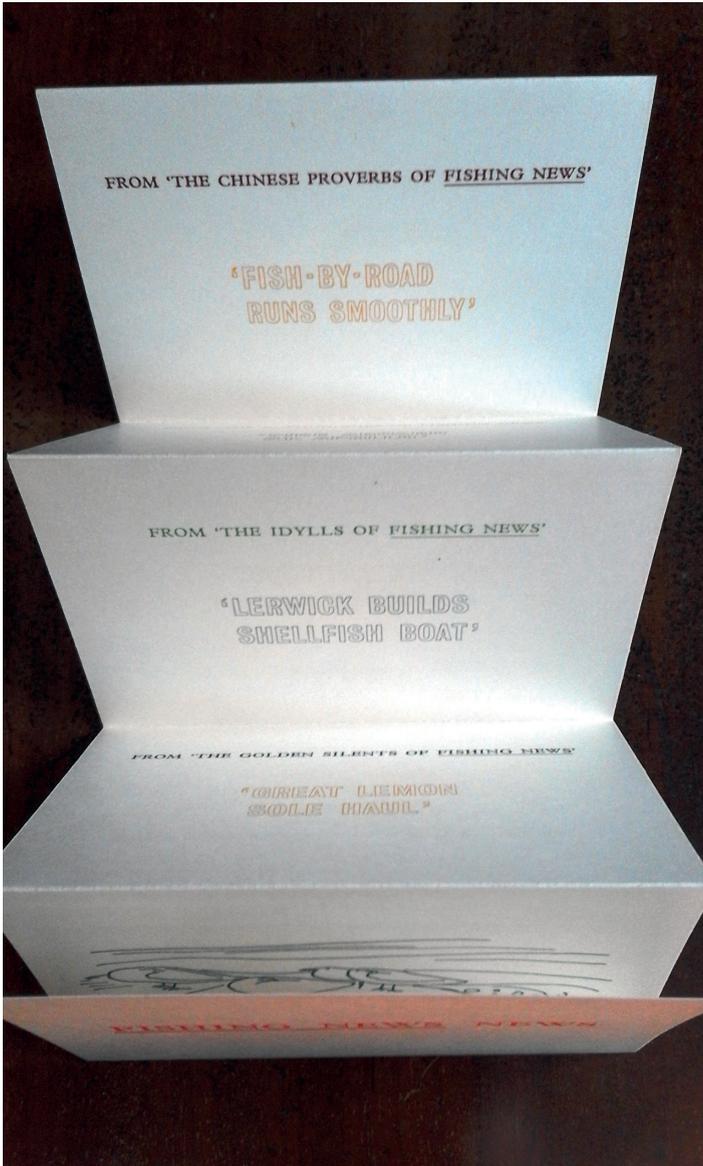


Fig. 3: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *Fishing News News*, drawings by Margot Sandeman, hand-printed for the Wild Hawthorn Press at The Salamander Press (1970).

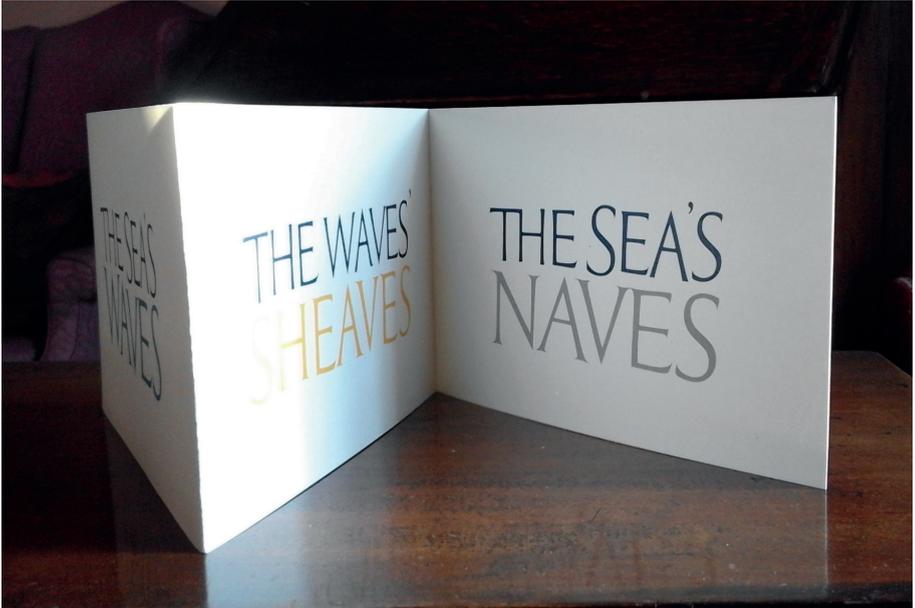


Fig. 4: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *The Sea's Waves*,  
lettering drawn by Stuart Barrie (1973).

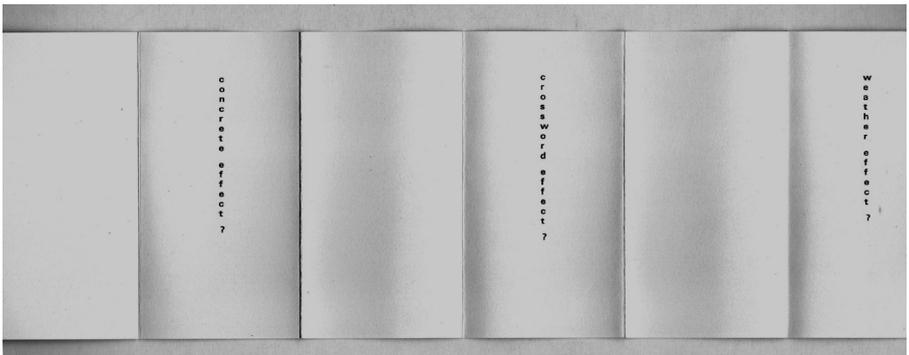


Fig. 5: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *Textbooklet 1* (1975).

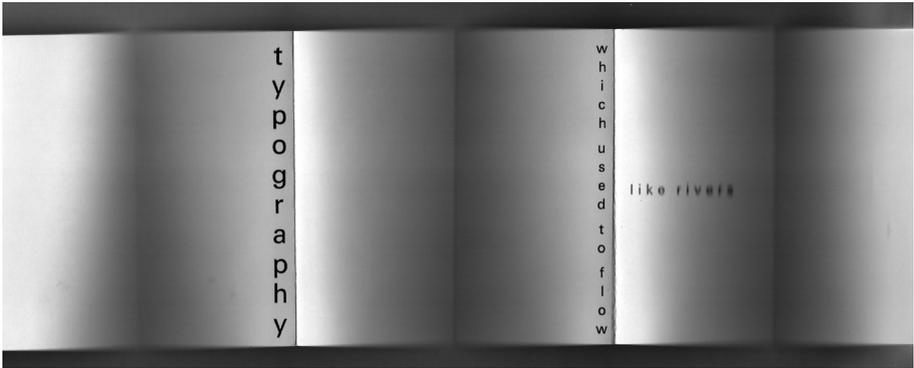


Fig. 6: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *Textbooklet 3* (1979).

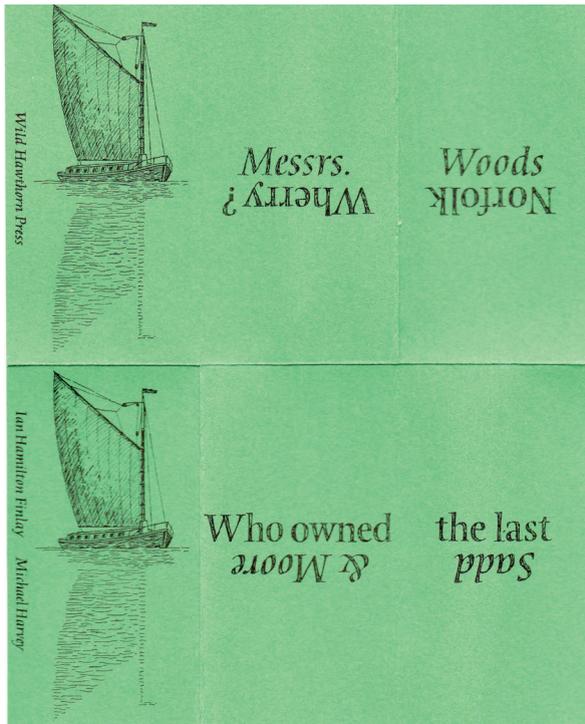


Fig. 7: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *The Last Norfolk Wherry*, with Michael Harvey (1974).

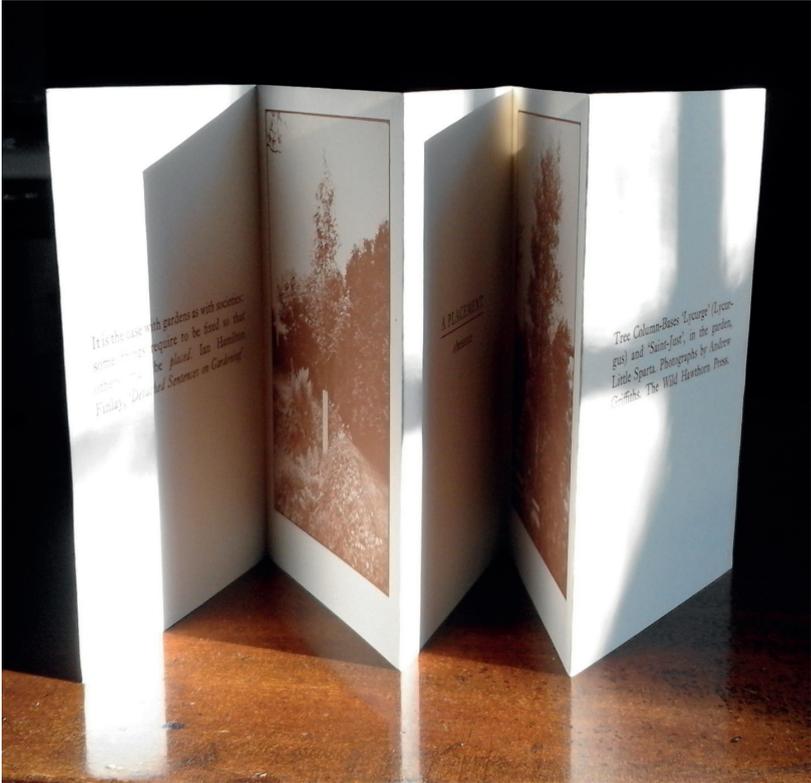


Fig. 8: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *A Placement*, photographs by Andrew Griffiths (1983).

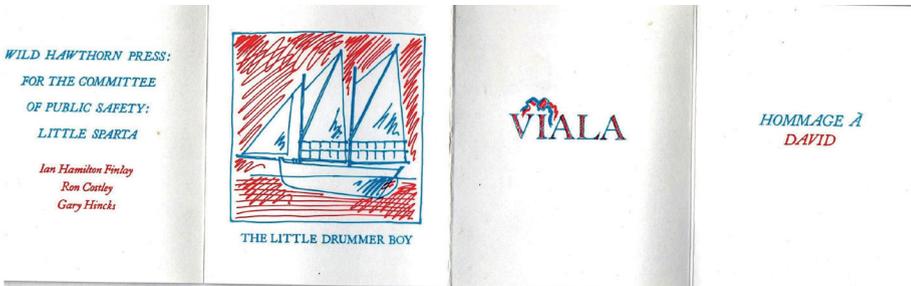


Fig. 9: Ian Hamilton Finlay: *Hommage à David*, with Ron Costley and Gary Hincks (1983).

