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concerned with all that  
is involved with our  
being literate

## THE ARTIST'S BOOK: THE TEXT AND ITS RIVALS

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Renée Riese Hubert

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTIST'S BOOK: THE TEXT AND ITS RIVALS

In this issue where critics, book artists, archivists and poets participate in defining the problematics of the modern artists's book, production and reading emerge as the key issues. Contemporary artists have modified traditional practices to such an extent that their readers are hard pressed to give a suitable definition of an illustrated book. By undergoing spatial displacements, text and image exchange or relinquish their respective identities. Many barriers have been crossed and many oppositions have disappeared, notably between handcrafted and industrial artifacts, between theoretical and creative productions, between unity and multiplicity of media. Text and image alternate, combine or wage war on one another. Their various alliances and rivalries give rise to a variety of questions discussed in this issue. Do text and image upstage or enhance each other? Does the shape of the book translate or subvert its message or meaning? Is the binding more than mere decoration and can its absence be revealing? In view of many radical changes, the artist's book assumes multiple functions: aesthetic, political, cultural and social. Frequently it provides a form of protest against either institutionalism or elitism even though it can cater only to an elite. The act of reading becomes complex, the reader, curator or librarian can no longer perform routine tasks, but must participate on another level in the creation or production of the book.

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In Rainer Maria Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge*, the narrator evokes a moment of extreme happiness and comfort as he sits in a Parisian Library reading Francis Jammes', "I Have a Poet." As reader, he appropriates the text. Reading has nothing to do with routine, since it substitutes itself in this particular situation for the outside world. Undoubtedly, this moment of satisfaction arises not from the text alone but from the book he holds in his hands. Although Rilke by no means refers to a volume that might qualify as an artist's book, the relation of the narrator to the book of poems can be compared to that of a bibliophile handling a *livre de peintre* (artists book with original graphics), for neither could possibly indulge in a commonplace act of reading. Such readings, marked by difference, are comparable to festive occasions and may even stand out as red-letter days capable of transfiguring day-to-day experience.

The history of the book in general and of the illustrated book in particular, as well as the semiotics of the artist's book, have in recent years given rise to important critical studies, for instance Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet's five volume *Histoire de l'Édition Française*. Gordon Ray's two volume *The Art of the French Illustrated Book*, François Chapon's *Le Peintre et le Livre*, and the Ruth and Marvin Sackner's *Archives of Concrete and Visual Poetry*. The traditional illustrated book, which originated in the Middle Ages, is the acknowledged point of departure of the modern and postmodern artist's book, whose deviations, whether friendly or aggressive, have in no way threatened the survival or indeed the multiplication of the former. Nor is it always a simple matter to distinguish the point of departure from the point of arrival. The difference between tradition and modernity would seem to arise less from changing the usual alternations of text and image than from rejecting the linear parallelism of the text and the fixed assignment of images.

The first work to enter our collection, a 1764 century edition of Pierre Corneille's theater illustrated by Hubert Gravelot, marks a high point in book illustration. However, Voltaire's running commentary together with innumerable annotations scribbled in the margins by Prémontval, an eighteenth-century philosopher living at the court of Frederick the Great, accompany the plays. The book thus consists of four components eliciting a variety of responses. Interactions of the written and the

printed word, interactions of creative and critical elements, interactions of engravings and rhymed as well as theatrical language may all pertain to the artist's book, which by its complexity bypasses simple rules, codifications and generic separations. Curiously, the Corneille-set in its uniqueness as a printed, illustrated, critical, creative and handwritten text—highlights the quandary, not to say dilemma, in which the modern artist's book has chosen to exist. Although it belongs to the electronic age to the extent of taking over such recent innovations as computer art, the modern artist's book nonetheless shows a propensity to do almost everything by hand in the manner of the craftsmen of old, from handcut fragments to the paper itself. Levi-Strauss's conception of bricolage (tinkering) can indeed apply to the artist's book.

One of the great twentieth-century publishers of *livres de peintre*, Tériade, insisted on replacing letterpress by lithographed writing. His readers can thus enjoy, among other confrontations, that of Reverdy's continuous penmanship with Picasso's incisive interventions in *Le Chant des Morts*. More recently, Tom Phillips, in his famous *A Humument*, has grafted his own illustrated text onto a Victorian novel by means of skillful appropriations and expropriations which, by blotting out or covering up parts of the earlier text, bring out astonishing new patterns. His reduced version, which is both textually and graphically new, presents the reader with a series of possible, not to say impossible, responses. But unlike the eighteenth-century edition of Corneille's theater, its layered—rather than simply juxtaposed—parts posit a substratum and form a palimpsest that can elicit only a postmodern response. The reader's conscious confrontation of the two layers provides the text with a certain physicality, almost in a geological and geographical sense. Moreover, readers remain constantly aware of the process of production, for they must follow every step in the manufacture, including etymological meaning, of the book.

This issue of *Visible Language*, *The Artist's Book: The Text and Its Rivals*, examines the eccentric and challenging nature of this book (art) form. My collaborators present definitions, examinations of particular book artists, discussion of team work in book conception and creation and examination of particular aspects of the artist's book such as computer generation, typographic manipulation

and bookbinding. Other authors take on the task of examining the “reading” of the artist’s book as multimedia, as non-book and as performance. Finally, the life of the book in exhibition and library is explored.

Taken at random, any four books discussed in the present issue—for instance, The Arion Press’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the Perishable Press’s *Gabberjabb*, Steve McCaffery’s *Evoba* and Dorney’s *Le Métronome*—would obviously fail to present us with a uniform pattern of any sort. And the addition of Zelevansky’s *Case of the Burial of the Ancestors* and Drucker’s *The History of the/my Wor(ld)* are so far from clarifying the situation—so overwhelming in their variety—that any definition of an artist’s book almost becomes irrelevant. Although artist’s books and *livres de peintre* always come in limited editions, ranging from a single copy to several thousand, statistics can provide very little help in narrowing down the field. The Deguy/Dorny *Métronome* is one of eighteen copies. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is one of 150 copies. Such limitations in numbers occasionally give rise to the accusation of elitism, even though an easel painting is one of a kind. And we may even consider an artisanal work a protest against industrialization rather than an enticement for the wealthy. In any case, categories, whether artistic or economic, and genre classifications are not our goal. Do we really increase our knowledge when we label a volume an “artist’s book” or when we apply the term “postmodern” to Frank Gehry, Valerio Adami and John Barth?

In his “From Book to Antibook,” Harry Polkinhorn considers the problem of definition. He invokes the authority of Kostelanetz in his attempt to define the postmodern book. The need to focus on space, even in a historical sense, could validly be added to his cultural concerns because, as in painting, the Renaissance space of the book has been completely deconstructed in our time. This fundamental disturbance, while opening up new possibilities, undermines the conventions governing the production of books. Moreover, his use of the term “antibook” allows us to establish a relationship with designations such as “antinovel” and “antiplay” that emerged in the fifties. The authors set up their anti-works as a radical gesture against the literary and artistic institutionalism to which they were expected to adhere. Not only did



they create new forms and focus on new problems, but they composed texts combining theory with practice. In other words, these texts must be assessed as arising from conflicts which the authors themselves, for instance Robbe-Grillet and Ionesco, did not necessarily set out to resolve. And this same kind of lucid creativity prevails not only in the Mexican books discussed by Polkinhorn but in many of those featured in this issue.

His theories would indeed apply to the Arion Press's edition of Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, discussed by Jessica Prinz, and the Dorny *Métronome*, or pyramid, doubly poeticized by Michel Deguy. Because the former book is round instead of rectangular, the art of typesetting and printing had to be reinvented. Circularity can have repercussions on many levels, and indeed the words "convex mirror" are a determining factor in producing the book, housed in a metal box instead of a leather or vellum binding.

But how are we to conciliate Polkinhorn's term "anti-book," made even more political by the revolutionary examples provided, with "non-book," which in Prinz's article suggests an aesthetic approach rather than opposition? Could the examples discussed by one critic serve the purposes of the other? "Antibook," while not precluding creativity, evokes a campaign against an institution, whereas "non-book" deals with the crucial question of identity. Although Prinz gives a vast number of examples—including, for instance, Broadthaers' *Embedded Letters* and Buzz Spector's *Toward a Theory of Universal Causality*—a heap of books from which destructive cultural statements burst forth in rivalry of one another, those she analyzes in detail seem to acquire a different status and perhaps even a higher set of inherent values.

By giving the book artist Andrew Hoyem the place of honor in her essay, Prinz has dealt with another, more aesthetic issue, even if she does not spell it out. Hoyem himself has repeatedly acknowledged his rapport with the *livre de peintre*, while Buzz Spector, in the example mentioned as well as in other altered books such as *Kafka* and the *Portrait of Dorian Gray*, has quite different preoccupations. For Bertrand Dorny, too, other origins must be invoked even though he produced a few years ago a fairly standard but nonetheless attractive *livre de peintre*.

The Arion Press often shows experimental daring, for instance in inviting such a radical artist as Baldessari to reveal the eternal novelty of a great eighteenth-century text, *Tristram Shandy*. Although Baldessari made use of photomontage, an art loaded with political implications, the status of the book is not questioned as it is in Spector's deviations. (The reader need only compare the Arion Press's 41 accordion panels of illustrations with the photograph of Ehrenburg's *Codex* provided by Polkinhorn to become fully aware of the problematic nature of any distinctions.)

Dorny's pyramids lead us to a different world; no special paper has been handmade for the occasion, no team of highly trained or specialized printers has been hired, and not a single engraver or binder has played a part in the procedure even though the artist himself could have functioned to perfection in both these capacities. Dorny carefully assembles his pieces of paper preempted from everyday use, rejoicing in the utilitarian origin of each one. The triangular pages held together by a plastic spiral should be viewed and even perused in several directions, making such notions as forward and backward irrelevant except for the actual reading of the poem, which follows its normal course from beginning to end. Dorny's pyramids have some elements in common with Dada books, but without submitting to chance and to polemics. Whereas the cutouts in *Le Métronome* determine textuality, the highly philosophical poet Deguy produces a verbal sequence whose concise literary rigor matches the geometrical severity of the pyramid, transforming the latter's timelessness into the measured musicality imposed by a metronome.

But the association between Deguy and Dorny has not produced a *livre de peintre* belonging in the same category as Ashbery's poem illustrated by eight American painters, each of whom has produced a single page print, for the French artist has abolished in his own imaginative way the expected confrontation between text and image. Nor is he the first and only one to do so; this particular feature has become crucial in many modern artist's books. Because the text can function as image, because writing can occupy the space usually reserved for graphics, the distinction between them breaks down and the notion

of illustration fails to apply either as a principle of interpretation or merely as an adornment. Moreover, the book need no longer adhere to a prescribed shape. Dorny's triangulation has more widespread implications than the circularity of the convex mirror, for it has not been initiated by a literary feature, not even by Hegel's cryptic pyramid. The book has been assembled so as to constitute a pyramid which can vary its shape by folding itself back to two-dimensional flatness. Dorny, a sculptor, produces books comparable to mobile statues. But to be fully appreciated, their mobility requires the intervention of the viewer/reader's fingers.

Hoyem and Dorny not only produce radically different artist's books but they induce us to review carefully any concepts concerning collaboration that we may have previously entertained. Illustrated books, artist's books, *livres de peintre*, by combining in various ways text and image, usually result from collaborative efforts. As Andrew Hoyem explains, artists and craftsmen, whose signatures may be included in the final product, actively participate in the making of the book. In a publishing house such as the Arion Press, the team varies because for each text a new illustrator is selected and new conditions are established through negotiation. Dorny, on the contrary, always works with a single poet chosen for the occasion: for example, Jean Tardieu, Michel Butor, Bernard Noël, William Jay Smith or Kenneth Patchen. If we think of Dorny as a visual artist, he would probably have left the selection of the text to others, but if we consider him primarily a book artist, then his selection of a poet appears rather typical. As Deguy points out in his article, the writer does not follow usual procedures by providing a finished poem to an illustrator, instead, Dorny prompts the poetic creation. He projects the visual aspects of the potential poem that the writer then actualizes in verbal terms. By locating Hoyem and Dorny within the same section of this issue, I have sought not so much to show different approaches to the book art as to highlight antithetical conceptions of collaboration. Teamwork, so essential in the making of books, can become, as demonstrated by Hoyem, an association with assigned functions or, as Deguy has shown, a cultivated attunement of artistic temperaments as well as a deliberate reduction of the barriers separating visual from verbal creativity.

Seen in this light, the ideal artist's book would be that of a single creator capable of compounding the accomplishments of writer, painter, graphic artist, printer, binder, publisher: William Blake. A few postmodern book artists have emulated Blake's achievement by taking a few short-cuts and short-circuiting the establishment, for instance Sauzé in *Le Livre Ficelé* or Duchêne in his *Livres Boules*. It takes a single artist to produce these objects made of printed paper which actually bars our access to reading, to turn the printed text up with a rope or roll it into little balls. These works made by a single artist have also been called *livres objets*, as they establish a dialectics between their bookish qualities and those belonging to objects or sculpture. Such creations would qualify for Prinz's "non-book," especially those by Broadthaers mentioned in her article. In fact, the wide range of such books in Europe has given rise to several exhibits organized by Caroline Corre under the title of *livres détournés* or *livres condamnés*, (deviant books or condemned books) their main goal being the problematization of reading as a fundamental cultural act. Probably one of the most powerful examples of an unreadable or deviant book, a book functioning as an object, a book created by a single artist, is Kiefer's *Ausbrennen des Landkreises Buchen*. Pages can be turned but to no avail, for the text itself has been cremated by incinerating the pages to a uniform blackness. The demise of the book corresponds to the death of our culture.

The accomplishments of Steve McCaffery have led Marjorie Perloff to examine the question of the text and its rivals in still another light. McCaffery's books, usually paperbacks issued by Canadian publishers under the heading of poetry, have also been labeled anti-texts. A practitioner, at least in his earlier stages of concrete poetry, and later of prose poems, he has also produced aphorisms reminiscent, in their gnomic brilliance, of René Char's. Perloff makes a strong case for his achievements as a book artist, clearly showing the relevance of his book artistry to his poetry. Above all, he experiments with language on several levels, which include semantics, graphics, phonetics, and logic or rhetoric. His typographical audacities, his creation of collages, are as much a feature of his poetic universe as his overt or hidden critical and philosophical discursiveness. He reverses even more aggressively than Hamady or Zelevansky the cultural

division between highbrow and lowbrow. We have already commented on the self-awareness of other book artists discussed in this issue, but unlike McCaffery, they refrain from creating a critical system where language subverts its conventional, everyday functions and, even more, its poetic status. McCaffery's art is a response to both Wittgenstein and Derrida. The very questioning of literary assumptions by means of multiple borrowings makes McCaffery's recourse to the artist's book almost inevitable.

Johanna Drucker is essentially the only person involved in producing a quite different kind of artist's book based primarily on typographical experimentation: *History of the/my Wor(ld)*. From her comments on the typographic manipulation of poetry, we discover that radical experimentation has rarely been sustained throughout an entire volume and that Mallarmé's theory and practice in such matters has not really been surpassed. The strongest example Drucker provides is Ilia Zdanevich's *Ledentu*. Concerned with the immediate typographic integration of poetic activity, she shows how Zdanevich's visual audacities, provoked by a preexisting text, function mainly as transcriptions and therefore can hardly generate linguistic innovation. Although the end product and the methodology may be radically different, the goal of simultaneous visual and verbal production undertaken by Drucker has much in common with Dorny's pyramids, conceived as visual/verbal fusions. A typographic experiment more recent than those discussed by Drucker is conducted in the German artist Helmut Löhrr's *Visual Poetry*, which may, in spite of its title, be read as a book. Löhrr's typographical experimentation highlights poetic sequences or progressions instead of dramatizing separate poems. What Drucker praises in *Ledentu* seems eminently applicable to the German artist, who reveals the futility of directly translating the verbal into the visual or vice versa. Löhrr's typographical audacities, often comparable to verbal games, give the impression of slippages, of foldings, of an always condensing yet creative regularity forcing the reader/viewer into a constant readjustment in regard to legibility. Löhrr, who has twisted a phone book with its low-grade printed paper into a fetching circularity has, in *Visual Poetry*, endowed his letterpress pages with an extraordinary aesthetic quality which other artists might have considered incompatible with this style of "writing."



Typography plays a significant role in the book art of Walter Hamady so wittily scrutinized by Mary Lydon. But unlike Löhrr's, Hamady's books have many other ingredients. Lydon, like Deguy, stays away from standard critical methodology deemed unsuitable to penetrate into an artistic universe where our reading habits are undermined, if not completely disarmed, from the beginning. From an unexpected angle, Lydon's sprightly narrative turns into a sort of musical accompaniment, thus adding still another dimension to the verbal and visual. Toward the end of her essay, she discusses the presence of collaboration in Hamady's books: "Paradoxically after years of successful collaboration with a great variety of poets, Hamady now faces the challenge of collaborating with himself: at once the most exacting and the most indulgent of partners" (see page 151). The conflict arises, so Lydon explains, between the printer and the writer, both being Hamady—who also manages the Perishable Press, which publishes his books. While Dorny's art in its visible gestures consists in pasting multiple paper fragments, printed or unprinted, onto various colored surfaces, Hamady's bricolage relies on the most sophisticated technology. As stated in a press release,

Each Gabberjabb combines a tour de force demonstration of the possibilities of the print medium with such extra embellishments as die-cutting, rubber-stamping, perforating, blind-embossing, sewing, grommeting and collaging with tags, tickets, labels, stamps, etc.

Paul Zelevansky's *The Case for the Burial of Ancestors*, as described in *The Book Made Art* seems equally complex, consisting of ink, watercolor, graphite, and blue graphic layout pencils, rubber stamping, dry transfer lettering, and typewriter printing over paper in combination with photographs and photolitho-offset reproductions. But this does not mean that Zelevansky's and Hamady's books have much in common. For instance, they differ radically in their treatment of paper. And even when Hamady includes other artists in his enterprises, his signature becomes unmistakable, thanks to his inimitable skills and a brilliant use of parody. By multiplying adventurous techniques—by associating heretofore never combined media, by transgressing borderlines, by criticizing conventions, artistic, academic and scholarly, by borrowing texts or images from other works and "misplacing" them in unexpected contexts—Hamady reveals the most surpris-

ing features of the antibook, where creativity and criticism exploit and undermine each other. Unlike the deviations of other antibook artists whom we have mentioned, his astonishing juxtapositions with their humorous paradoxes have much in common, as Lydon has pointed out, with surrealist practice, particularly with that of Max Ernst. Moreover, Hamady makes his personal presence felt in his books while other book artists tend to remain outside their own creations. In his enterprise, aesthetic, political and social considerations function as means to attain a humanitarian goal.

There are other kinds of collaboration besides Hamady's individualistic teamwork, besides Dorny's and Deguy's, besides Hoyem's with his long-term technical associates. Collaboration can remain an issue when the computer replaces the hand, the pen or the brush. As Zelevansky points out in his article, the interaction of artists and craftsmen, of visual and verbal "producers" can be replaced by that of man and machine. This dialectical relation has, in a way, been foreseen by a number of avant-garde Frenchmen, such as Raymond Roussel and Marcel Duchamp, who invented and sometimes operated a number of *machines célibataires*. As some of you may have surmised, the creation of the artist's book hardly precludes conflicts and rivalries, and it is quite possible that muted and forgotten rivalries will forever haunt some of the books. Clashes of a more overt nature pervade the relationship between the human brain and artificial intelligence. Celibate computers are programmed to make changes, to blend or erase verbal information or images temporarily visible on the screen: pages encased in a window. Zelevansky's article, with its ironic title, "The Computer Made Me Do It," is loaded with diabolical implications. I have already mentioned the technical complexities of Zelevansky's book creations, complexities that make his confession and his reluctant assumption of responsibility in producing them all the more meaningful. Moreover, the title obliquely raises the question of "access" to one's own creation while bridging the gap between a sinful writer and his edified readers.

In addition to the artist's attitude toward conventions, the role of medium and matter in the manufacture of the books plays an important part in this issue of *Visible Language*. Walter Hamady's art can hardly be appreciated



if we fail to take into account his absolute mastery of paper. (In fact, even some of his former students can be identified by the attention they give to its manufacture.) The artist has written a volume on the subject, *Paper-making by Hand. A Book of Suspicions*. His numerous handmade papers—with their various textures, shapes, degrees of opaqueness or transparency, their extraordinary contrasts and assemblages—constitute an art in itself, which, no less than other aspects of his work, transmit messages from the very beginning of book art. Above all, they drive home the message that the book, in addition to being verbal and visual, is tactile. Paper-making, as a creative, entirely manual and never repeatable process, also constitutes a key element of the achievement of Ania Staritsky, a Russian artist active in Paris. Antoine Coron, in his *50 Livres Illustrés Depuis 1947*, states:

*Peu d'illustrateurs ont eu, comme Ania Staritsky, le sens des ressources infinies du papier, le goût des pliages, des surprises qu'ils ménagent.* (Few illustrators have had Ania Staritsky's feeling for the unlimited resources of paper or her taste for foldings and the surprises they can hold in store.)

Another startling publication, entitled *Mavena*, which joins together a lithograph by Miró with a poem by the publisher, Radovan Ivsic, displays floral elements and debris from ferns and cereals which had been pressed into the paper pulp before it dried. Although their characteristics are completely integrated into the paper, they nonetheless keep their vitality as divergent aspects of nature. By means of the paper, a displacement has taken place; all illustrative qualities have been subsumed, generating a dialectics between the handcrafted, the hand-pressed and the printed. A glaucous colored box, reminiscent of an aquarium, houses the book, endowing and preserving it with lifelike substances.

The cover, box or binding both extends and limits the book. Like handcrafted paper, the enclosure, by rejecting standardized sizes, textures and repetition, focuses on the materiality of the book. It has moved in recent years well beyond its protective and decorative function. Ivsic created with Toyen an unusual box for *Le Puits dans la tour*. As viewers, we face a linen-covered red enclosure with a transparent window through which we glimpse a playable game, enticing us into the world of the book.

Distracted from routine by the shape of a female anatomy with five holes into which we have to roll five marbles, we make ourselves ready for the oneiric and erotic experiences the book will eventually offer.

Such practices are not incompatible with the bindings that Anzalone and Copans discuss in their article "Covering the Text." The traditional hierarchy governing binding, illustration and text has more often than not been rejected and sometimes reversed in modern, and especially postmodern, practice. The more artists assert their freedom, the less illustrations depend on or submit to the text, so much so that in extreme cases they become, to all intents and purposes, fully autonomous. Bindings and boxes no longer play the subordinate part assigned them in the past, for they often impose a disquieting interpretation on the text even to the extent of leading the reader, as Ivsic has shown us, into voyeuristic fantasies. The impressive examples of embossed leather bindings displayed by Anzalone and Copans, some of them asserting their own metaphorical dominance at the expense of the text, unashamedly belong to the rarified world of the bibliophile. They rival in every respect the texts they enclosed, such as *livres de peintres* or limited editions with prestigious provenances.

Bookbinders, like others contributing to the art of the book, have undoubtedly achieved a high degree of sophistication as interpreters and of self-awareness as artists, but it would be difficult to associate them in any way with the trends singled out by Polkinhorn and some of the works mentioned by Prinz, since their craft involves mainly, if not exclusively, valuable books treated as investments. There is, of course, a vast gulf fixed between such bindings and even the most elaborate cloth boxes. I might mention in this connection that some of the most aggressive antibooks are altered canon books, for instance Carol Forget, *VHF. Salvation: a found printed codex (Bible)* altered with cloth ribbons. This conventionally bound book provides the battlefield for a cultural attack.

The artist's book in its multiple manifestations gains in complexity after its completion when it becomes available or accessible to the reader/viewer. Some essays in this issue discuss books that preclude reading (non-books) while others focus on volumes that are merely hermetic,

for instance certain typographical books which demand that the reader redress jumbled letters, fit reproductions into suitable contexts, and decipher incongruous collages before yielding an acceptable coherence. In their articles, both Haskell and Sayre read in this painstaking manner a single book: the first providing, we are told, about the hundredth illustration of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, while the second, almost devoid of any text, presents images that deliberately fail to provide a cohesive narrative or to function as poetic allusions, thus bringing about a breakdown of interpretive means. The juxtaposition of Haskell's and Sayre's commentaries shows that reader response, far from being universal, consists in perpetually revising strategies, at least when avant-garde books are involved. Neither Haskell nor Sayre seeks to provide the only possible reading of his "book," yet both suggest, each in his own way, that reading such works is a creative enterprise. Readers of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, familiar with its poetic ambiguities, its penetrating journey into the self, the unknown and death, may find, perhaps to their surprise, in Bezombes' loud, multicolored collages borrowed from innumerable sources, unsuspected intertextuality and parody. Far from considering the illustration an invasive reduction and a disturbing displacement, Haskell shows the necessity of bringing Baudelaire's text up to date through new media, above all through collage, a major genre in twentieth-century art.

We may, for reasons of personal taste, be unprepared for Haskell's convincing account of how the illustrations, deliberately verging now and again on kitsch, actually fit into the text. Moreover, any objections we might raise about illustrations of avant-garde artists who favor a disturbing blend of discordant media that clash with the original text would also apply to Rauschenberg's Dante illustrations, at least if they were assembled in a book. The *Inferno's* circularity becomes a crazy quilt, a non-pattern highly suitable to modern disorientation. Rauschenberg and, more recently, Tom Phillips visually elaborate a text that they take seriously so as to show its applicability to our present culture.

Henry Sayre confronts a work where text and images can no longer be sorted out. The rapport between the two is in no way comparable to the sort of relationship proposed by either Dorny or Löhr. The word "interpretation" takes

on a disturbingly different meaning, for Sayre must deal with the collapse of "discours" into "figure" capable of producing a disturbingly new kind of space. And he shows how the various components are finally reduced to one: performance, a concept that he has treated in both practical and theoretical terms in his *Postmodern Performance*. Applebroog's minimal drawings showing scenes that barely progress could be described as immobile figures, framed by a curtain, observed by a voyeuristic viewer eager to "oversee" and "overhear." Applebroog would not be the only one to qualify as a performer. Baldessari's *Telephone Book* immediately comes to mind. Sayre not only proposes a radical new way to read such performative works, but also shows to what extent he can be carried away by it. His approach by no means aspires to academic continuity, but proposes a series of lively responses. Aware of the risk of appropriating the text, he strives in many different ways toward participation.

An essential question remains: How and where can readers get hold of such books? The manifold divisions, differences, complexities and uniqueness that characterize these volumes create problems for dealers, galleries, and especially, libraries. The hybrid nature of artist's books, their alternatively semi-popular and bibliophilic propensities, mean that the potential buyer has to discover where they are stocked. Universities and museums in various ways include artist's books in their collections. The Museum of Modern Art in New York houses a rich collection of *livres de peintre* in the Print Room and also owns a more experimental avant-garde and controversial collection curated by Clive Phillpot. This kind of division also prevails in universities. The University of California at Los Angeles keeps books which can readily pass for objects in its Art Library; volumes with original signed prints in the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts; and those where, for varied reasons, the text plays the determining role in Special Collections. A similar division is followed at the University Iowa. As Timothy Shipe points out, librarians and curators face tough decisions in cataloguing and, of course, in acquisitions. The Iowa Center for the Book deals with book art as an active program separate from acquisition and cataloguing: courses in papermaking, preservation and binding are integrated into various academic programs of the University.

Among libraries, the Bibliothèque Nationale, a treasure house for rare, “precious” illustrated, fine press and other books, considers it part of its responsibility to organize major exhibits, either historical or thematic, devoted, for instance, to books involving a single author or by a single illustrator, but more often in recent years by book artists such as Guy Levis Mano and Iliazd. In spite of their versatility and openness, in spite of the fact that Antoine Coron has acquired unusually rare recent books, exposed them and described them in irreproachable catalogues, the exhibitions at the Bibliothèque Nationale remain classic by reason of the manner of their display in cases and on the wall. Everything is somehow placed at the same distance from the viewer: the book remains open so as to display its two most characteristic pages. The book’s origins are accounted for to perfection by the presence of completely relevant manuscripts and documents.

In this respect, nobody can compete with the Bibliothèque Nationale. Controversial confrontations are, of course, avoided. Book arts in this context are reserved for highly trained curators. A few years ago, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix organized an exhibit of *livres d’artistes* without treading in the least on the Bibliothèque’s collective toes, or rather fingers. Other less ambitious expositions have taken place since then, for instance an exhibit at Rouen sponsored by Michel Servièrre. Edition du F.R.A.C. de Haute—Normandie, or Harriet Watts’ exhibits at the Herzog Adolph Bibliothek in Wölfenbüttel. More ambitious and perhaps more conceptual shows were organized by Documenta in Milan and London.

The Pompidou exposition (1985) proved to be a breakthrough, first by its internationalism, for books came from many parts of the world instead of only from Paris—and then by its range: the text could take over the entire space or be dwarfed and subverted while the volume as such might look like a book or some strange object only remotely involving such staples as pages, paper, print or handwriting. Never did the text have to vie with so many rivals. With it came an ambitious program of classification: *livres de poésie concrète et visuelle*, *livres d’images*, *livres sur le livre*, *livres à manipuler*, *livres condamnés*, *livres de performances*, to mention only a few. The question whether such categories are valid in present day experimentation must

go unanswered, for to my knowledge, more than most other exhibits it included a critical evaluation of the book as representative of our cultural heritage, of our efforts to fight for its survival at the same time we contribute to its destruction. An endless game of substitutions takes place, from matter to idea, from violations in good taste to recognition of radical changes in aesthetics. By their sheer number, the examples were at once dazzling and threatening.

A few years later, Martine Saillard, an independent book artist in every sense of the word, was invited to prepare a one-woman exhibit in another section of the Pompidou museum. Her books, by their shape and pagination, look conventional enough to be stocked by standard bookstores. Recently she has often chosen well known but nonetheless revolutionary texts by such modernists as Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Stein, for whom she selected equally avant-garde visual commentators, such as Kolar, Aeschbacher and Ayme. They do not actually illustrate, but pursue the dialectics featured in the text. Her exhibition, which presents to the viewer a simultaneous reading of the entire text by displaying all pages of the book, provides a different way of moving from “discours” to “figure.” She knew how to overcome the dilemma pointed out by Timothy Shipe: in a museum, the artist’s book can only be displayed statically.

“Perhaps the hardest thing about the artist’s book is to find the right way to talk about it,” says Dick Higgins, the great practitioner and theorist of book art, in his preface to Joan Lyons’ *Artists’ Books* (page 12). The quotation sums up the endeavor of contributors to this issue who were in several instances asked not to deal with their medium in too direct a way. But there are also those who were unavailable, who could not be reached, who would have added to the illuminating interactions between articles. At the University of California Riverside, I saw an exhibit of artist’s books made by women prisoners; they were almost all very brightly colored, highly decorated and with complex cutout shapes. Of course, I had practically no access to the texts; what I could see, to my surprise, had a highly spiritual note, whereas I had looked for revolt. I had no success in finding anybody to write about the workshop from which the books came. The “writing” constituted the crux of the problem, an imposition which lay

outside a valuable project, which with the exhibition had perhaps been taken one step too far. Again we might think of Rilke's narrator.

I also contacted Michel Butor. The new novelist or anti-novelist of the fifties and sixties who has written poetic texts for some one hundred books edited in collaboration with painters. Last year, for the first time, they were all exhibited in the city of Geneva; it was not in a set of rooms at the Pompidou, but spread over several galleries. Butor has collaborated on a book with Jacques Hérold which unrolls like a Chinese silk scroll and on a book with Boni where the handwritten etched text is accompanied by three-dimensional plates. He has worked with Alechinski's dynamic sign language and has modestly meandered his text among Staritsky's multifolded, handcrafted and handcolored papers. As we have mentioned, he too worked on a pyramid with Dorny. I asked him for a few pages on the artist's book. The silence of this indefatigable animator is understandable.

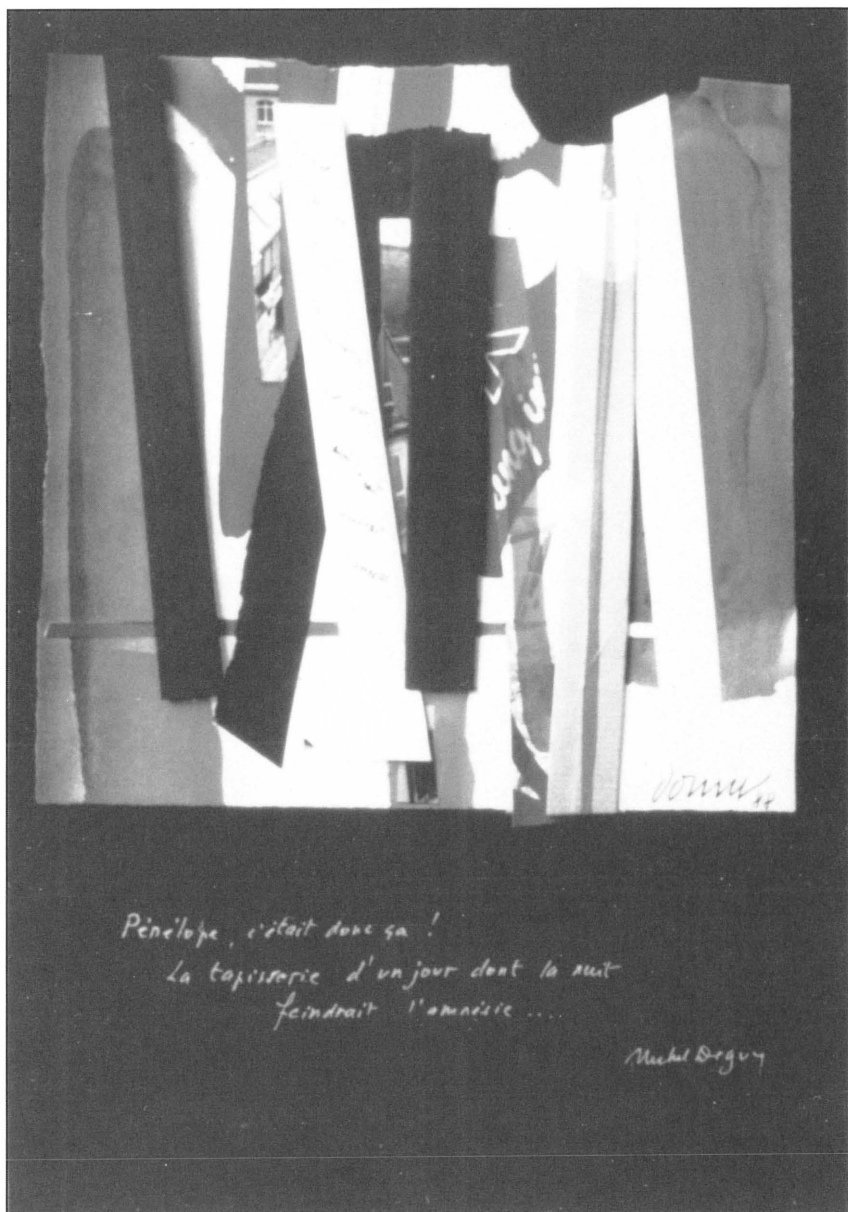
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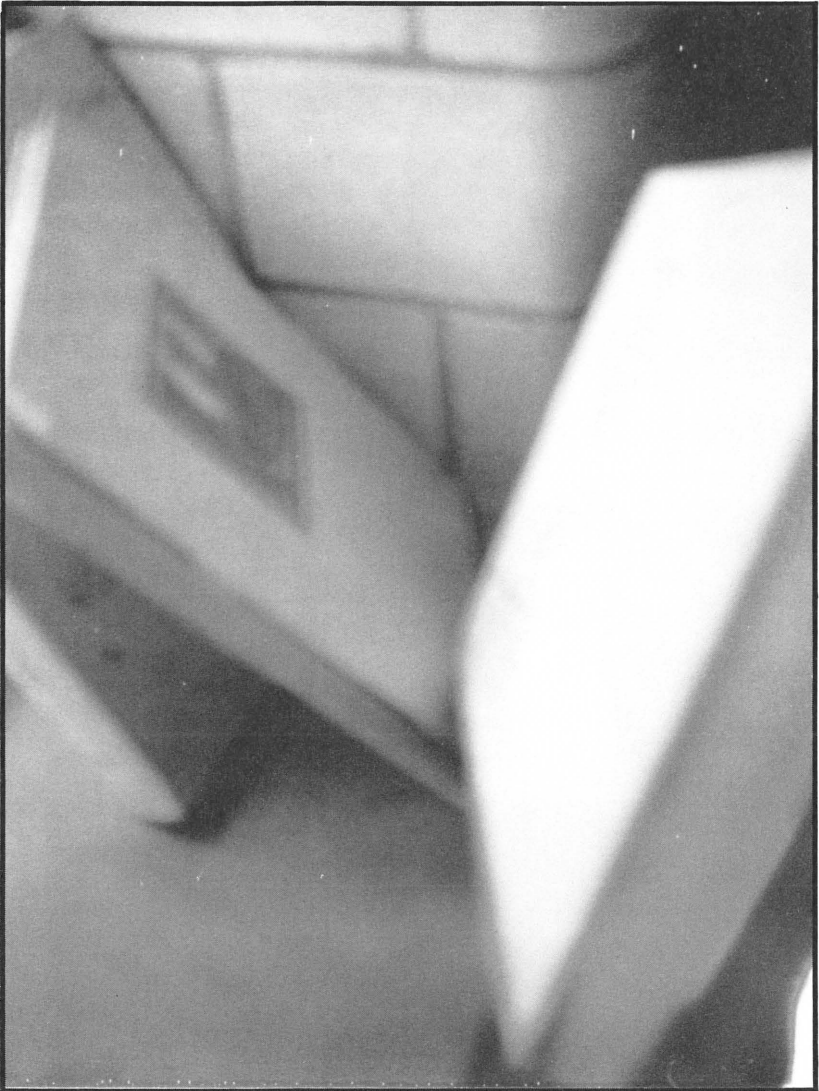
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Deguy/Dorny, Tablette.



## Definition

## FROM BOOK TO ANTI-BOOK

**Because they are mixed modes (words and images), "artists' books" have lacked an adequate theory relating them to other forms of cultural production. In order to understand these unique objects, one must divide them into two subgroupings: de luxe editions (usually limited, numbered, signed and sold to dealers and collectors), and "anti-books," those which question the physical and conceptual foundations of the book, seriality, identity and the art marketing system. Mexican examples are presented because they highlight the explicitly political and social substratum from which the avant-garde emerges.**

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*Visible Language*, 25:2/3

Harry Polkinhorn, 139–147

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The notion that man has a body  
 distinct from his soul is to be expunged;  
 this I shall do,  
 by printing in the infernal method,  
 by corrosives, which in Hell  
 are salutary and medicinal.

William Blake, cited in *Artists' Books*, p. 155.

I.

To arrive at a theoretical understanding of artists' books, it is perhaps best to begin, as Richard Kostelanetz points out in his essay entitled "Book Art," on a formal note:

"Artists' books" are those book-like objects made by visual / literary artists which treat the book form as an artistic genre comprised of dynamic sets of tactile/graphic as well as literary potentials. A (false) contrast is suggested with "writers' books," thus underscoring the futility of trying to classify art objects solely from the point of view of the initial profession (or education)<sup>1</sup>

of their makers. Since a formal analysis of these unique objects poses such difficulties for theory, they have generally been relegated to the lower-level rear stacks of the grand library of high culture. The same has happened with pattern poetry, also driven by visual and verbal energies.<sup>2</sup>

*Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, in which Kostelanetz's essay appears, makes this willful neglect understandable by placing the books in a specific historical context, thereby contributing valuably towards their restitution. With stimulating essays by Dick Higgins, Lucy R. Lippard, Ulises Carrión, Shelley Rice, Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, Clive Phillpot, Susi R. Bloch, Betsy Davids and Jim Petrillo, Felipe Ehrenberg, Magali Lara, Javier Cadena, Alex Sweetman, and Robert C. Morgan, this collection attempts to give the general reader some sense of the richness of artists' books as well as suggesting the first steps towards a theory whereby they can be explained.

Complementing these well-illustrated studies are the "sourcebook" sections: the most important collections of artists' books are detailed, with information on size, a breakdown by subcategories, contact persons, cataloguing and other services provided by individuals, institutions, and archives. Because of the ephemerality of many such

books, the information in this section will prove of inestimable value to scholars of the form. A comprehensive bibliography follows, divided as to articles, books, reviews and exhibition catalogues.

## II.

The book as an artistic medium has been with us, in one form or another, since books have been present in our culture. What has become known as “book art, bookworks, or artists’ books”<sup>3</sup> since about 1960 allows, even requires, reconsideration of the nature of the book as an aesthetic medium and as a cultural form. Even when considering traditional books made up of text alone, we frequently forget that

the design of books is as much an art as architecture, or painting, or sculpture. . . it exerts an aesthetic influence upon more people than any other art.<sup>4</sup>

Books now are considered primarily as non-image objects, although this has not always been the case. “In antiquity the connection between painting and writing seemed obvious: in ancient Greece the word *egraphen* (“written by”) was affixed to the artist’s signature.”<sup>5</sup> The separation of word and visual image, which took place over centuries, is directly linked to politics: “Deterioration in the language and in pronunciation is . . . inseparable from political corruption. . . . Writing is the very process of the dispersal of peoples unified as bodies and the beginning of their enslavement.”<sup>6</sup> Separation of codes and the social specialization necessary for their mastery and transmission provide entry points for an analysis of culture. Consequently, works which consciously rejoin the codes will be perceived as politically subversive, since control of the production and distribution of word and image is necessary to maintain the status quo.

If one can identify two main categories of artists’ books—the editions de luxe that emphasize the craft of the “fine” book and the “anti-books” Kostelanetz mentions, which push the form beyond conventional expectations—then we can begin to understand why the theory which several essays in *Artists’ Books* call for may be lacking. With regard to the first category, we find an earlier group of artists whose works consisted chiefly of visual/plastic elements, yet who turned to the well-made book as a medium of expression. Typically these artists “illustrated” another’s

writings. Such artist-illustrators include Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Birket Foster, John Gilbert, Frederick Leighton, John Millais, D. G. Rossetti, John Tenniel, Aubrey Beardsley, Lucien Pissarro, Walter Crane, Arthur Rackham, George Grosz, Miguel Covarrubias, Picasso, Matisse, Marie Laurencin, Chagall, Braque, Bonnard, Degas, Derain, Dufy, Maillol, Rodin, Roualt, de Chirico, Toulouse-Lautrec, Arp, Dali and Ernst. These artists and others collaborated with authors and dealers to bring out fine books in limited editions not designed for a mass market, who could neither afford nor appreciate them. In our time, there are "Tatanya Grossman's elegant editions of painter-poet collaborations by Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara, Jim Dine and Kenneth Koch, Lee Bontecou and Tony Towle, and Alberti and Motherwell."<sup>7</sup> Kahnweiler, Vollard, Teriade, and other dealers have done much to further such projects, also known as *livres des peintre*, which can be seen as appealing to the elitism upon which they are based and which informs them throughout. These take the book as what Carrión in "The New Art of Making Books" calls an "accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book" (*Artists' Books*, 32), including the visual imagery, which functions like so much more text.

The other category mentioned above of course has its historical background as well, which is well-documented in the essays in *Artists' Books*. Blake's illuminated books establish him as the spiritual progenitor of this line; his contributions are interestingly analyzed from the technical viewpoint of printing processes by Davids and Petrillo. Books which fall into this category explore the medium and so necessarily develop a politics of resistance and subversion. Simultaneously, the books become limited in terms of audience appeal.

Since the two types of artists' books have such diametrically opposed political implications, this dimension calls for closer examination. Thus, Lippard holds that

the most important aspect of artists' books is their adaptability as instruments for extension to a far broader public than that currently enjoyed by contemporary art (*Artists' Books*, 48).

This, of course, is valid only for the visual imagery (if such a separation can be made at all) since, clearly, the verbal element has always enjoyed such extension by the very nature of printing. It is this bias towards the visual which

mers Kelder's comments as well: "many artists' books reject the de luxe concept, using impersonal duplicating techniques, such as xerox, offset, and mimeo."<sup>8</sup> What Kelder does not mention is that impersonality was (and is) the very essence of industrialized printing and book-making. The sacrifice of conventional quality and the personal touch is no guarantee of aesthetic interest, originality, or even a product more accessible to the masses. "Good book design has almost no bearing on expense of manufacture,"<sup>9</sup> which applies as well to artists' books.

Try as it might, the book cannot shake the dirt off its own history: "In its classic phase, the book is a privately owned object,"<sup>10</sup> the reading of which requires light, stillness, withdrawal from work activities; that is, the experience of "reading" (viewing a painting) is very much a part of how the class society structures consciousness. "Printed books were thus [with printers' marks] early identified as articles of commerce."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, since "Western culture unfolds by highly self-conscious modes of imitation, variation, renaissance, parody, or pastiche, from a strikingly small set of canonic, classical texts and form-models. . . most books are about previous books."<sup>12</sup> Industrialized printing techniques can be and are used very effectively in artists' books; what counts here, however, is the control over all aspects of production and distribution which the artists have claimed as their own, as Ehrenberg, et al., make clear. The fact is that when artists begin to produce their own work, most cannot afford a four-color Heidelberg offset press and must work with less sophisticated equipment, which may explain the "impersonal" or raw feel of the product.

Rather than trying to understand the function of these books from the viewpoint of their deviations from standards set by conventional books which inevitably dead-ends in some woefully inadequate form of communications theory, a more useful approach, as Carrión points out, sees the contemporary artists' book or anti-book as categorically rejecting the hierarchic and linear elements upon which traditional culture has been established. "In the old art all books are read in the same way. In the new art every book requires a different reading," or, "In order to be able to read the new art, and to understand it, you don't need to spend five years in a Faculty of English" (*Artists' Books*, 42, 43).

This rejection is mirrored in the most obvious and important innovation in these objects, namely, an attack upon or subversion of sequentiality. According to Alloway, "Nonhierarchic form can be equated with the idea of repeatable structure."<sup>13</sup> Not only is pagination frequently dropped (this alone would unwittingly align the work with the medieval incunabula, sixteenth-century books which were unpaginated), but there is also no formal sequencing to the subject matter, or if present it is parodied. This lies at the heart of the problem, since

Seriality is . . . a basic social mechanism [in that] 'each is the same as the others to the degree that he is Other from himself,' Sartre says, and in this sense seriality is a vast optical illusion, a kind of collective hallucination projected out of individual solitude onto an imaginary being thought of as 'public opinion' or simply 'they.'<sup>14</sup>

Such a philosophical/psychological view can easily be complemented by reference to economic theory, which relates directly to the "decay of plot" in modern literature because "that shared community of abstract values on which no writer can count any longer has been replaced by something even more fundamental, namely the reality of purely physical sensation . . . the reduction to the body itself,"<sup>15</sup> so that seriality in our society can now most clearly be seen in the phenomenon of "advertising and merchandising of mass-produced commodities,"<sup>16</sup> each of which like traditional books is completely substitutable for all others of its kind.

Lack of sequence, absence of plot, "diminished faith in the autograph . . . antipathy to the gallery,"<sup>17</sup> radical exploration of physical properties of book and non-book materials (within the general format of the book) all characterize the contemporary anti-book and constitute one more evidence of "the breakdown of absolute standards in art."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, meaning itself is not rejected: a critique is an implicit assertion, and artists' books resort to traditional, even ancient means, such as the rhetorical devices of metonymy and synecdoche, not to mention juxtaposition of imagery and a new use of sequence and repetition.

### III.

In "Independent Publishing in Mexico," jointly authored by Felipe Ehrenberg, Magali Lara and Javier Cadena, we have a direct demonstration of a theory of the anti-book; artistic forms are generated out of a social context acutely



conscious of arbitrarily constituted power structures. Facing what Ehrenberg calls “the politics of our moment” (*Artists’ Books*, 183), artists’ books came into being in a situation which lacked infrastructure for their support:

Generally speaking, avant-garde art [in Mexico] can only develop under distressingly difficult circumstances: there exists no supporting criticism, so experimentation develops in a vacuum. And there is no funding whatsoever, no enterprising galleries willing to bet on rising talent, no private foundations, no specific government grants, nothing. (p. 172).

Some universities end up providing alternative spaces for unusual art. To complicate matters, Mexico’s history of colonization, of economic and cultural exploitation by foreigners, and her dangerously strained relations with the United States serve to catalyze a contemporary avant-garde much involved with book art.<sup>19</sup> Ehrenberg, Lara and Cadena detail the birth and spread of visual presses in Mexico, always relating this to a situation of sharply aggravated political and economic tension. Thus, the essentially international or transnational nature of avant-garde experimentalism, so often overlooked in purely formal analyses of artists’ books as a genre or form, becomes central for an understanding of the political dimension of artists’ books.

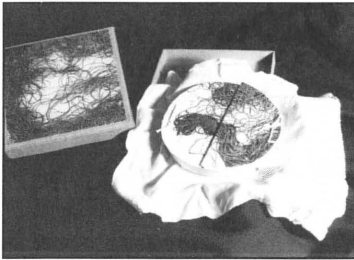


Figure 1

Among those Mexican artists active in the field of artists’ books should be mentioned Felipe Ehrenberg, Angel Cosmos, Jani Pecanins and Gabriel Macotela. Pecanins’ *El Miedo* (1990) works in a fully integrated way with concept and presentation. The theme of fear is reflected in her choice of format, a six-inch-square box containing a small circular embroidery frame stretched with white cotton onto which is tied the round, bisected pages of this book. Intimacy created by the diminutive dimensions magnifies the feeling of fear, presented from a woman’s perspective (*figure 1*). Reproductions of string and thread are accompanied by rubber-stamped text on some pages printed across the vertical art. Cosmos’ *Los 6/80 Primeros Días* (1988) reproduces a unique poetic project which the author undertook in the first six days of 1980, when he published several poems in paid advertising space in the Spanish newspaper *Levante* (Valencia). The book gathers loose reproductions of these newspaper ad/poems in a folder. As Cosmos explains in the introduction, “It was a space for creativity,” which the newspaper’s editors did

not seem to grasp (*figure 2*). The poems are socially critical and directly address the man in the street. Cosmos has produced over a thousand artists' books and related objects and has been very active in the area of innovative musical scores. Gabriel Macotela's *apuntes de ciudad* (1990) gathers loose pages into a small black box. Each sheet contains a semi-figural drawing of some aspect of a city. These sheets or cards can be recombined in any sequence the viewer desires, thereby restructuring the reading/viewing experience (*figure 3*).

A good example of the more demanding work produced by Mexican artists in this genre is Ehrenberg's own *Codex Aeroscriptus Ehrenbergensis: A Visual Score of Iconotropisms*, recently published by Nexus Press in Atlanta, Georgia, where the artist was in residence. No such press exists in Mexico, so the high-profile, book-art production values evident in *Codex* are a direct reflection of cultural difference. In his accompanying acknowledgments, the artist says,

I might also mention Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, and wish it better times. Had a peer jury not rejected this book project, I would have never produced it at Nexus Press.

Ehrenberg's title makes playful reference to the history of the book, "codex" suggesting a manuscript volume, "especially of a classic work or of the Scriptures."<sup>20</sup> Yet the imagery and narrative seem very contemporary, with no obvious references to the Bible. "Aeroscriptus" refers to the spray-can technique with which much of the work was done. Thus the title tells us that this book is ironically important, the technology of its production is somehow central (allusions to the uncontrolled popular proliferation of street art created with spray cans), and the artist's ego will play a controlling role. As Ehrenberg explains in the accompanying pamphlet, stencils have been used extensively in *Codex*, and both detective fiction and the musical score should be considered in an interpretation of the work.

The book itself is presented in almost a square format (c. 17" x 17"). Metal-plate, multi-color lithography is the medium. Printed front and back on sheets, then glued to form one long accordion-folded sheet, *Codex* works with serial imagery appropriate to books. Key images are the television screen, the tropical palm, cameraman, the gunman, the female body, arrows, the skull (Posada), the

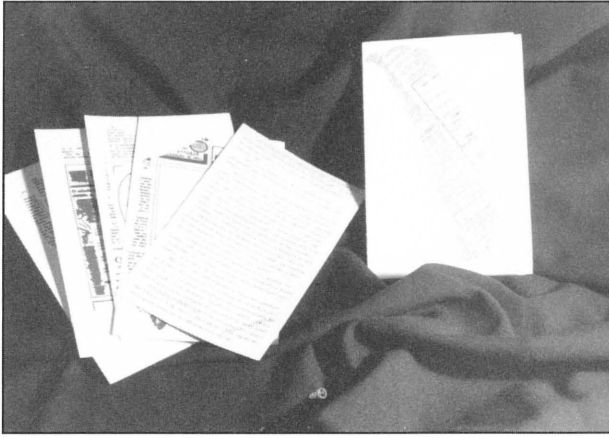


Figure 2



Figure 3

nightclub singer, stamps and helicopters. The main imagery on each spread reverberates with identical but smaller images, often in black on white, running along a horizontal stripe at the top of the sheets, providing a splitting, as if the work were commenting upon itself through internal division. As well, it graphically alludes to Pre-Columbian practices. This stylistically decenters the narrative, playing it back through its own conceptualization. On the inside of the accordian-fold are dark green palms against a blood-red sky. When the book is open with the folded sheet fully pulled out, we have a large, multi-pointed, star-shaped object (*see figures 4 and 5*). This

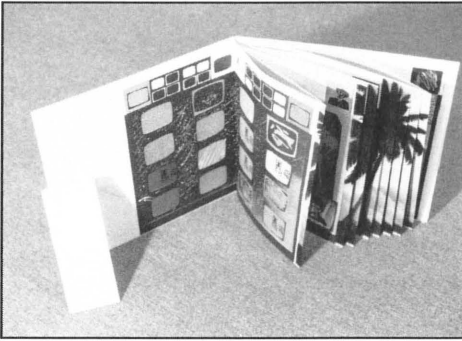


Figure 4

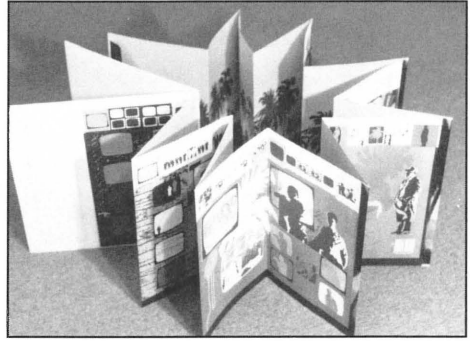


Figure 5

presentation suggests a circularity to the narrative; beginning and end join up to form a non-linear yet open-ended structure.

Perhaps the artist's suggestion of the genre of detective fiction is our best approach to *Codex*. This genre has always appealed to the masses, suggesting a connection with popular culture important to Ehrenberg. However, he complexifies easy interpretation through the panoply of aesthetic strategies he has deployed in *Codex*. The strict linearity which mass culture demands will not be found in this work; yet, the individual images and the bright colors seem easily decipherable. There is an accessible quality that the artist has carefully created in order to involve the reader/spectator. We are in the Latin world of tropical palms and an almost oppressive plant life, threatening gunmen, nightclub torch singers, military violence, sex and death. Something mysterious has happened; someone is fleeing. We have plentiful allusions to consumerism (the bar code) and high technology as well. These are the elements of a Latin version of the detective story. The reader/spectator is put in the position of being the detective trying to decode the hidden messages which structure this riotously colorful and ominous world. Transnational economics emerges as a kind of interpretive backdrop, yet nothing is bluntly stated.

In the end is our beginning; the first spread features an opposition between sixteen mostly dark blue television screens and a single palm tree printed across the folds of

the accordion sheets. All get homogenized through the medium of television, as art divides nature into its own underlying aesthetic structures. The simple chair and fragment of a bed which appear on many of the television screens allude to our principal activities as human beings: sitting in order to work or relax, and reclining in order to sleep, make love, be ill or die. Thus Ehrenberg's seeming simplicity of imagery, style, coloration, and presentation turns out to be a sophisticated guise, revealing an acute sensibility in sharply critical conflict with its social, cultural, economic and natural surroundings.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Joan Lyons, ed. *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*. Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985, p. 29.
- <sup>2</sup> See Dick Higgins. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- <sup>3</sup> Kate Linker. "The Artist's Book as an Alternative Space," *Studio International*, (1980), p. 76.
- <sup>4</sup> Douglas McMurtie. *The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1943, p. xxv.
- <sup>5</sup> Nicolas Calas. *Icons and Images of the Sixties*. New York: Dutton, 1971, p. 131.
- <sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 169–70.
- <sup>7</sup> Diane Kelder. "Artists' Books." *Art in America*, (January, 1974), p. 112.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> McMurtie, p. xxviii.
- <sup>10</sup> George Steiner. "After the Book?" *Visible Language*, 6:3, p. 199.
- <sup>11</sup> McMurtie, p. 289.
- <sup>12</sup> Steiner, p. 201.
- <sup>13</sup> Lawrence Alloway. "Artists As Writers, Part Two: The Realm of Language." *Artforum*, (April, 1974), p. 41.
- <sup>14</sup> Frederic Jameson. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 248.
- <sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson. "Seriality in Modern Literature." *Bucknell Review*, (Spring, 1970), p. 71–2.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Linker, p. 48.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Note, for example, the "Third International Biennial of Visual Poetry," an exhibition made up of works by some 400 artists from 41 countries recently being displayed in Mexico City.
- <sup>20</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969, p. 258.



## The Book Artist

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## THE BOOK AS THE TROJAN HORSE OF ART: WALTER HAMADY, THE PERISHABLE PRESS LIMITED AND GABBERJABBS 1-6

**Walter Hamady's combination of iconoclasm/craft, art/daily life, and sophistication grounded in physiology and earthiness set his work apart. "The Book as the Trojan Horse of Art" explores these themes while the article itself mirrors, in its form, Hamady's attitude toward the book as a reflective vehicle in its ability to break and intersect narrative lines, play with syntax, integrate found materials, and convey enigma, paradox and information all at once.**

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## We are all of us in the gutter,<sup>1</sup> but some of us are looking at the stars.

Oscar Wilde

On May 1, 1991, I visited Minor Confluence Tree Farm, Walter Hamady's home and the site of the Perishable Press Limited, "located 5.3 miles southwest of Mount Horeb Wisconsin."<sup>2</sup> What follows is the product of the conversation recorded that day, of the letters that heralded and succeeded it and, most importantly, of the hours spent in the Rare Books Department at the University of Wisconsin's Memorial Library (with views of the State Capitol and Lake Mendota—this is a mid-western project from start to finish), hours spent not just reading, but handling and looking at Hamady's extraordinary books.<sup>3</sup> It is because few of the readers of this essay will, I imagine, have that opportunity (at least immediately), that I shall try to convey something of the flavor of Hamady, the man and the work, through the form and not just the content of my text. I shall do so

<sup>1</sup> The subject of the present essay would call this a "buzz-word." All quotations and illustrations from his work are reproduced with the kind permission of Walter Hamady and The Perishable Press Limited.

<sup>2</sup> Printing and binding are done in what was originally the parlor of the farmhouse. The immense barn, about a hundred feet away, is given over to papermaking, collage and sculpture, and is divided into areas for "wet dirty work" and "dry" ditto. All work areas, whether in the barn or pressroom, are in apple-pie order.

The precise location of the press, "5.3 miles southwest of Mount Horeb Wisconsin," is a regular feature of Hamady's distinctive, some might say idiosyncratic, colophons. Typical in its precision, it is evidence (a) of the printer's obsessive concern for exact measurement and (b) of Hamady's particular interest in mapping and terrain. As a young man, he had wanted to be a geologist and remains enamored of geological survey maps, especially maps of "driftless Wisconsin."

The site of the press is fully described in the "Colophon Postface" to Book 95 *The Selection of Heaven*, text by Paul Blackburn, illustrated by Walter Hamady, 1980:

To sustain the sharp division between "those who hate and those who love" e.g. bibliophiles vs. human beings; false rigidity vs. life and so on, we need to clarify (with reader's indulgence) where are these books made? minor confluence is just that, coming together at the south end of our farm which is in the part of Wisconsin that was sur/rounded three times by the continental glacier but never was penetrated or covered. Geologists term this the driftless area which is within the us postal bailiwick of Mt. Horeb—so no need for confusion—it is possible to be in multiple places at the same time! Western Hemisphere North America Midwest Northern Interior Upper US Pecatonica Watershed Dane County Perry Township Lee Valley Road the Southwest Quarter of the Southwest Quarter of the Northwest Quarter of section 33, Township 5, North, Range 6 East of the 4th Principle Meridian Military Grid coordinants 7149.

<sup>3</sup> I have received generous help in this enterprise from members of the staff at Memorial Library. Wonne Schofer, humanities bibliographer, introduced me to Hamady over a memorable luncheon, John Tedeschi, senior academic librarian and head of Rare Books, encouraged the project from the start, while Barbara Richards, Jill Rosenshield, and Susan Ehler made repeated access to the Perishable Press collection easy and my visits to Rare Books pleasant as well as profitable.



by adopting a narrative mode not usually associated with the scholarly essay (though it is characteristic of the Perishable Press style) while at the same time exploiting what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of scholarly writing: the footnote. Thus, while there is a conscious departure from scholarly convention on the one hand, that very convention will be simultaneously privileged on the other: a strategy designed to reflect Hamady's practice, specifically in his *Gabberjabbs*.

For all his avowed "anti-academic" prejudice, Hamady loves footnotes provided they are, in his view, worthwhile. Thus, immediately before producing the first *Gabberjabb*, he had, he says, been "grievously offended" by the notes to a particular edition of *Moby Dick*, which he found were "trivializing the text" and hence a "waste of time." The footnotes to Allan W. Eckert's books he finds, by contrast, "fantastic," a pleasure to read because "they are another story in themselves," Eckert having "the good sense to keep his narrative separate and really electric."<sup>4</sup> The disruption that continuously extensive notes produce in the chronology and "flow" of a text may thus have a positive effect, in Hamady's view, a view that has an immediate parallel for me in Derrida's "Living On," where the footnote is pushed as far as it can, or perhaps ought to, go.<sup>5</sup> I don't go quite that far, but would nonetheless encourage the reader to follow the notes as she goes along.

With regard to convention, scholarly and otherwise, experience has confirmed that in Hamady's case it would indeed be foolish to anticipate the conventional from either the man or the work, but that equally, neither rejects convention indiscriminately or out of hand. Thus, by virtue of a certain robust courtesy (though uncompromisingly direct, he places great value on "good manners"), and of his celebratory if parodic exploitation of the conventions of the book, Hamady sets himself apart from more simply (not to say simplistically) iconoclastic artists. Furthermore his "answers" (books included), if they tend to be categorical, are not on that account to be taken as

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Walter Samuel Haatoum Hamady, Minor Confluence, Mount Horeb Wisconsin, May 1, 1991. Allan W. Eckert (1931) is the author of twenty-eight works including *The Court Martial of Daniel Boone* (1973) and *The Wading Birds of North America* (1979) and over two hundred television scripts for *Wild Kingdom*.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Living On," in *Deconstruction & Criticism*, Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller, (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 75–76.

necessarily final. For all his elaboration of the colophon,<sup>6</sup> Hamady is not wholly bent on having the last word—or at least, allowing for his cheerfully and irrepressibly contentious disposition, not immediately.<sup>7</sup> Thus R.S.V.P., rather than Q.E.D., is the device traceable, like a watermark, throughout the Perishable Press volumes,<sup>8</sup> which are designed primarily, as I see it, to disrupt the practice of silent reading. This practice is at once the crowning achievement and the bane of the literate (hence a fortiori, the scholarly)—because while it implies comprehension, hence a certain mastery of the text, it simultaneously produces, and is indeed predicated on, a kind of tunnel vision. Thus, as Jean-François Lyotard argues in his important book, *Discours, figure*,<sup>9</sup> we read fluently only at the cost of ceasing to see letters, registering their differential value within an alphabetic system at the expense of their form, not to speak of their composition, their disposition on the page.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, literacy blinds us to what Hamady calls the “bookform” itself, which for the skilled reader paradoxically ceases to be a “spiritual instrument” (Mallarmé) in order to become instead a purveyor of information: the volume (or, in Hamady’s terms, “the picture plane”) disappearing from view in favour of its sole “content.”<sup>11</sup> Hamady’s books (specifically the *Gabberjabbs*) consciously

<sup>6</sup> According to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Thirteenth Edition, Revised and Expanded (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 30 (called by Hamady “the Oracle”), “An embellishment sometimes added on the last page of a specially designed and produced book is the colophon, in this sense not simply the publisher’s device, but an inscription including the facts of production . . . This practice is not so common in book publishing today as it once was.” Except at the Perishable Press, where it continues to flourish, recounting “facts of production” hitherto undreamed of.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, when seeking working capital for the production of the magnificent and very costly *Flora*, (Book 114, 1990, text by Anne McGarrell, illustrations by Jack Beal), Hamady solicited advance orders exclusively from those of his subscribers who (in addition to paying promptly!) “almost always send some kind of a note to say something about the book they received; in other words encouraging me.” ML/WshH Interview, May 1, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Another buzz-word.

<sup>9</sup> Paris: Klincksieck, 1974, currently being translated into English by the present author for Cambridge University Press.

<sup>10</sup> See Mallarmé (an expert on typography) on *La Musique et les lettres*.

<sup>11</sup> See *Two Decades of Hamady and the Perishable Press Limited*, “PRE/FACE, IN LIEU OF,” np. “[T]he book is perhaps the most personal form an artist can deal with. It encompasses a multiple and sequential picture plane, it is tactile, and to be understood it must be handled by the viewer, who then becomes a participant. . . . The book as a structure is the Trojan horse of art—it is not feared by average people.”

resist such elision at the hands of the too adept reader, who, frustrated, is consequently obliged to regress and, in the process, to recapture something of the pleasurable mystery (and frustration) of pre-literacy: her customarily automatic decipherment of letters jammed for once by the bookform she is obliged to puzzle over, looking at it from different angles, in an effort to "read" it. The *Gabberjabbs* are designed to bring home to us that reading (even "regular" books) is a hands-on experience.

Hamady's inspired play with the conventions of text and bookmaking is closely linked to his production of collages and sculptures, and a retrospective exhibition, organized by the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin, March 17–April 28, 1991, has recently provided his fellow-midwesterners with an opportunity to view a representative selection of his oeuvre.<sup>12</sup> I shall limit my discussion here to the books (of which, at the time of writing, The Perishable Press Limited had published a total of one hundred and fifteen since its foundation in 1964, including superbly produced volumes of poetry by such writers as, in alphabetical order, Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley, Galway Kinnell, Toby Olson, W.S. Merwin, Jerome Rothenberg, W.D. Snodgrass and Diane Wakoski) and specifically to the *Gabberjabb* series which now numbers six volumes, all represented at the Wustum. Here are the titles of the *Gabberjabbs*, as they appeared in the "Checklist of Pieces in the Exhibition":

- 1 Voltaire the Hamadeh (Walter Hamady); *Interminable Gabberjabbs*; 11 x 6 1/2 inches; Book 61, 1973.
- 2 Walter Hamady; *Hunkering in Wisconsin Another interminable Gaggerblab* (a series), illustrated by Jack Beal; 8 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches; Book 62, 1974.
- 3 Walter Hamady; *Thumbnailing the Hilex/Gabberjabb Number 3*, Illustrated by Jack Beal; 15 x 7 1/2 inches; Book 69, 1974.
- 4 Walter Hamady; *The Interminable Gabberjabb Volume One (&) Number Four*, Illustrated with two photographs by Gregory Conniff; 6 1/2 x 10 inches; Book 70, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Catalogue available. Hamady, who was born in Flint, Michigan, of a Lebanese father and an American mother in 1940, graduated from Wayne State University and Cranbrook Academy and settled in Wisconsin in 1966, is a midwestern artist with roots in the Levant. Hence Walter Semihittite Hamady (or WshH), one of the artist's many riffs on his name (Walter Samuel Haatoum Hamady). See note 103, *For The Hundredth Time Gabberjab Number Five*, where the full name is (first?) printed. It reads as follows: "(See 38, 42, 47 & 95) My father once told me that in the old country, Hamady is a common name and has 5 branches; this one is ours." The numbers refer to other footnotes, which are continuously numbered throughout all six volumes of the series. Much fun and frustration can be had by the reader willing to look them up. Reading the *Gabberjabbs*, especially number 6, means playing "Hunt the Footnote," among other games.

- 5 Walter Hamady; *For the Hundredth Time Gabberjabb Number Five*; Illustrated by Walter Hamady; 7 x 5 1/2 inches; Book 100, 1981.
- 6 Walter Hamady; *Neopostmodrinism or Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo or Gabberjabb Number 6*, illustrated by Walter Hamady; 7 1/16 x 9 7/16 x 16 x 7/8 inches; Book 113, 1988–89.<sup>13</sup>

The seventh, according to the latest available report, “is wandering round in my head and its parts are piling up in the barn and in this pressroom”—a heap to which these very pages may well contribute, if the artist’s declared intention holds. Thus

“I would love it,” he wrote, “if some ‘scholar-type’<sup>14</sup> would go to the Gabberjabb as if unearthing them from a tomb in Egypt. And record and document what they present etc. Then I could use that text as a text for another Gabberjabb with my notes and comments etc. as per how they got it all wrong.”<sup>15</sup>

The last phrase might have been daunting had I not also been privy to WshH’s views on the fear of making mistakes and the inhibiting effect this can have on the creative impulse. Thus “What’s a mistake?” he asked rhetorically, in his kitchen in Mount Horeb, on May 1, 1991, before pronouncing mistakes to be no more than a useful means of advancing the work and/or of learning something new.<sup>16</sup> There is nonetheless a difference between acknowledging and incorporating, hence profiting, from one’s own mistakes and having them identified

<sup>13</sup> Henceforth referred to as *iG1* (for *Interminable Gabberjabb*) *iG2*, etc. The word “Gabberjabb,” which recalls Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” was the bookmaker’s invention. He had not yet read Carroll at the time, and did not do so until he began to read *Alice in Wonderland* to his children, the first of whom was not born until 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Palatino? Sabon Antiqua? Gill Sans? If I am to be a “scholar-type,” I fancy Bifur, designed by A.M. Cassandre for Deberny and Peignot in 1929, one of the typefaces used in *For The Hundredth Time Gabberjabb Number Five*. Clearly, “the Hamady heresy” (see *Interminable Gabberjabb*, 1973) is contagious.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from WshH to ML, May 10, 1991. This sounds more disagreeable than it was intended to be and is symptomatic less of hostility towards individual scholars than of the artist’s frustration with the academic institution, which has such difficulty in evaluating and hence recognizing (in both senses of acknowledging and rewarding) creative as opposed to “scholarly” practices. That such an opposition should be so firmly established is, of course, a large part of the problem, calling for discussion and scrutiny which cannot be undertaken here. See, especially in this regard, *Neopostmodrinism or Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo or Gabberjabb Number 6*.

<sup>16</sup> Hamady’s books, even as they strive for perfection, are far from flawless, as he is the first to acknowledge. See, among many other examples, the colophon to *Hunkering in Wisconsin*, where we read that the type is Herman Zapf’s Palatino, which “is/was put into readable sequence with the hands (though the preceding page is a bit looking like it was set with the feet), no matter friends, perfection is dangerous to achieve usually arriving as a disguise—and ennnnways flaws are necessary as the escape route for inadvertently [sic] trapped evil spirits.”

and exploited by others. Hamady himself, describing the creative process of which the work is the inevitably diminished product —what he calls his “art as shit” lecture<sup>17</sup>— was emphatic that the right to refer to his production in these terms belongs exclusively to the artist. “You can’t say my art is shit, only I can,” he warned: a sentiment I endorse, on the simple grounds that the digestive process is not transferable. But neither is reading, so that the misprisions, memory lapses and misinterpretations that inevitably mark every encounter with a text, when looked at from a certain angle, may be the only incontrovertible evidence available that a reading has actually taken place, the provenance of “correct” interpretations (so readily reproducible) being infinitely more difficult to determine. It is just this non-transferable quality of reading that the *Gabberjabbs*, with their demand for “heavy-duty reader participation,” bring to the fore.<sup>18</sup> That, in turn, is what makes them at once so difficult to describe and so valuable an instrument for advancing our understanding of what books and reading are all about.

Given their heuristic, if not didactic, function, it is not surprising that this “Interminable” series originated in a pedagogical impulse, as the “Foreward [sic] Preface Acknowledgments Introduction” to the first volume (which did not know it was the first at the time, there being as yet no series)<sup>19</sup> explains. Here is that inaugural text in full:

When Mary Roth asked where the acknowledgements page should go in her book and I told her the printer’s prerogative of: *put anything anyplace however you wish*

Not just necessary, but cherished. See colophon to Conrad Hilberry, *Housemarks*, illustrated by Walter Hamady; 5 x 4 inches; Book 97, 1980: “The paper is Canterbury from Barcham Green and lest you think all their work so flawed, these sheets are seconds which are much treasured here—as are all small events that show human process/humanity.”

Except perhaps in the case of the star-crossed *since man began to eat himself*, the 110th book from the Perishable Press Limited, a collaboration of six authors: (in the order of their appearance in the book) Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Kenneth Bernard, Allen Ginsberg, Toby Olson, Jerome Rothenberg, Joel Oppenheimer; illustrated with six etchings in seven plates by Warrington Colescott, produced by Hamady, bound by William Anthony and “signed by everybody,” where a succession of such “events” threatened to defeat the project. This book went through five dummies, of which the last was called “the rescue dummy.” See “Designing Literature,” *Fine Print: The Review for the Arts of the Book* 14:3, July 1988, p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> A well-known topos of Western literature, with particular reference to writing, from Montaigne to Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett.

<sup>18</sup> Colophon to *Thumbnailing The Hilex/Gabberjab Number 3*, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida’s quite simple point, which commentary has so frequently and unnecessarily obscured.

and seeing the cheerful look of frustration I suggested *The Manual of Style* which she had consulted already and the printed Oracle said *it comes after the such and such* and of course she didn't have a such and such which reinvoked my original advice and provoked the form of this small raggy scrapmade volume in your hands.

As for strict adherence to the Oracle, a very slight amount of the hamady heresy managed to invade the fine intention and so here are some confessions: Notes should come after the Appendix so we used an old uterus instead. The only item left is the ear-numbering/tattooing device borrowed from Ivan<sup>20</sup> on Christmas, the outfit has but one each of characters and numbers so we have resourced again and the full account will go to the perishable press limited archive at SUNY at Stony Brook.

### Wsh/ at the New Farm 28 December 1973<sup>21</sup>

The simplest way to describe the contents of this "raggy scrapmade volume" (made indeed of paper scraps during the Christmas vacation succeeding Mary Roth's question) is to reproduce the table of contents. Note that it begins, not where the majority of we purblind readers do, at "Text, first page of" (actually the *fourteenth* page) but at "endpaper" (stamped FRONT in the book itself with the aid of Ivan's ear-numbering/tattooing device, to distinguish it from its opposite number at the back of the book, appropriately stamped BACK).

Each page in the volume bears its name: "endpaper," "blank verso," etc. so that the parts of the book are spelled out for the reader, who is consequently obliged to take notice, perhaps for the first time, of the book's structure qua book. Here is the "official" description:

This is the first of a series of books which perhaps parody the structure and parts of the book. The type is hand-set Sabon Antiqua printed in red, brown, blue, black, pink and grey on/into a variety of Shadwell<sup>22</sup> scraps in progressively different sizes. The edition is 120 copies handsewn into blue Fabriano Cover wrappers with U.S. Geologic Survey maps of the Blue Mounds region where the book and its events happened<sup>23</sup> (see figure 1).

The text, "For Ivan and Oral," is a poem describing the

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Staley, a neighboring farmer, to whom both the book and the text (*Interminable Gabberjabs* makes the distinction clear) is dedicated. Thus: "For Ivan who got it started & who wryly said, after I showed him how to make paper with your hands: Uhbleev U'd rather milk Cows."

The barn where WshH makes his paper was originally used for milking cows, and he continues to store his paper pulp in the stainless steel SOLAR MILK MINDER (after which he named one of his papers), letter to ML, May 10, 1991.

The ear-numbering/tattooing device is an instrument for marking livestock.

<sup>21</sup> *Interminable Gabberjabs*, 1973, quoted from *Two Decades of Hamady and the Perishable Press Limited*, a slightly revised version of the original.

<sup>22</sup> Shadwell is the generic name of the Perishable Press papers, so called in homage to Thomas Jefferson's birthplace.

<sup>23</sup> *Two Decades of Hamady and the Perishable Press Limited*.

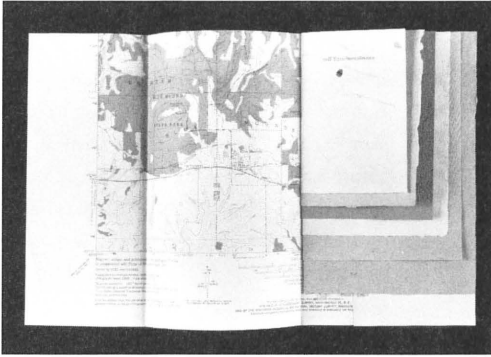


Figure 1  
*Voltaire the Hamadeh* (Walter Hamady),  
 Interminable Gabberjabbs, 1973,  
 an edition of 120.

erection (in secret) of a one-hundred pound birdfeeder commissioned from Hamady by Oral as a Father's Day gift for her husband, Ivan. Before it was fully secured, a mighty storm, flattening crops, gardens etc., blew the whole thing down, while the birdfeeder-erection party and its beneficiary ate and drank heartily in the dark, the electric power having failed.

That a giant birdfeeder should play such a central role in the first *Gabberjabbs* is entirely appropriate, in view of the fact that building birdfeeders and elaborate clubhouses from lumber charged to his mother's account at the lumber yard was a recurring feature of Hamady's youth in Flint, Michigan. Hence, the "box" sculptures that mark the latest phase in his development have their origin, according to the artist, in this early activity, and are not, as has been suggested, an offshoot of his experiments with the bookform. Books, however, are also boxes, I would suggest, and in a metaphorical sense, houses too, feeders, even, of a sort, and one might argue that bookmaking and boxmaking come together in the initial *Interminable Gabberjabbs*: the construction of a book being the subject of the *volume*, and the construction of a birdfeeder the subject of the *text*.

"Charge it to Mother" was, on his own admission, the emblem of Hamady's growing up,<sup>24</sup> and the more closely one studies his books, the more evident and pervasive the influence of his mother, a practicing physician and a voracious reader with anglophile tastes, begins to appear. Asked when he first became involved with bookmaking, Hamady replied that he "grew up in a house full of books," which he and his sister had carte blanche to order

<sup>24</sup> ML/WshH interview, May 1, 1991.

and “charge to mother.” Add to this numerous subscriptions to a wide variety of American and English periodicals, as well as scientific and medical journals, and it is not surprising that, as he recalls, “There was a lot of stuff coming into that house.” Hearing that phrase, I made an immediate association to Hamady’s mature art: *Gabberjabbs*, collages and sculptures, all of them carefully constructed containers, dwelling places made out of and for “a lot of stuff.” He had expressed his admiration for Kurt Schwitters in the course of our conversation, and it seems to me that it is to Schwitters’ *Merzbilder* that Hamady’s art may most usefully be compared.<sup>25</sup> What distinguishes it, however, from Schwitters’ collages and assemblages and from the boxes of a Duchamp or a Joseph Cornell, is Hamady’s choice, in the *Gabberjabbs*, of the book as his medium, hence his experiments with expanding the book form.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to being a “book-nut,” as he describes her, Hamady’s mother comes from Keokuk, Iowa,<sup>27</sup> coincidentally the birthplace of her contemporary, Harry Duncan, who was instrumental in “getting private printing going again in this country.”<sup>28</sup> It was while stopping over with a maternal aunt in Iowa City, en route to study the physiographic provinces of America in the Rockies, that Hamady, then in his early twenties, was shown Duncan’s work: his first encounter with handmade books. He subsequently met the artist and got his first demonstration in bookmaking, marveling that the product could look so much “like real books.”

Aside from its generally informing power, the influence of Hamady’s mother manifests itself in quite specific ways

<sup>25</sup> Schwitters and Hamady share not only a combination of a “dada” sensibility with bourgeois origins, but, arguably, an attachment to “the most banal bourgeois values and the most romantic sentiments” that does not preclude satire. Thus, Schwitters’ astoundingly popular poem, “An Anna Blume,” is described as “both a Dadaist poem with all its banalities and its nonsense, and a sentimentalized Expressionist one, for the bliss that goes with the banality is not entirely satirical.” See John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, (need name of book) (New York, Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 39; and Hamady, *The Interminable Gabberjabb Volume One (€) Number Four*; footnote 80 (referring to the title): “This is the title, the fourth in this gushy sentimental slob series.”

Coincidentally, Hamady’s second wife’s name is Anna, and title 115 from the press, *Of Boulders and Bolides*, “intended for Halcyon Days but arriving closer to Valentine’s” contains “writings by walter for his wife anna emilie.”

<sup>26</sup> See note 11 above.

<sup>27</sup> The midwestern origins of The Perishable Press Limited again assert themselves.

<sup>28</sup> ML/WshH interview.



in the initial *Gabberjabb*: first, as I have already suggested, in the giant birdfeeder, relic of the boyhood activity she subsidized; second, in the Geological Survey maps which form the binding (she was the first to interest the young Walter in topography and geology, teaching him how to read the landscape); and finally and most tellingly, in the “heretical” appendix page, illustrated, ostensibly for lack of the appropriate body part, by an engraving, “lifted” from *Gray’s Anatomy*, of a uterus.<sup>29</sup> Beneath this illustration is the admonition: “the appendix should not be a repository for odds and ends of the author’s research that he/she was unable to work into the text,” which sounds like the Oracle, i.e. *The Manual of Style*, though my edition (the thirteenth, 1982, hence posthumous to *Interminable Gabberjabs*) gives: “The appendix should not be a repository for raw data that the author was unable to work into the text.”<sup>30</sup>

I like to think that the persistence of images from *Gray’s Anatomy* throughout Hamady’s work is as much a tribute to his mother as to the skill of the anonymous engraver: the remarkable mother who in addition to giving him her own copy of *Gray’s Anatomy* to cut up for collage material (he has run through several more since) also gave him the more precious gift of his remarkably easy relationship to the body and its functions, high and low.

For the body is an integral part of the Perishable Press Limited experience: whether it be “the different papers that come from trying to reduce our supply of old towels, ties, jeans, sheets and shirts, so you could say our friends have slept on and worn this book,”<sup>31</sup> the laborious setting of the type by hand, the hand-cranking of the Vandercook press, the hand-sewing of the binding, the sensual pleasures recorded in many a colophon and note, implicitly even the very name of the press itself, introduced in 1964, when Hamady published his first book, *The Disillusioned Solipsist*. Here is the “official” account of how the press got its name:

<sup>29</sup> See the “Foreward” quoted above. The source of the illustration is not acknowledged, but I make the assumption based on the colophon to *Hunkering in Wisconsin*, the second in the *Gabberjabb* series, where we read: “It never did said [sic] who illustrated iGI & letters have not been pouring in. For those readers just popping with curiosity . . . the answer is we don’t know except that it might be the 19th century English anatomical engraver whose name has never been known to us.”

<sup>30</sup> One can only imagine what inspiration Hamady might have drawn from the phrase “raw data.”

<sup>31</sup> Colophon to Walter Hamady, *In Sight of Bluemounds*, Book 52, 1972.

The press name came from an attempt to find another word beginning with the letter P to go with the word press—such complex ideas of youth! Thank heavens parthenogenetic wasn't chosen! As it was/is there has been a lot of criticism as per the name of the press (silly) vs. the quality and nature of the work (sometimes elegant, texts often serious etc. etc.) so at some point I had to make up a "real" reason why the name: Because it reflects the human condition which is both perishable and limited.<sup>32</sup>

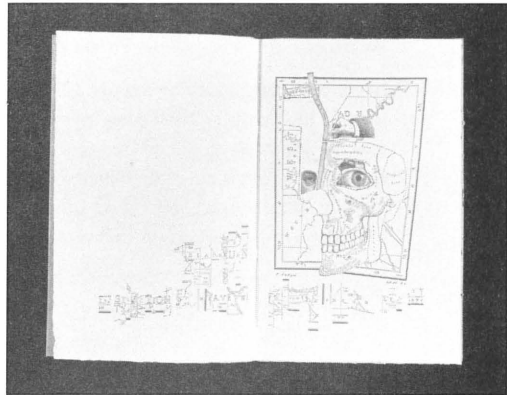
But the epigraph to *The Disillusioned Solipsist* reads in part as follows: "A man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him (Ecclesiastes three/twenty two)," and when Hamady "recycles" it for use in *Gabberjabb number 6*, he adds "thank you PHD doctor James for that grand course in the King James (no relation) at Wayne State in sixty four." I have seen the marked copy of the King James version of the Bible he still has from that course and am of the opinion that the "real reason why the name," far from being invented belatedly, was probably operative (if unconsciously) from the start. "The Perishable Press Limited" (the name) has of course acquired further resonance with the years, which mark the inevitably advancing age of the printer (faithfully recorded in the *Gabberjabs*). Thus, his brush with death when his appendix ruptured on December 25, 1990, was a sharp reminder of the perishable and limited nature of the human condition, although on the lighter side, one might imagine that event as the appendix's revenge, after all those years of cavalier treatment. Represented by a uterus in *iGI*, it was again replaced by an anatomical engraving, this time of the seminal vesicles, in *iGA*. No wonder it had to assert itself. As a further indication that mapping, anatomical drawing, writing and the perishability of the human condition are not the exclusive concern of the *Gabberjabs*, but are rather constants of Hamady's imagination, see the remarkable combination of all four in the double-spread title page of Paul Blackburn's *The Selection of Heaven* (see figure 2).<sup>33</sup>

A large part of the pleasure one derives from the Perishable Press books lies in their celebration of life in all its aspects, the joy and the tears of things. This is especially true of the *Gabberjabs*, which document the bookmaker's pleasure in teaching (*iGI*), his joy in nature and country

<sup>32</sup> *Two Decades of Hamady and the Perishable Press Limited*

<sup>33</sup> Monica Strauss, writing about this book in *Fine Print*, had this to say:

Figure 2  
 Paul Blackburn's *The Selection of Heaven*,  
 illustrated by Walter Hamady, 1980.



life, the halcyon days of his first marriage (*iG2*), his friends and neighbors, and growing his own food, as in the following lines:

August, the month of harvest starting  
 in Wisconsin, our friends and loved ones  
 come like cucumbers, tomatoes and eggplants—  
 nobody and nothing can keep up with it.<sup>36</sup>

(Consultation of note 36 yields: “Here’s the time-old artist’s problem: getting on with one’s inspired life-work versus farting round with friends, etc.”) At the end of the poem, he describes his former wife:

your face shining like  
 gleaming treasure of all the canned stuff  
 we’ve put up from: our garden, you are  
 always the highly thought of esteemed and  
 waited for first come ripe tomato, in fact,  
 both windowsills of the kitchen racked up with them.

And the book’s colophon is set inside the outline of the shadow cast by the large tomato drawn by Jack Beal, which illustrates the volume.

In this series of seventeen poems published for the first time as a separate edition, the poet explores the intuitive, hesitant process by which the matter of life is transmuted into art. The palpability of memory, the arbitrary fashioning of metaphors, the humbling effects of desperation, pain and loss, and even the traditional poet’s role as eulogist, are woven into a continuous reverie that coincides with a few weeks of burgeoning spring. . . .

Blackburn’s charting of memory clearly inspired the enigmatic collage by Walter Hamady for the double-spread title page. An anatomical diagram of a skull superimposed upon a strangely distorted map is eerily animated by images of eyes and a writer’s hand. Author, title, publisher, and date of publication form part of the cartographic notation in further fragments of maps. When the title is blind-embossed in the same format on the olive green wrapper, it gives the impression of a hieroglyphic relief. Thus, both cover and title page require decoding, an action that serves as an introductory metaphor to Blackburn’s own decipherings. [See note 14, and reference to Egyptian tomb, above.] Quoted in *Two Decades of Walter Hamady*.

In *iG3* the poet and printer is gathering grapeleaves, declaring that:

Many pleasures exist for the picker: the smells of the woods, the flowers, the leaves themselves—often there are mint patches crunched by your thoughtless feet, what a great bouquet that is! Just like being immersed in the Tabouli salad you will be eating with the grapeleaves you are picking! Without doubt this is heaven!

The book is illustrated by another Jack Beal drawing, this time of a grapeleaf, which has been incorporated into the “rosette” à la state fair adorning the title page, emblem, we are told, of “The Wild Grapeleaf Picking Association Blue Mounds Township Grand Prize.”<sup>34</sup> It is preceded by an endpaper from which a circle has been carefully cut to reveal a segment of the rosette bearing the words “1974 A Grapeleaf for Mary” in Jack Beal’s handwriting, and the rich green of the wrapper is suggestive of the color of the picked leaves.

The text of *iG4* celebrates cleaning windows, as the poet/printer experiences a strong housewifely desire for the pleasure of looking out through clean glass and sets to, with his wife, to fulfill it. When the work is done, they survey each other through the sparkling panes and he admires her pregnant body, anticipating the birth of their first child. No wonder the appendix is here represented by an anatomical drawing of the seminal vesicles! Or that the “bastard title” comes under scrutiny in this volume celebrating paternity, a common enough theme for male poets, but how many of them would write enthusiastically and expertly, in the same breath, as it were, about cleaning windows?<sup>35</sup> In a certain sense the text of this book functions like the freshly cleaned window panes, since it is bound between two photographs, representing

<sup>34</sup> “The original intention for this book was to have a manufactured ribbon such like the ones at State Fairs to affix to the cover somehow. But each round trip to the badge maker, another snafu would creep in, so I gave up and manufactured my own with Jack Beal’s help in drawing the grapeleaf! But it forced the problem of using cutting dies, which was another door that opened to great profit since.” *Two Decades of Hamady*.

<sup>35</sup> Under the heading “100% Bastard Title Page” (the alternative term for bastard title is “half title”), we read:

<sup>76</sup> Mr. Larry Brown\* often used to say to me, right in front of my mother, ‘Walter, you are a bastard!’ and my dear sweet mother would puff up bigger than life size and with huffy indignance blurt, ‘He is NOT a Bastard! I know who his father was and we were Married at the time!’ (But this has nothing to do with bastard title page, about which consult the *Interminable Gabberjabb*, volume I, number 1, ‘the Oracle vs. Hamady Heresy’ and consult the first book on the bibliography, 12th edition, 2nd. printing, pages 1.1–1.9 & see footnote 52, pp. apropos.)”

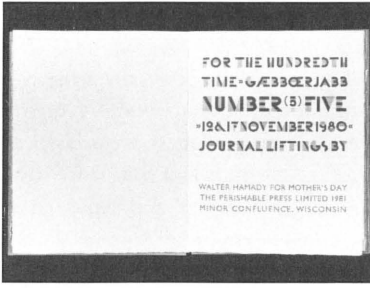


Figure 3

Walter Hamady,

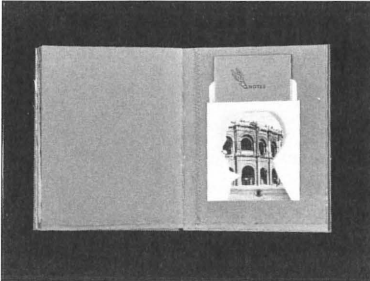
For the Hundredth Time Gabberjabb Number Five,  
1981, title page.

Figure 4

Walter Hamady,

For the Hundredth Time Gabberjabb Number Five.

the window cleaners, who thus might be said to look at each other through the poem. (I think here of the French expression *en regard* to signify what English calls “the facing page.”)

It is with *iG5*, however, that the *Gabberjabbs*' potential for radically expanding the bookform begins fully to emerge. Techniques proliferate: collage (a profile of WshH in a hat, die-cut from a map with an infinitesimal footnote alerting the reader to “Note key words here”),<sup>36</sup> grommeting, elaborate footnotes printed and bound into a miniature book of their own, which is stuck into a library card pocket at the back (*see figure 3*), thumbprinting, all kinds of printer's ornaments depicting everything from Hermes' winged sandals to a stop sign.<sup>37</sup> This book, as befits a sequel to *iG4*, celebrates Mother's Day (*see figure 4*). The artist's mother is represented in the “front matter” by the “private language” spoken at “ten-eleven Grand Avenue in Keokuk, Iowa,” her family home, *see Note 97<sup>2</sup>*, while the text (in two parts: “Mary in Hospital 12 XI 80” and “Text Part 2: 17 XI 80 Mary Home”) rejoices in the young mother's recovery from reparative surgery made necessary by the ravages of childbearing.<sup>38</sup> The printer is having a field-day throughout, with Bifur type, (“love that g!”) cast especially for the press by Alfred Hoffmann.

<sup>36</sup> I have noted “original” followed by a broken inverted “w” on the map's surface, for starters.

<sup>37</sup> This “is a collaged book using up various scraps etc. It is a bit difficult to describe as some pages are fastened together or embossed or perforated or rubber-stamped or scored or sewn.” *Two Decades of Hamady*. Quite so!

<sup>38</sup> “ten/seven nine/two seven/five  
Twenty seven pounds of babies  
In two times at the plate! R B I average  
Babe Ruth & the rest can't touch”  
(The second birth produced twins.)

An interval of seven years separates *iG5* from its successor *Neopostmodrinism* or *Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo* or *Gabberjabb Number 6*, a difficult period in the life of the artist as the heavily satiric title and the wounded, somewhat querulous note on which the book opens suggest. *Schmerz*, rather than *Merz* (the term Schwitters had coined for the principle of assemblage, so gaily adapted and exploited in *iG5*), would seem to be the emblem of this volume. This is evident, for example, in the second part of the epigraph, which is printed beneath two stickers, one marking “24 years of service of the Perishable Press Limited (1964–1988),” the other “48 years of service of Walter Samuel Hamady.”

The Disillusioned Solipsist 1964 (Bk No 1)—(Bk No 113) (*Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo* 1988. 1988 minus 1964 equals 24. 24 times 2 equals 48. 1988 minus 1940 (the printer’s year of birth) is also 48, which, more or less, points to 1/2 of the printer’s life has been given over to making books about which see, (more) Seymour under headings Disillusionment Disappointment & Disgust or the DDD of midlife crisis in k)ademia or Professoring for twenty-two years and earning the \$alary of an Entering Assistant Professor which, More or less, Points to several conc(de)lusions.

The “DDD of midlife crisis” does not, however, prevent the artist from creating the most challenging of the *Gabberjabb* series to date with this volume, which would deserve an essay to itself. *Neopostmodrinism* quite properly resists summary. “Accept no substitutes!” (i.e. commentary) might be its slogan, and any description of this Aladdin’s cave of a book<sup>39</sup> must be inadequate. Grommets, rubber stamps, metal tags, cuts, marks of every kind abound. The fine marbled covers are made from nineteenth-century Wisconsin tax assessment rolls retrieved from the State Historical Society dumpster where they had been discarded. The eye (or I) motif, frequently represented by an anatomical engraving of the organ, is dominant—from page surface number 2: “arch (drawing of eye) vally adhesived to cover board” to the galaxy of rebuses on which it ends. This page is artfully folded (I have not spoken of the importance of the fold in Hamady’s books) over the university bookplate, depicting

<sup>39</sup> The metaphor is chosen to convey the riches, the traps for the unwary and the intense childish pleasure, as produced by *The Arabian Nights*, offered by *iG6*. See notes 12 and 41, above and below.

an eye, surrounded by rays, interspersed with the letters of the motto "numen lumen" above four open books arranged in the form of a cross. I cannot but think that Hamady, in his disillusionment with the academic institution, is making an ironic visual/verbal comment here, winking as it were, at the university and its motto, attributed to the verbal cognizance of the Earl of Balcarres, which reads: *Astra Castra, Numen Lumen*, and is customarily translated as "Stars my Camp, God my Light."<sup>40</sup>

This impression is reinforced by the succeeding page, in which Hamady's profile (the eye and the brain represented by collaged anatomical drawings, die-cut within a circular aperture), is seen precisely "in profile" against the background of the Perishable Press Limited letterhead, reproduced on the succeeding recto. The two P's frame the head, and the flourish of the "L" in "limited" extends under the chin. The affixed "brain" engraving creates the impression of a turban, lending

<sup>40</sup> My intuition about this was subsequently confirmed by the following phrase, which appears in three languages: English, German and French: "not the eye in the effusive radiating star," "aber nicht im Auge der über schwengliche austrahlungenden Stern," "non pas l'oeil dans l'étoile chaleureuse radieuse au ciel": a clear reference to the eye of *numen lumen*. No doubt the university has, in the artist's perception, been frequently blind to his work and its merit.

It should be noted that Hamady's justifiable discontent with the academic institution (promoted to associate professor in 1971, four years after his arrival, he was not made full professor, despite a rapidly growing national and international reputation, until 1988) is not universal. Thus, "The university exists for the students," he said to me, with the unquestionable sincerity of a dedicated and successful teacher. See the catalogue of the remarkable exhibition, researched and curated by his students under his supervision, called *Breaking the Bindings: American Book Art Now*, an exhibition of creative bookmaking produced in the United States since 1980, held at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, UW-Madison, 6 May-3 July, 1983.

With regard to the university administration, Hamady repeatedly expresses his gratitude to the Graduate School of the University, which has, under Dean Eric Rude, been a constant source of support and encouragement for his work.

Box 54, recently exhibited at the Wustum, entitled "In Consequence Not Everything is a Suitable Subject (Pariah & Proud)," 1990, probably best sums up the artist's relation to the academic institution. The piece incorporates type set to read, "God will not examine our medals but our scars." (see figure 5).

Hamady confided that the titles for his boxes are culled from the articles of a well-known academic art critic, to which he adds, in parentheses, his own name for the work "so that I can remember which one it is!"



Figure 5

Walter Hamady,

Box 54 In Consequence Not Everything is a Suitable Subject.

(Pariah & Proud), 1990.



a kind of Middle Eastern aura to the image.<sup>41</sup> Underneath, one reads:

PROFILE OF THE DOG/SEE: RE: OEUVRE & DEVELOPMENT  
PAGE 61 MORE OR LESS  
AS A VULGAR YOUNG MAN NEVER AGAIN TO BE INVITED  
TO ORATE BEFORE THE FRIENDS OF THE BIO (REGIONAL)  
LIBRARY OF WHICH HE IS A LIFETIME MEMBER.<sup>168</sup>

Note 168 explains that: “To be called vulgar (at first) hurt the feelings of the sensitive printer until he looked it up [to wit] ‘common to the great mass of people in general’ which fits in with his aspiration,” and the whole assemblage refers to a venerable professor’s reportedly negative reaction when Hamady lectured to the Friends of The Library. Predictably, such an uncharitable judgment stung the artist, and this page and its accompanying footnote betray a pain and resentment markedly absent from the earlier, happier volumes. This negative emotional state could not fail to affect “the sensitive printer’s” attitude to his readers, hence no doubt the impression that *iG6* is distinctly less reader-friendly than its predecessors. It is difficult and not always visually agreeable to read, the tones of the paper are frequently dark, and though witty and clever, there is a newly cutting edge<sup>42</sup> to the play that tends to raise one’s guard, making it touch and go as to whether (recall the Trojan horse) curiosity or suspicion will triumph.

If one is willing to persevere, however, there are wonderful and funny discoveries to be made, and the mood lightens perceptibly as the book progresses, almost as if its production had brought about a kind of catharsis for the bookmaker, one in which the persistent reader participates. Thus, the poem that is an important, if not central, element in the text and which in retrospect strongly recalls Schwitters’ “An Anna Blume,” is revealed at the end to be the verbal transcription of an elaborate rebus constructed with rubber stamps, of which Hamady had recently become an enamored collector.<sup>43</sup> The laughter this discovery provoked, after I had been reluctantly puzzling over what appeared to be a parody (but was it?)

<sup>41</sup> See note 39 above. (This is a typical Hamady ploy.)

<sup>42</sup> Cutting is a significant feature of *iG6*. See the half-title page, which is literally cut in half.

<sup>43</sup> A pair of postage stamps, honoring “Stamp Collecting” and cancelled with the Mount Horeb postmark, March 16, 1986, embellish the page bearing Hamady’s name and address.

of a rather predictably “surrealist” (or more accurately, dadaist) poem, was one of the highlights of my experience with the *Gabberjabbs*.<sup>44</sup>

Other delights include the use of the image of a hand holding a pen extending across the gutter to end on a holograph page whose first word, “sign,” begins precisely at the tip of the pen nib, as if the image had done the writing (subsequently, this same hand is used to designate each of the book’s “signatures”);<sup>45</sup> the densely printed page containing the precisely one thousand words a picture is said to be worth; the duly notarized page bearing the paw print of Betsy, a ten-year-old Labrador, standing in for the artist as an “old” dog<sup>46</sup> (see “PROFILE OF THE DOG” above), his oeuvre referred to obliquely in the title *Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo.*, This Lawn is not a Dog’s Loo (my translation), see note 22.<sup>47</sup>

“I hold the view that books design themselves,” Hamady has written.<sup>48</sup> Essays, too, it seems, for the image of the signing hand traversing the gutter invites us to look back at the gutter<sup>49</sup> of my epigraph, now to be understood as a technical term in bookmaking, designating the space occupied by the two inner margins on each side of the binding. Let me once again quote Hamady:

The gutter, with the foredge<sup>50</sup> is are the “empty quarter” of the book. That is, visually most people never see that place because of the centuries of conditioning by reading. Rather, the ordinary person and all those scholars in Kakademia, see only the text and

<sup>44</sup> I was laughing at myself as an archetypal “literoearly [sic] expectational aquifer,” of course, but also laughing with pleasure at having “got it,” however belatedly.

<sup>45</sup> See O.E.D., “signature, the action of signing or stamping. Printing: a letter or figure, a set or combination of letters or figures etc., placed by the printer at the foot of the first page (and frequently on one or more of the succeeding pages) of every sheet in a book, for the purpose of showing the order in which they are to be placed or bound.”

<sup>46</sup> No disrespect intended. I refer to Dylan Thomas’ *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*.

<sup>47</sup> *Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo*, is the text of a notice seen by Hamady and Paul Hayden Duensing at the railway station in Giessen, Germany, and translated by Duensing as “This grass is not a toilet for your dog.”

<sup>48</sup> “Designing Literature,” p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> See note 1, above.

<sup>50</sup> When Hamady first pronounced this word I heard “forage,” which what with grapeleaves and assessment rolls and collaged books, is not entirely inappropriate. But see, in *iG6*, FORE EDGE PLAY, and the newly invented “accordion” foredge.

see it only for its yield-it-up function. A visual artist sensitive to this sees the open book as a special picture plane. The center of this is the gutter, the crack, the break on the screen etc.

Typically, several of the gutters in *Neopostmodrinism or Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo or Gabberjabb Number 6* are adorned with anatomical drawings of the intestines (what else?). In this inventive manner, the book, oeuvre of the “dog” profiled in the front matter, digests the insulting charge of vulgarity and transforms it into art.

I now believe that my initially ambivalent response to *iG6* was my reaction to the overly intrusive presence, at the beginning, of the “sensitive printer’s,” bruised ego, represented by the dominant eye/I motif discussed above. This would have interfered with my pleasure by inhibiting my own fantasy, hence provoking resistance.<sup>51</sup> As the book-maker’s irrepressible fun-loving inventiveness triumphed over his wounded self-esteem in the course of the book’s production, that resistance progressively disappeared, but it is possible that *Neopostmodrinism* pushes the printer’s mark to the limit of the reader’s (as distinct from the looker’s) tolerance.

By virtue of being considerably more taxing to read, *Gabberjabb Number 6*, raises a difficulty posed by the increasing emphasis on the bookform that has characterized the series to date. That difficulty, which also constitutes the challenge now facing Hamady, might be described in the following terms: paradoxically, the more skilled the printer, the more invisible his work, which is eclipsed by the very legibility he so expertly facilitates. Thus, it is “the discerning reader” indeed who will delight—in “the complete lack of hyphenation” throughout a given book, for example—since this lack will have been specifically designed to “[let] the eye glide uninterruptedly.”<sup>52</sup> To the degree that he is at once writer and printer, the position Hamady has adopted in *Gabberjabb Number 6* is inevitably marked by a certain tension: the writer, requiring of the printer that “the eye glide uninterruptedly” in the service of the writer’s self-expression, and the printer rebelling against the self-effacement the

<sup>51</sup> On this point, see Freud’s important essay, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 22 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), pp. 141–154.

<sup>52</sup> An achievement to which the Colophonic Afterwords in *Hand Papermaking: Papermaking by Hand, being a Book of Qualified Suspicions Book 102*, Perishable Press, 1982, finds it necessary to draw the attention of the uninitiated.

writer's demand imposes upon him. Thus, after years of successful collaboration with a great variety of poets, Hamady now faces the challenge of collaborating with himself: at once the most exacting and the most indulgent of partners.

The artist has described his first *Gabberjabb* as "an expanded colophon in space"<sup>53</sup> and in so far as the colophon is the bailiwick of the printer, one could read the development of the *Gabberjabb* series as evidence of the printer's growing self-assertion, culminating in the exuberance of *iG6*.<sup>54</sup> The *Gabberjabb* series set out playfully to forestall the kind of reductive reading, the tunnel vision, which focuses on the book's content at the expense of its form. With *iG6*, it becomes evident that this development is not without risk to the reader's cooperation in this expansion of the bookform. The legibility/illegibility tightrope act on which the pleasure and instruction of the *Gabberjabbs* depend demands a very nice balance in the writer/printer relationship. *Neopostmodrinism* or *Dieser Rasen ist kein Hundeklo* or *Gabberjabb Number 6*, more than any volume to date, brings the printer to the fore (if not the foredge). The dedicated reader, forewarned, waits with interest and some trepidation to see what will emerge from the gutter (or the belly) of *iG7*.

<sup>53</sup> Colophon to *Hunkering in Wisconsin Another interminable Gaggerblab* (a series).

<sup>54</sup> While it is true that *Gabberjabbs* 2, 3 and 4 are less overtly concerned with the bookform than with the printer's life, as distinct from numbers 1, 5 and 6, the continuous and cross-referenced footnotes alone would support the continuity of purpose I suggest here. Life and work come together most powerfully in number six.

## "INNER TENSION/IN ATTENTION" STEVE McCAFFERY'S BOOK ART

Steve McCaffery's poetic career had its inception in the northern England of the late sixties; his biggest influence was the concrete poetry/concrete art of Ian Hamilton Finlay. Emigrating to Canada in the early seventies, McCaffery worked both on sound-text poetry and on artist's books, producing a series of remarkable illustrated books—*Ow's Waif*, *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, *Intimate Distortions*, *Knowledge Never Knew*—which combine word and image and, more important, treat the book as a composite whole, spacing, typography, arrangement, white space, letter size, etc. all working together to create a field of play. McCaffery doesn't, in other words, write poems; he produces books. He is therefore all but impossible to anthologize and his work belongs more properly with artist's books than with conventional poetry.

Marjorie Perloff's most recent books are *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986), *Poetic License: Studies in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1989), and *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991). She edited *Postmodern Genres* (1989), which contains essays by some of the other contributors to the present volume as well as her own essay on John Cage's *Roaratorio*. She is Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities at Stanford University.

It is wonderful how a handwriting which is illegible can be read, oh yes it can.  
Gertrude Stein

consider the page not as a space but as a death occurring in the gap between  
'writing' and 'wanting to say.'

Steve McCaffery<sup>1</sup>

"The materiality of language," Steve McCaffery has suggested in a 1978 essay on the poet bill bissett, "is that aspect which remains resistant to an absolute subsumption into the ideality of meaning. . . . To see the letter not as a phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality, inevitably contests the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning(s)" (NI 105). Consider the following scenario, provided by Michael Coffey as an illustration of McCaffery's argument:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, you see a red arrow pointing to the right. Or:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, you read a sign that says, "Parking to the Right." Or:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, an attendant nods over his shoulder and says, "There are spaces to the right."<sup>2</sup>

Coffey comments: "Each of these directional episodes 'means' the same thing: proceed to the right to park your car. In that all three messages convey the same meaning, the material differences in the composition are devalued, made irrelevant. Despite three entirely different modes of presentation (graphic, lexical/phonetic, oral/gestural), the idea from each converges at the same terminus and all else falls away" (OL 32-33).

Steve McCaffery's writing project has, from the first, foregrounded the "all else," what Georges Bataille has defined as the "excesses of energy" inherent in the economy of distribution and circulation (NI 201). In literary terms, "excess" is equivalent to the *paragram*, which McCaffery defines, following Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, as a text whose "organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits." The paragram "is that aspect of language which *escapes* all discourse" (NI 63-64).

The foregrounding of the *paragram* is closely related to the conception of textuality as literally open-ended: McCaffery's own analogy is to the biotopological form known as the Klein worm: "a form which differs from

conventional geometric forms in its characteristic absence of both inner and outer surfaces. . . . Any part of the form can touch, contact, communicate with, flow with any other part" (NI 20). The Klein worm provides the model for a form "without 'walls,' with milieu and constellation replacing syntax. The letter—in its major and minor registrations—not the word forms the basic unit of organization" (NI 21).

If this defense of the paragrammatic, of what McCaffery calls "a first order experience of graphemes" (NI 19), is reminiscent of the manifestos of concrete poetry prominent in the fifties and sixties, the difference between a "post-concrete" poet like McCaffery and his mentors—the *Noigandres* group in Brazil, Ian Hamilton Finlay in England—is that McCaffery's unit has always been the page rather than the individual concrete poem, and, beyond the page, the book. In a fanciful Cratylian study, McCaffery (writing together with bp nichol) points out that the word *book* is etymologically connected with the name of the beech tree (OE, *bok*, *boce*, ON, *bok*) as well as the Gothic *bokos* (letter of the alphabet), whose plural form *boka* means writing or document. Book as beech leaf (an organic object), book as document: the double meaning, McCaffery and nichol suggest, denies the book the passive role we generally assign to it. Similarly, page comes from the Latin *pagina*, whose stem *pag-* is also that of *pingere*, to fasten, fix in, fix together. A page, the authors conclude, is not just a blank sheet, waiting for "meaningful" print to be affixed to it, but a kind of trellis upon which words and letters are fastened visually as well as semantically.<sup>3</sup> Thus the "book of the writer" becomes the "book of the written" (KNK56).

"Artist's book" is not quite the right term for the resultant productions. Illustrations, for example, the reproductions of old engravings underlying the text in *In England Now that Spring* and the anatomical drawings of *Panopticon*, are sparse, and the innovative typography, used in the early works like *Ow's Waif*, gives way, in the recent *Black Debt*, to a long, continuous block of large type with justified left and right margins. Compared to, say, John Baldessari's and Barbara Kruger's artist's books, McCaffery's look amateurish and a shade drab. One would not expect to see them in art galleries or at "book art" exhibitions. "[An] essential distinction," writes Richard Kostelanetz, "separates imaginative books from conventional books.

In the latter, syntactically familiar sentences are set in rectangular blocks of uniform type (resembling soldiers in a parade), and these are then “designed” into pages that look like each other (and like pages we have previously seen). An imaginative book, by definition, attempts to realize something else with syntax, with format, with pages, with covers, with size, with shapes, with sequence, with structure, with binding—with any or all of these elements.”<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, McCaffery’s are certainly exemplars of book art, pages functioning as trellises upon which letrist and verbal experiments are hung, the whole giving a very different impression than does the individual page or print unit on a page.

McCaffery’s first book experiment or, more accurately, page experiment was called *Carnival, the first panel: 1967–70* and published by the Coach House Press in Toronto in 1973. The work was made by placing masks on each of sixteen standard 11" x 8 ½" pages, arranged in groups of four to make a square (or, strictly speaking, rectangle) measuring 44" x 36". The sixteen pages were then perforated and arranged in sequential book form, accompanied by the instructions, “In order to destroy this book please tear each page carefully along the perforation. The panel is assembled by laying out pages in a square of four.” The readerly dilemma thus created was that in order to take in the whole panel, the book has to be destroyed.

As for the mask technique itself, McCaffery has explained his procedures as follows:

*Carnival* was essentially a cartographic project; a repudiation of linearity in writing and the search for an alternative syntax in ‘mapping’ . . . . The panels grew directly through the agency of the typewriter and through the agency of marginal link-ups. . . . As a mask bled off a page I would devise another shape that picked up the bleed of the text at the margin. . . . The mask came about as a way to create a painterly shape by censoring the flow of typewritten line. It was a method of arriving at a collage effect without resort to the actual adhesion of different fragments to a support surface. . . . It’s important to remember that the mask excludes and deletes much of the written text. What results are deliberately induced fragments, parts of inscriptions whose terminations and commencements are not determined by a writing subject or a logical intention but by a material, random intervention (OL 72-73).

Since the writing in this “multi-panel language environment” was a “spontaneous emission into the space set up



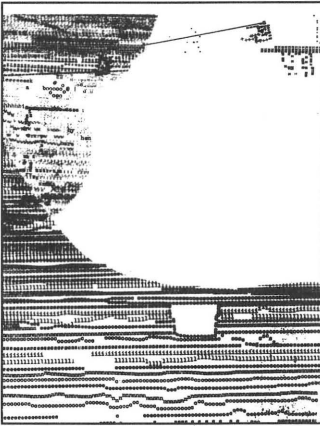


Figure 1

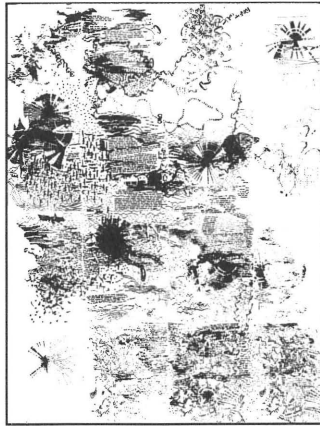


Figure 2

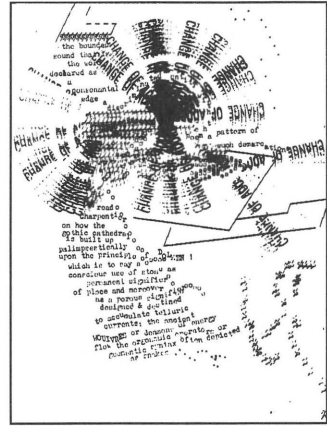


Figure 3

by the mask for writing," there are large areas of "non-semantic type, zones of repeated letters and letristic clusters that attempt a sort of abstract expressionism through the typewriter" (OL 72; see *figure 1*). Such coherent words and phrases as do appear in the panels were later repudiated by McCaffery as "incredibly naive . . . I built the text around certain biblical allusions. Adam as the power of nomination; Babel as the source of polyglossia and so on. All of this I would now scrap" (OL 72).

*Carnival, the second panel: 1971–75* (published in 1977) takes what McCaffery calls "a structure of strategic counter-communication" even further. Whereas the first panel was entirely typewriter generated, the second "places the typed mode in agonistic relation with other forms of scription: xerography, xerography within xerography . . . electrostasis, rubber-stamp, tissue texts, hand-lettering and stencil."<sup>5</sup> The effect (see *figure 2*) is a distancing of language so as to foreground its "neglected qualities of immanence and non-reference," language as a "seen thing," as McCaffery puts it in the Introduction (C2). But although the sixteen-panel overview, as depicted here, allows for little comprehension of individual words or phrases, the individual panel-pages make various "reading paths" available. Thus the spokes of the wheel on the tenth page (see *figure 3*) are rubber-stamped "CHANGE OF ADDRESS" signs, underneath which we

find a complicated set of tissue texts and xerographies, the fragmented words referring to a text by Charpentier “on how the gothic cathedral is built up palimpsestically” to “geomantic syntax often depicted as snakes.” And indeed those “snakes” do appear as part of the graphic page design (see figure 2).

*Carnival* represents the first stage of McCafferyan language experimentation, the stage when the “death of the referent” as well as the fabled “death of the subject” were taken to be *de rigueur*. As the poet’s book art evolved, the drive toward non-referentiality began to give way to the recognition that the referent never wholly “dies,” even if the “trace structure” and “scriptive play” (Derrida’s terms) of poetic language complicate its determination (NI 148–49). The role of the speaking subject posed greater problems. In the book works of the mid-seventies, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* and *Ow’s Waif*, McCaffery’s desires to “present language-material without the intrusion of my own consciousness” caused him to base his writing entirely on “supply texts chosen at random from whatever happened to be on or near my desk when i was working” (DSM). These “supply texts”—the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the works of Shakespeare, the *I Ching*, various newspapers, magazines and abandoned drafts of earlier poems—were subjected to “numerous chance and random techniques to assist me in word selection and partial syntactic structuring to a degree such as would keep me excluded from the content part of the compositions.” The reader will recognize this as a technique similar to Jackson Mac Low’s chance-generated poems and especially to John Cage’s “writings through” texts from the Bible to *Finnegans Wake*.

How does this “writing through” work in *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins*? In the “Note on the Method of Composition,” from which I have been quoting, McCaffery explains:

as a poet i took responsibility for the page but not necessarily for everything that found its way onto the page. what i did was set up the sufficient conditions for an open field to form into which a word could find its own way settling in its own syntactic space. . . . having no responsibility whatsoever for the lexical material i found that i could concentrate exclusively on the invention of form—on the realignment of discrete semantic units into either open or closed fields of independent energy and image. . . .

But if *Carnival* subordinated the semantic to visual effects, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* works the other way around. It looks, to begin with, like a perfectly normal book of poems.

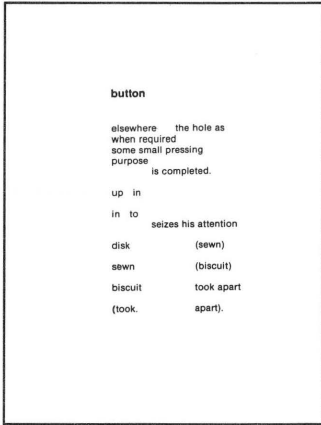


Figure 5



Figure 4

True, the endpapers feature witty collage-drawings with letters from “Steve” to “Tim” about matters of production concerning the very book we’re reading (figure 4), and each poetic sequence has a separate title page facing a page of abstract black and white graphics. But the texts themselves are printed conventionally enough. Take the section called “Anamorphoses,” which the Note describes as “attempts to ‘describe out of definition,’ to transform a comprehension into a perception, the known thing into the thing seen, by having a text generate itself out of the dictionary definition of its title.”<sup>6</sup> The eighteenth anamorphosis is called “button” (see figure 5), immediately recalling Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, which provides McCaffery with the epigraph to the sequence, “Act so that there is no use in a centre.” But like any little imagist lyric, “button” is centered on its numbered page.

Here the nonparallel columns—“disks” is matched to “(sewn),” “sewn” to “(biscuit)” and so on—recall Dada rather than imagist lyrics; but the poem, however dependent it may be on its “supply texts,” is fairly straightforward, referring as it does to a “required” “hole,” to “some small pressing,” to a movement that goes “up in/ into,” and then to “sewn” and “took apart,” counterposed to the “disk”/“biscuit” rhyme. Stein’s own *Tender Buttons* are, to use McCaffery’s own vocabulary, more radically paramagrammatic.

Much more effective is the title prose poem, which uses a “core structure of 13 phrases selected at random from the Toronto Globe & Mail and repeated and permuted according to a predetermined chance programme.” Among these phrases, most of them marvelously rapid, are, “the virtues of middle age were the ones that marked the Fifties,” “That was a terrible day I could eat nothing. I

felt faint,” and “the foundations for the new world are being laid right now.” Dr. Sadhu makes his appearance in the sentence, “Let me put the matter allegorically, friends of Dr. Sadhu Singh Dhama are invited to attend a lecture entitled ‘Between Two Worlds’” (DSM 12).

As for the muffins, these have nothing to do with Dr. Sadhu, except in McCaffery’s scheme of things; their actual entrance cue comes on the opening page in the phrase, “dropping him a scented note or a flower or a bran muffin baked with her own little hands.” Dr. Sadhu makes only three appearances in the poem that bears his name, but the “dropping . . . muffin” phrase appears six times, always in different contexts, and then begins to permutate, “dropping him a scented note” splitting off from the rest of the phrase and undergoing reshuffling, so that we read:

sick. tired. i am sick of the amount  
 great trouble. the foundations for this new  
 indeed. guilty. i’ll try to be another  
 muffin. baked. scented note or flower  
 fact for. the unseen cook

and the poem ends with the lines:

the cold scented with her own little hands  
 a bran muffin baked with her

where the syntactic displacement of “own little hands” creates an entirely different meaning; the unnamed “she” is now baking in the oven along with the bran muffin. And if that can happen, why not attribute muffins to the evening’s lecturer on the topic “Between Two Worlds,” the eminent Dr. Sadhu Singh Dhama?

The parodic word play of these “found texts” looks ahead to the profoundly satiric *Black Debt* of 1989. As book art, however, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* is less interesting than another book of this period, *Ow’s Waiif*, which is McCaffery’s parodic tribute to Longfellow’s (as in Henry Wadsworth) *The Waiif*. Again, the poet’s stated aim is to create “a near to total separation of form from content, the entire ‘borrowing’ of content as a prepared word-supply (a ‘supply-text’) and a creative concentration on the invention of the poems’ forms as verbal fields free of presupposed or prerequisite rule structures of grammar and syntax.” The supply-text functions “as the total available language system for the poem.” This time, these texts include Newton’s *Optics*, 1705 edition, an Evelyn Waugh

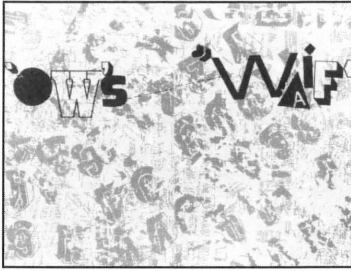


Figure 6



Figure 7

biography of Edmund Campion, Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, a trigonometry textbook, Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* and John Cage's *A Year from Monday*. There is also a set of poems called "Ten Portraits," whose supply-text is a transcribed interview with some New York prostitutes. As in *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, word choice, frequency and recurrence are produced by systematic chance operations, although there are instances of "careful conscious choice." The "operating analogy," in any case, is "cubism: the process of fragmentation and reconstitution of a known thing in a fresh form." Or, we might say, using McCaffery's own designation, anamorphosis.

Unlike *Carnival* and *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, *Ow's Waif* is something of a collaboration: the design and instant lettering collages were made for the Coach House Press by Roberta MacDonald. The miniature (6" x 4") book is beautifully produced and all of a piece, typographical design in primary colors being integrated with the printed texts. The title page foregrounds red letters and numbers, some in bold type, some transparent, against a "busy" yellow background: the title itself is rendered in black designs (see figure 6). The O is rendered as a black circular disk, a black sun or an apple with a stem-like shape (the dot of an i?, an apostrophe?), even as the first W is transparent and the A of "Waif" is an "empty" letter silhouetted against a black triangle. The black/white, full/empty contrast is then reversed in the book's centerfold (see figure 7): now it is the O that is merely outlined (and almost invisible) and the two giant-size bold W's, letters that here dwarf everything else, are identical. The type-faces of "Waif," furthermore, produce paragraphs in the form of "a" and "if." "What if?," the second page seems to ask. And the long dash, followed by what looks like a

colon, leaves the question open. What if what? Given the background pictographs—letters, numbers, houses, dollar signs, telephone shapes—the possibilities for narrative are intriguingly open.

The visual representation of the words, in any case, reinforces the paragrammatic play of the title: “Ow’s” seems to be Cockney dialect for “How’s,” in which case the phrase, spoken aloud, sounds like “How’s the wife?” “Ow’s” also suggests “Owl’s,” and since owls are solitary nocturnal creatures, the sense of “waif-hood” is made more prominent. And when we turn to the individual “poems,” we note that the layout of the titles (taken from the supply-texts) is often striking, calling attention to their own meanings, which are often intensified by, or in competition with, the individual texts.

Take the double-page spread for “E.A. Poe The Poetic Principle” (see figure 8). Here POE anticipates the first two syllables of POETIC, but at the same time, the title can be read as Ea’s THE POE PRINCIPLE, even as THE POET, printed in lighter dotted letters, is subordinated. And this is of course what Poe’s famous essay does: it applies the “Poe Principle” to all “poetry” and equates the two:

With inspired limit,  
inculcation, not demands thy dispensable  
but her we need  
language

We word as poetical  
perceive between incultation.

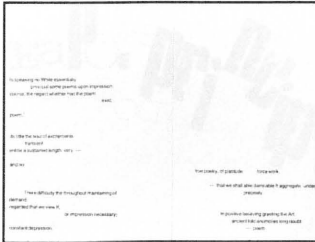


Figure 8

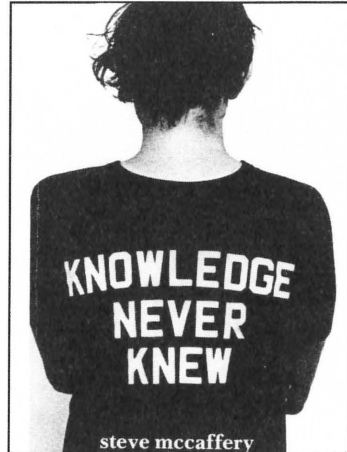


Figure 9

Poe's "Poetic Principle" is, of course, a famous instance of "poetical . . . inculcation." And McCaffery buries other puns and double entendres in his title designs: The textbook title *Elementary Trigonometry* contains, inside a "so-called 'perfect' figure"—the three-dimensional circle or O a second letter, N. That letter becomes, in turn, the first letter of NOM (NAME), but M also goes with E to spell ME and try is placed above the letter line by itself, a reminder that even elementary trigonometry takes a good deal of TRY[ing]"

a ladder is placed with its foot at a distance

Find Sin

find navigation

Find the height of window

*all circles*

hence

write down all ratios.

Here is the "first order system of graphemes," the "trace structure" or "cipheral play" McCaffery wants to produce. The titles are paragrammatic, the found texts themselves often providing clues as to how the titles should be read. Indeed, what the poet has done is to infuse even as dry a supply-text as *Elementary Trigonometry* with, if not his own personality, at least his own aura. One of McCaffery's recurrent themes, for instance, is the human inability to draw proper conclusions, to make correct syllogisms and analogies. So the "writing through" the elementary trigonometry book produces passages like the following:

man runs each minute

traverses yards two places

subtends centre hence

flywheel

clock is 20 minutes

hence navigation

*all circles.*

*Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* and *Ow's Waif* represent the "writing through" or "supply text" stage of McCaffery's book art, but by the later seventies, the poet was moving on to other experiments. *Knowledge Never Knew* (see figure 9), published in 1983 although composed some years earlier, turns to a different language game: the recharging of a time-honored genre, the aphorism, coupled with a rethinking

of Pound's famous definition of the epic as a "poem including history." In *Open Letter* (OL 76), McCaffery recalls the genesis of the book:

*Knowledge Never Knew* was written as a reaction to those awful collections of aphorisms such as Chazal's *Sens Plastique* (great title/terrible book) and Dahlberg's *Reasons of the Heart* (terrible title/terrible book) . . . . The aphorism is a defiant and extremely presumptuous form. It's intellectually cheeky. Its force derives not just from the classical brevity of its appearance (that would link it to the epigram) but also from the successful excision of the discursive elements that make it possible. It is thus an ideal model of parricide.

Whereas the "language of the critical essay is normally contextual and integrative, and of a cumulative, linked, propositional nature," the aphorism, inherently "brief" and "non-integrative," "calls attention to its own scenic disposition" (OL 77).

The aphorisms are placed at the bottom of each page; at the top (with a large expanse of white space in between), McCaffery has placed a series of dates, times of day, and pointless historical facts ostensibly relating to those dates, thus playing off the "audacity" of the aphorism against the "banality" of historical "fact." The dialogic of double bands is designed to make the reader ponder the very nature of facticity, both upper and lower bands providing what at first looks like "information." To put it another way: when "knowledge" is tested by placing it in the unexpected context of the aphorism, it moves from "knew" to "new."

The calendar (upper band) runs from January 1 to April 19, but the designated year shifts randomly from century to century and the historical tag often doesn't go with the time frame. On page 12, for example, we read:

january 7, 1259

*Rev. Thomas Malmsbury leaps into a pool of burning gasoline*

and on the facing page:

january 8, 1943

*Knowledge declared to be a venal sin by the fourteen monks of Wearmouth:*

Here the "encounters with history" are themselves absurd. But further, these "facts" are "penetrated" (McCaffery's own word) by the aphorisms in the bottom band (see figures 10 and 11). Here are the full pages 12 and 13:

On the "january 7 1259" page, "to write is to reach a surface through the holes named things" obliquely refers



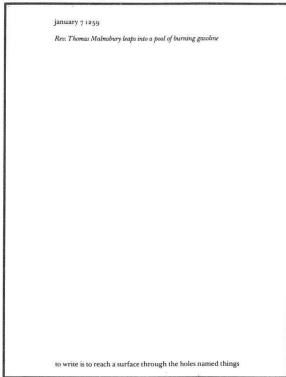


Figure 10

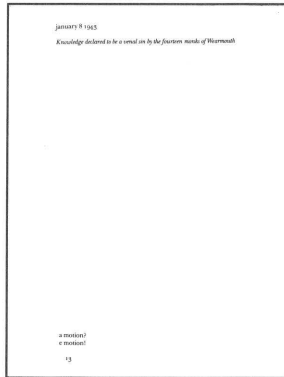


Figure 11

to the Rev. Thomas Malmsbury's leap into the burning gasoline pool. The writer reaches a "surface" denied the priest. And on the "January 8 1943" page, the declaration that knowledge is a venal sin can be understood, via the aphorism, as "a motion" that deals with "e motion."

Or again, a pointless piece of information like that on page 15:

January 10, 1344

*Wichlaf, Bishop of Kingston, celebrates Easter at Croyland*

may take on a new edge when juxtaposed to an aphorism like:

the dream of the written is always to be somewhere else

the irony here being that to write about "somewhere else," in this case Wichlaf's Easter Mass at Croyland," doesn't necessarily put the writing somewhere else at all.

A similar sleight of hand occurs on the "January 18 1392" page, where "*Hippocentaur found preserved in honey*" is juxtaposed to the phrase:

once upon a time  
twice inside a space

the medieval tale not inappropriately designated by "once upon a time" actually recounting what is "twice inside a space," the first time being the time of preservation and the second the time when the Hippocentaur was found.

To avoid predictability, the steady recurrence of the A+B pattern, McCaffery introduces pages that have no upper "history" band at all. Page 31, for example, provides only the date, "January 31" (with no year), the aphorism reading:

grammar is skeletal  
words are glandular

followed on the next page by “february 1 211 b.c.,” and again no “history” entry, the bottom band reading:

the essence of the sign is to be a margin emerging.

Here the pages enact what the words say: the “glandular” words are given full force by subordinating the “skeletal” grammar and placing a line of type at the bottom of a nearly blank page so that the “sign” can indeed “be a margin emerging.” The final entry in the book is for “5.42 A.M.,” no date or fact being given. What does the dawn hour signify? The aphorism reads:

never read  
never write  
always continue to learn.

The pun of “never wrong, never right” and the emphasis in the third line on continuity, on the projection forward in the direction of the empty page beyond, provide a nice form of anti-closure.

*Knowledge Never Knew* thus constitutes an important statement of aesthetic, an artist’s commonplace book where the briefest aphorisms force us to think through the question of how writing works. When, for example, the entry “march 18 1923/Frank Sinatra baptized” is “penetrated” by the lines:

to be rooted in anything  
one must be rotated in something

the reader has an image of the infant Sinatra “rotated” in the baptismal font, the relation of “rootedness” to rotation thus making perfect sense. Nothing, the poet seems to be saying, is as irrelevant as you think it is. Watch those words you merely “read”! Or, as the “march 20” entry would have it,

to ground yourself in words always lean against your reading  
and balance on the weight of what you don’t know.

Such “balancing” acts have characterized McCaffery’s more recent books, *Evoba*, *Panopticon*, and *The Black Debt*. Since I have written of the latter two elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> I want to conclude here with a discussion of *Evoba: The Investigation Meditations 1976–78*, published in 1987. *Evoba* is “above” spelled backwards, and the book’s “Meditations” are on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, which are quoted extensively. *Evoba* thus follows up the implications of

*Knowledge Never Knew*, which is written under the sign of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Whereas *Knowledge* plays on the Wittgensteinian proposition, *Evoba* takes up the more expansive language games of the investigations.

Let us begin with the source of the title *Evoba*, Wittgenstein's #160:

Suppose that a man who is under the influence of a certain drug is presented with a series of characters (which need not belong to any existing alphabet). He utters words corresponding to the number of characters, as if they were letters, and does so with all the outward signs, and with the sensations, of reading . . . In such a case some people would be inclined to say the man was reading those marks. Others, that he was not.—Suppose he has in this way read (or interpreted) a set of five marks as *A B O V E*—and now we show him the same marks in the reverse order and he reads *E V O B A*; and in further texts he always retains the same interpretation of the marks: here we should certainly be inclined to say he was making up an alphabet for himself ad hoc and then reading accordingly.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 12

In opting for the “reverse order,” McCaffery announces his aim to call our normal language habits into question, to produce an oppositional text. The frontispiece plays on Wittgenstein’s proposition #309 (“What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle,” PI 103e), declaring:

If the aim of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein claims, to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, then the aim of poetry is to convince the bottle that there is no fly.

Which is to say that poetry is the discourse that removes words from their habitual contexts and reconfigures them both syntactically and paragrammatically.

The first step is to get rid of the Augustinian notion, called into question on the opening page of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that *verba rerum nomina sunt*, that “the individual words in language name objects” (PI 2e). The passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* (I. 8) cited by Wittgenstein is rendered by McCaffery as a page from a comic book (see figure 12). The first band, for example, plays on the caption *Cum ipsi (majories homines appellabant secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam* (When they [my elders] named some object, and accordingly moved toward something, I saw this) by taking the

“mov[ing] toward something” quite literally as the cliché image of a passionate lovers’ kiss.

The opening comic strip is further juxtaposed to the photograph, which appears on the cover as well as on the recto and verso of front and back endpapers (see figure 13), of two men in hats, looking at books evidently taken from a floor-to-ceiling bookcase which is surrounded by rubble—a library, as it were, in the process of demolition or, at the very least, transit. Here, McCaffery seems to be saying, is what philosophical meditations look like. And throughout the text there are cartoon-drawing rebuses, witty diagrams like the “line”/“nile” crossing on page 23 (see figure 14) that are an integral part of the poetic composition. Indeed, layout is everywhere a part of the meaning. On facing pages (24–25), for example, we have the opening sentence of #162 (PI 65e):

You are reading when you *derive*  
the reproduction from the original.

Wittgenstein now goes on to demonstrate that this definition could apply to someone who has been taught the Cyrillic alphabet and, not knowing what words are being spelled out, tries to pronounce every letter, one by one.



Figure 13

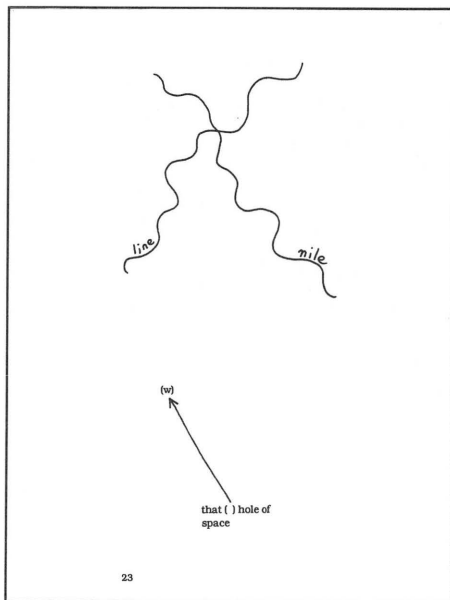


Figure 14

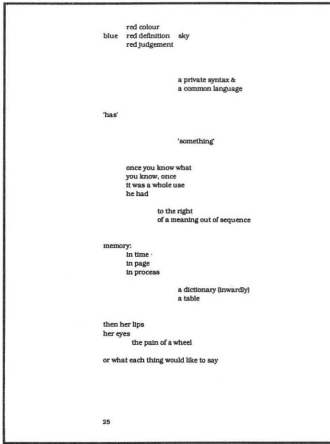


Figure 15

Strictly speaking, such a person is reading. But McCaffery's poetic version (the fly-bottle without the fly) carries the proposition much further (see figure 15). "Red" is by definition a "colour," but what do we know about it when we have so designated it? Can a "judgement" be "red"? Yes, in the sense that it is "read." Poetry draws on a "common language" but it is inevitably a "private syntax," McCaffery's own poem juxtaposing verbs without subjects, pronouns without antecedents, and the image of "her lips" and "her eyes," juxtaposed to "the pain of a wheel," that can refer to any number of narratives, especially when that pain is juxtaposed to "or what each thing would like to say," where the "or" follows no "either." Indeed, McCaffery's meditation on memory and time, a dictionary and a table, lips and eyes, red and blue, once and then, private syntax and common language, never makes clear what it is that "each thing would like to say."

*Evoba* culminates in a series of pages that bring McCaffery's intense scrutiny of language to an interesting verbal/visual conclusion. One page 98, a child's drawing of a cloud is suspended in space over a diagonal block E that looks rather like a doormat or grate. On the facing page (99), McCaffery reproduces the conclusion of Wittgenstein's #426: "In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by sideroads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed (PI 127e). The book we have been reading has, in fact enacted this very insight and so, we read at bottom right, "The book exploded in his hand. Slowly, at first." As the book gets ready to disappear, the poet turns his attention to Wittgenstein's meditation

on the meaning of “pain” and “feeling,” especially Wittgenstein’s statement (#284): “And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain” (PI 98e). What, then, is it to be alive? The last page of the book looks like this (see figure 16):

Take the **I** (the individual self) out of **ALIVE** and what do you have? **AL VE**, perhaps the truncated **SALVE** of **SALVE REGINA**, with its reminder of the Mass. Or perhaps an anagram on **VALE (AVE ATQUE VALE—“Hail and Farewell”)**. Then again, the **I** is only a lowercase **i**, so maybe its removal, along with those little raindrop circles falling from the **AL VE** cloud, doesn’t damage **ALIVE** all that much. It would be pretty to think so except that near the bottom of the page on the right, we have the single word *dead*. Language, as Wittgenstein argues and as McCaffery knows full well, has its own power. Take the **i** out of **ALIVE**, and you have dead. Read sequentially, this is what the page “says.” But read spatially—and in McCaffery’s books we must always read spatially—what dominates is the oval containing **AL VE**, dropping its **i**’s. Poetry, the text tells us, needn’t focus on individual sensibility. When the “**i**” drops out, emphasis shifts from the author to the reader. As the first page of *Evoba* would have it:

*The water in this space  
disappears  
a reader enters.*

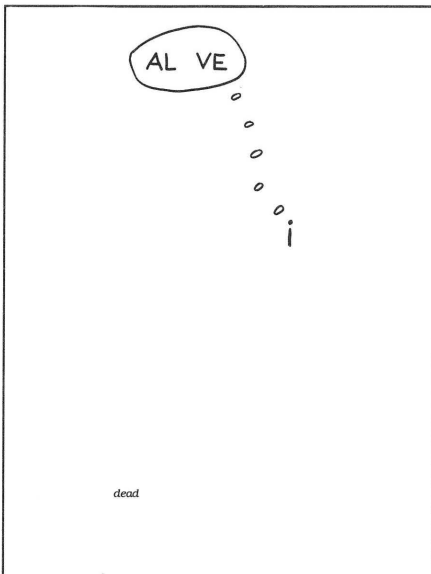


Figure 16

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Steve McCaffery. 1983. *Knowledge Never Knew*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 24. Subsequently cited in the text as KNK.

McCaffery's books and broadsides cited in this essay are listed chronologically, preceded by the acronyms I have used to designate them and followed by bibliographical information, derived from bp nichol, "The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checklist of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery," *Open Letter, Sixth Series, No. 9* (Fall 1987): p. 67–92. This special Steve McCaffery issue is subsequently cited as OL.

- C *Carnival, the first panel: 1967–70* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), 18 sheets, offset, perforated.
- DSM *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins: a book of written readings* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcépic, 1974), 142 pp., offset, printed endpapers.
- OW *Ow's Waif and other poems* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1975), 160 pp., offset, hardbound, printed endpapers.
- C2 *Carnival, the second panel: 1971–75* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977), 22 sheets, offset, perforated.
- IEEN *In England Now That Spring*, with bp nichol (Toronto: Aya Press, 1979), 128 pp., offset.
- PAN *Panopticon*, (Toronto: Blew Ointment Press, 1984), 160 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- NI *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986*, (New York/Toronto: Roof Books/Nightwood Editions, 1986), 239 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- EV *Evoba. The Investigations Meditations 1976–78*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987), 101 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- BD *The Black Debt*, (London, Ontario: Nightwood Editions, 1989), 202 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael Coffey, "Grammarology & Economy," OL, 32.
- <sup>3</sup> See the OED and Steve McCaffery and bp nichol, "Manifesto as Interlude," *Open Letter*, 2d, series, no. 9 (Fall 1974): pp. 78–79. And for a good account of the TRG (Toronto Research Group), formed by McCaffery and nichol and their various manifestos on questions of language and etymology, see Caroline Barnard, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 56–67.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, "Book Art," in *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Joan Lyons, ed. (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985), p. 29. The book is subsequently cited in the text as AB.
- <sup>5</sup> Introduction to C2, pages unnumbered. In *Open Letter*, McCaffery further explains that "Panel Two, thanks to the xerox disintegration sections, stages entropy . . . I've long felt that a large part of the history of writing has been the sociological impact of its materiality upon its agents and users" (OL 73).
- <sup>6</sup> Anamorphosis, according to the OED, means 1. "distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned; a deformation," and 2. Bot. Such a degeneration or change in the habit of a plant from different conditions of growth as gives it the appearance of a different species or genus; abnormal transformation."
- <sup>7</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "'Voice Whislt Thither Flood': Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon* and *North of Intention*," *Poetic License: Essays in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 285–96; "Signs are Taken for Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space" (on *The Black Debt*), in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- <sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed. trans. G.E. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 64e. Subsequently cited in the text as PI.



## The Team



## DEGUY|DORNY DORNY|DEGUY

**Deguy|Dorny Dorny|Deguy is a reflection on poetic stimulation  
and collaboration in the realm of space and materiality of words.**

Michel Deguy is a poet and essayist residing in Paris. He teaches philosophy at Paris-Vincennes, directs the Collège de Philosophie, and is editor-in-chief of *Po&sie*. His collections include *Actes*, *Où dire*, *Tombeau de Du Bellay*, *Poèmes de la Presqu'île*, *Donnant, donnant*. A selection of his writings, translated by Clayton Eshleman, has been published by the University of California Press under the title: *Given, Giving*. He has made frequent lecture tours in the United States.

Bertrand Dorny, sculptor, graphic artist and book artist lives in Paris. He has collaborated with such major poets as Michel Deguy, Bertrand Noël, Ron Padgett and William Jay Smith. He has created over sixty books, highly experimental in form, of which he is simultaneously the artist and the publisher. He has had close to one hundred shows. His works can be seen in many major museums and rare book collections in Europe and North America.

### And strange flowers on shelves

Charles Baudelaire

We rhyme, by the final vowel Y. A poor rhyme?

No, because the two surnames, bisyllabic,

also begin with the same consonant: DxxxY.

Of the two, it is Bertrand who takes the initiative. He began the series of things that we do together and which are inserted on the shelves among those that Guillevic or Butor, Tardieu or Noël, or other poet friends give him to shape after he has given them things to make speak. Given giving.

He makes the suggestion by arranging strange phylacteries, oblong or transversal like ribbons of rain, that wait for the graphic legends by which the writer, call him poet, will cause the polychrome, motley, luminous rectangles of Dorny to communicate, compose, articulate, become "pages."

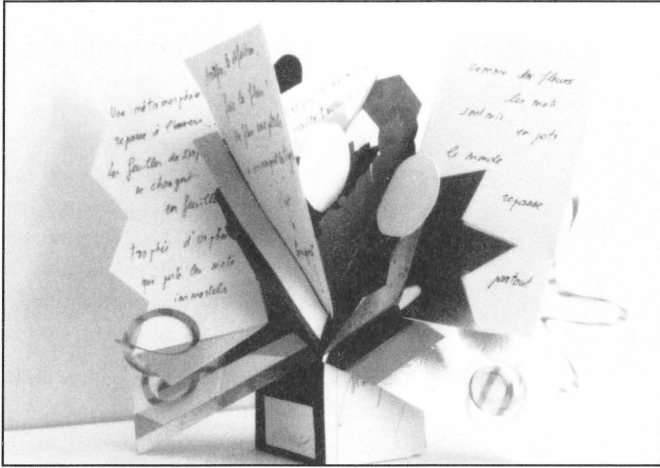
We began with a sort of book—is it a book?—*Paris, Frimaire*,<sup>1</sup> back in 1989; such was the title of the poem; another time it was paper flowers or foldable, foliated pyramids or tattooed posters; then a sort of book—is it a book?—of "Indian" postcards; then a "coffee table book" for Dutrou (*At Rush Hours*), and now a horizontal black notebook that waits for me on the table like a supine Manhattan skyscraper . . .



Deguy, *Cartes Indiennes*.



Deguy/Dorny, *Paris Frimaire*.

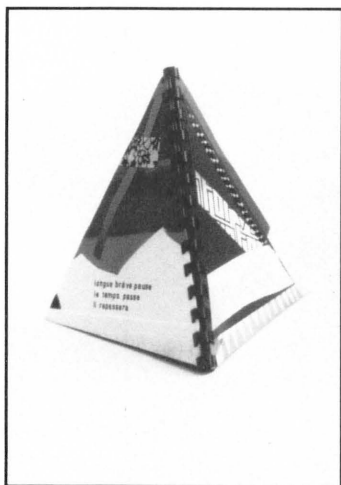


*Deguy/Dorny, Me Metamorphose.*

We are neighbors across the street from each other on Boulevard Saint-Germain. I go up to his studio; the floor is littered with scraps, debris of collage; it does not smell of turpentine, nor acrylic; Dorny's art is not painting. His material is paper, thin or heavy, or wood; of wrecks—driftwood rounded and angled by the sea—he makes ship's colors. Friends of cities, indefatigably curious like a Constantin Guys of the Grands Boulevards who visits shops, offices, collecting cards, maps, bags, advertisements and innumerable media, he gathers and piles up, he accumulates, he replaces, unmakes and remakes, by cutting out and superimposing. He departs from usage, and deflects from their functional or fated trajectory these calling cards with which the age invites and advertises itself, to delight in and to play with its hieroglyphic inventiveness. He makes bas-reliefs of paper with all these leftovers (reliefs) from the feast of our consummation of messages, signs and signals. He mints coins of cardboard with his mark, brilliant, stimulating, glossy; every day the printers varnish his opening.

He reinvents filigree, honeycomb, quadrature; he makes visible the pulp of paper, the compaction, the compression—the page.

These strange concretions—at once abstract, if you will, because (with)drawn from their semiologic circuit, stripped of their value in signifying usage; and concrete,



Deguy/Dorny, *Le Metronome*.

because resulting from an increasing concentration and an elaboration—prescribe inscriptions to the poets invited to treat them like good omens. A whole way of doing, that does without words, that sets out and takes measures to submit itself to reading, interpretation, incrustations of meaning, phrases or messages that will complement and complete it. There is a silent blanched space that desires the word. In the circle of arts, neighbors who hold hands each desires what the other can do, and thus, they cooperate; affinity of plastic and poetic, association of mute and paralytic.

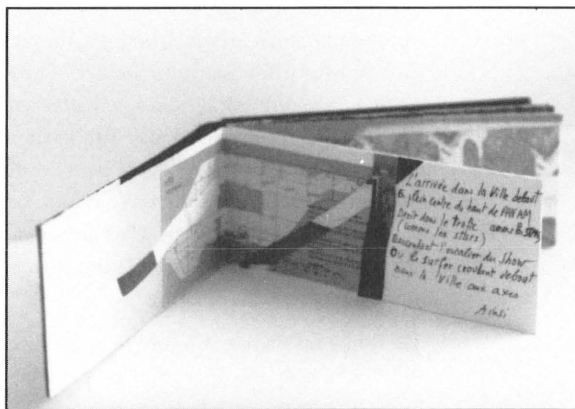
It is necessary to complete, to put on finishing touches, to construct with the imperfect. And this is not a compromise! “Work in progress”: hence the enigmatic character of every formulation, however accomplished.

The project waits for its frame and sometimes its slipcase. Illegal depository of manufactures and meanings, the finished object escapes from the law of the book that must go to the Bibliothèque Nationale. It adheres to that of the hybrid work, at play, in process, by our prerogative.

Translated by Susan Rogers

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Third month of the Republican calendar, beginning November 21, 22 or 23.



Deguy/Dorny, *Made in Manhattan*.

## WORKING TOGETHER: COLLABORATION IN THE BOOK ARTS

**Different styles of book art collaboration are explored through fifteen vignettes of the author's work with various contemporary artists including Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, John Baldessari and Jim Dine as well as the architect Robert Graves and photographers Michael Kenna and Lou Stoumen. These vignettes are anchored by an introductory description of collaboration at the Arion Press and the fact that the author was a given in each creative, interpersonal encounter.**

Andrew Hoyem, publisher, typographic designer and fine printer, is president of Lyra Corporation and its two divisions, Arion Press and M & H Type, in San Francisco. Arion's productions have included a series of *livres d'artistes*, original publications such as *Grayson's Birds of the Pacific Slope* and *Le Désert de Retz*, and a large quarto edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* with forty etchings by Robert Motherwell. Hoyem's drawings have been exhibited at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco and he is the author of five books of poetry.

*Visible Language*, 25:2/3

Andrew Hoyem, pp. 197–215

© *Visible Language*, 1991

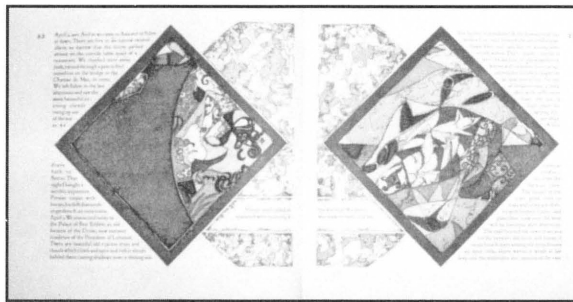
Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, Rhode Island 02903

From the beginning of printing from movable type in the mid-fifteenth century, the making of books has been a group effort. (Even before that, scribes and illuminators teamed up, and labors were divided.) The movement at the end of the nineteenth century known as the “revival” of fine printing was coupled with socialist ideals, however much the personal wealth and strong personalities of the founders of the presses may have been responsible for the survival of those enterprises and for the remarkable volumes that issued forth in the forty years from the Kelmscott Chaucer to the Grabhorn Whitman. Aside from the anachronism of the great Rogers Bible of 1934, fine printing scaled back during the Depression. Not until the 1960s did that activity significantly increase. Again, it accompanied a social movement with ideals that verged on the utopian. By the late 1980s computer technology had enabled Everyman to be his own publisher. Some of us continue to use old methods for the aesthetic effects that can only be achieved when inked, leaden letters sink into handmade or mouldmade paper. Regardless of the method there is a tendency today for people to be by themselves when they attempt to make artistic books.

Figure 1

A Travel Book by Fred Martin, with drawing and linoleum color blocks by the author/artist, pages 22–23. Arion Press, 1976, an edition of 200.



I argue against isolation. The book is a complex object, perhaps too complicated for one person to accomplish well. It is true that a single individual may learn to write, draw, make paper, set type, prepare plates for illustrations, print on a press, and bind an edition. William Blake serves as an example. But then there was Mrs. Blake. Matisse’s *Jazz* is a one-man band, but he had sidemen to achieve in pochoir the colors of his cut-paper collages. This paper urges working together in the book arts. To what extent such involvement constitutes collaboration may be realized only after the fact. Work comes first.

At the Arion Press, I work with a team of craftsmen to make books. This is something I learned how to do. With my first partner, at the Auerhahn Press in 1961, I was very edgy, determined that my self-expression not be compromised by the style of another. So I insisted that he and I trade off, alternating ultimate responsibility for all decisions on succeeding books. As a tyro-typographer I was defensive and insecure, which made me all the more assertive. Five years later, when I went into partnership with Robert Grabhorn, my attitude changed.

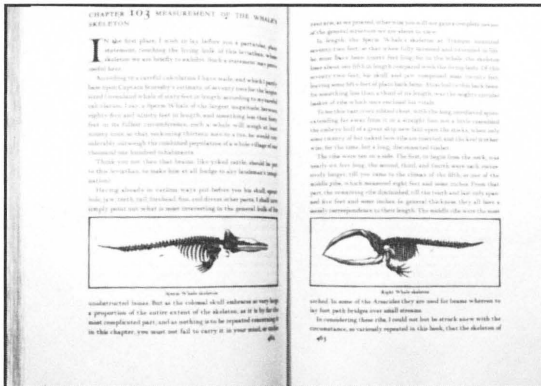


Figure 2

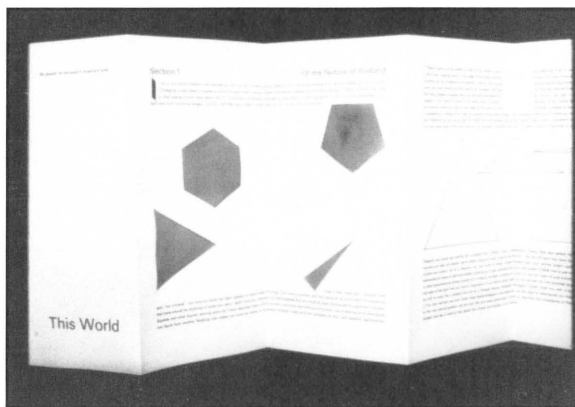
*Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, with wood engravings by Barry Moser, pages 462–463. Arion Press, 1979, an edition of 250.

The difference in our ages was thirty-five years. Robert Grabhorn was a scholar of printing history, particularly of the development of types, and was one of the country's foremost book designers. His knowledge was freely shared; his willingness to improvise was matched by his receptivity to ideas from others. In our free exchanges as we solved problems of layout, materials, and means of production, I often forgot the generational gap, because it had been bridged by his assurance and generosity.

After his death in 1973, I changed the name of the press from Grabhorn-Hoyem to Arion, after the Greek poet of legend who was saved from the sea by a dolphin that had been charmed by his lyre. The number of associates at the press has varied from four to eight, with more hired during bigger binding operations. Currently, seven people are employed at Arion and four more at our other division, M & H Type, the foundry and composition service.

Among us the functions of editing, printing, binding, marketing, bookkeeping and sweeping are shared. Who decides which books the Arion Press will publish and how they will appear? The answer is that I do—with the caveat that many others influence these decisions, most of all those with whom I work on a daily basis, though some excellent suggestions have come from friends, customers and advisors of the Press. Contrary to the common assumption that limited editions are only reprints of the classics, Arion Press has issued several original publications. Our editor Glenn Todd has had a hand in each of these. He and I have worked together for over twenty-five years. He is the Corrector of the Press, in sixteenth-century usage of the term. His education, curiosity, wide reading, and keen memory have been indispensable for the quality of the contents of our books.

*Figure 3*  
*Flatland by Edwin A. Abbott,*  
*with diagrams and die-cut,*  
*hand colored illustrations*  
*by Andrew Hoyem, section 1.*  
*Arion Press, 1980,*  
*an edition of 275.*



In designing the books, the opinions of press members are solicited as proofs are prepared. Gerald Reddan, who has worked at the Press for over ten years, takes the main responsibility for production coordination, and it is with him that I work most closely on the arrangement of type. He carries a catalogue of our library of typefaces in his head and can recall the names and point sizes available. After years of working closely together, our communication is almost unspoken, as if one intuitively knows what the other is about to say. We review the faces that seem to be suited to the text at hand, consider the choice of paper, set a trial page, and refine spacing.



Solutions come faster than they did when I was beginning. We do not belabor problems. If one approach does not seem right and another is not immediately apparent, we work on something else—perhaps the drudgery that comes along with the more exhilarating aspects of the project. Some of my best ideas have occurred while I was distributing type or adding a column of figures for an estimate or sweeping up. In the afternoon we pause for a cup of coffee or tea, and in these informal gatherings the current activities of the Press are discussed, and projects are hatched or hashed out. Every person who works at Arion puts in his or her two-bits worth. The place and the printing are the better for these contributions.

This is a self-supporting business, not a grant-subsidized atelier. Everyone employed is aware that we must produce efficiently and sell what we make in order to survive. In-house projects may be conceived and executed with available people and facilities, but collaboration with an outside artist means additional investment and greater risk. Books containing original prints are more uncertain ventures, dependent upon the unpredictabilities of artistic temperaments, high costs for subcontractors, and the erratic international marketplace of the art world, which is very different from bookstores and mail-order catalogues where bibliophiles shop. Books do not command the staggering prices that prints do. In a market for artworks that are obvious in their presence, the book, which, after displaying its graphic qualities, closes itself discreetly and then unobtrusively rests on a shelf, hasn't the currency and doesn't command the cash that comparable works by the same artist do if those pieces prominently hang on a wall or sit on a pedestal.

My first attempt at a book with an invited artist was an unmitigated pleasure in its making, just as the initial response by our clientele was nearly an unmitigated disaster. In 1976 the book world was not ready for a revival of *livres d'artistes* in an unfamiliar form. I'd long admired the work of Bay Area painter Fred Martin, who was dean of the San Francisco Art Institute. On first meeting, we shook hands and agreed to concoct a book together. He provided a diary of a journey he had taken more than halfway around the world to sites of the origin of civilization, written in the manner of a nineteenth-century travel journal and including excerpts from published

writings of that period. I edited his text to fit pages that were embellished by drawings he had made, both of us working back and forth so that a dialogue was established on each spread between the pictures and works and so that the layout of the pages changed throughout the book. Both of us cut linoleum blocks to color the drawing he had made on mylar so that photo-engravings could be taken directly from the images. Martin was a model collaborator—ever enthusiastic and cooperative, adaptable, and considerate of the constraints of time and money—even though I nearly went broke bringing our vision to pass. The title was *A Travel Book*, and I never regretted the trip (see figure 1).

The next year I began to plan for our handset folio of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which was to appear in 1979 with 100 wood engravings by Barry Moser. Moser at that time was just coming out from under the influence of his teacher Leonard Baskin. *Moby-Dick* was his first big book commission. I insisted that the characters of the novel not appear in the illustrations, so the reader could conjure their features from Melville's descriptions. Instead, I asked Moser to depict those things in the story that the reader might not be capable of visualizing: the places visited, the ships, boats, tools of whaling, and the creatures, though sperm whales were not to be mistaken for the White Whale. We started by researching the whaling industry at the time Melville went to sea, just before whaling became more advanced in the middle of the nineteenth century. This was an important distinction because the experts would fault us if we showed one too many sails on a mast or a harpoon developed after the date of the story.

The artist was working in his studio in Massachusetts; I was coordinating from the West Coast. Moser's blocks had to be cut at a pace with our handsetting and printing, at the rate of sixteen pages a week, with delivery far enough in advance that I could cast off the pages to place the prints at the point in the story where the subject was first mentioned. When he was late I became irate; when I demanded he became demented; when he lamented I lambasted; when I was mutant he was mute. Somehow the book was finished; everything fit, from the opening wave that rolled over the capital C in "Call me Ishmael," based on a sketch I had sent to Moser, taken from my memory of Hiroshige's breaker, to the still seascape calculated to fill

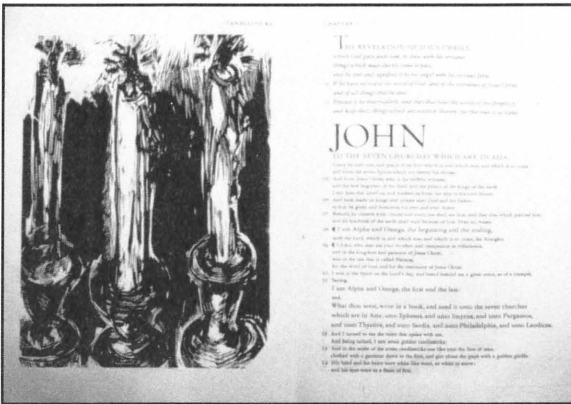


Figure 4

The Apocalypse with 29  
woodblock prints by Jim Dine,  
chapter 1, Candlesticks.  
Arion Press, 1982,  
an edition of 150.

out the last page, with a conceit Moser provided—a subtle dark patch on the water that might be taken for the whirlpool where the Pequod went down. If we made our peace later, it was as though we had each on opposite sides of the country taken a symbolic puff on the tomahawk pipe Queequeg wields in the Spouter Inn of chapter three. The blade still had an edge (see figure 2).

My next encounter with an artist was entirely satisfactory. For Edwin Abbott Abbott's 1884 precursor of science fiction, *Flatland*, I had invited the Los Angeles artist Ronald Davis to join us. *Flatland* is a social satire about a two-dimensional world populated by plane-geometrical figures, one of whom, a square, tells the story of how he learns of the third dimension from a sphere and suggests that we who inhabit it ought to know of the fourth and higher dimensionalities. During a meeting with Davis at the studio-home the architect Frank Gehry had designed for him in shapes that resembled his geometrical plastic paintings, the artist unexpectedly pulled his expensive watch from his wrist by its metal expansion band and hurled it against a distant wall, shouting, "There goes your space-time continuum!" The timepiece ricocheted off the radically juxtaposed ceiling and another wall before it smashed on the floor. A continuity had definitely been shattered. The night after Davis' resignation, I woke up with an idea for an accordion-fold book with die-cut illustrations, so that the citizens of *Flatland* would live within the volume, infinitely thin yet casting shadows, their edges glowing. The publisher was pleased with the artist, his other half (see figure 3).

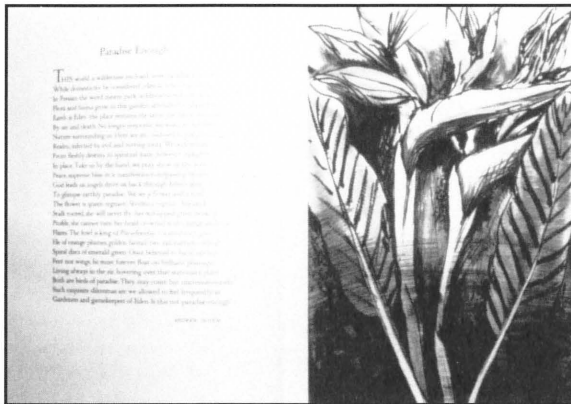


Figure 5  
The Temple of Flora,  
edited by Glenn Todd  
and Nancy Dine,  
with 28 drypoint-engravings  
by Jim Dine.  
Arion Press, 1984,  
an edition of 150.

Despite the hazards of artistic licensing, I wanted to propel the French tradition of incorporating original prints into books toward a further expression that would be unmistakably American. These were not to presume to the grand lineage of illustrated books that would include the *Hynerotomachia Poliphili* of Aldus from 1499, nor were they to be volumes that merely served as typographically unrelated containers for a suite of etchings or lithographs. The goal was to fully integrate text and graphics with the hope that the whole might be more than the sum of parts. What better then, than to start with the *Revelation of Saint John the Divine*—a new *Apocalypse*. This was the daring choice of the artist Jim Dine when he and I discussed the list of possible titles I had prepared for him. He was going up against Dürer and a host of antecedents.

Dine and I were introduced by way of mutual friends. We met by telephone, and he immediately recalled our literary connections from the late 1960s when he lived in London. We clicked. I knew his work well but was unprepared for the immediacy and intensity of his engagement once committed. To say that we worked fast would be an understatement. I chose a French handmade paper, set a page in Garamond Bold, using 14-point for the account of the saint, 18-point for the louder voices from on high that inform him, breaking the King James version into phraseological lines. This proof was sent to the artist with guidelines indicating that he could use any part or the whole of the area designated for the text, so that the margins would conform. Dine cut the woodblocks in a matter of a few weeks, while he was laid up with a bad

back. As has become a standard operating procedure, we sent Dine masses of background information on the book, researched by our editor, Glenn Todd, as much for our own edification as for that of the artist. With the history of the illustrated *Book of Revelation* before him, Dine relied on his own impulses to enter a serious contender in what some ominous handicapper might darkly call a horserace.

Dine was very trusting of me. That trial page was all he saw of the book until it was printed. He even sent his blocks to us unproofed, so well did he know as a printmaker what would come from the wood. Of course we conferred often by telephone, and I cleared with him the sequence we had assigned to the images and the excerpted words and phrases we had taken for titles. Full of trepidation, I showed him the bound book. He was entirely approving and said that he would like to do a series of books with Arion Press (*see figure 4*).

In 1984, we published *The Temple of Flora*, patterned on Robert John Thornton's magnificent botanical folio by that title from 1806. Dine used its color mezzotints as models for his drypoint engravings, which were printed in black. The text also followed Thornton's provision of poetic and botanical accompaniment though ours, we hope, is less florid. Modern poems with reference to the plants depicted were chosen, or contemporary poets were commissioned to write with a certain flower in mind. Botanists aided us in the preparation of the notes that were both scientific and literary in scope (*see figure 5*).

More books continue to come from my collaboration with Jim Dine. In 1989 we published a series of poems by Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, graced with an intaglio portrait of the poet by Dine. During 1990, Jim Dine and I worked together on a large-format presentation of the last long poem by the late Frank O'Hara, *Biotherm*. The text was handset in 22-point Spectrum, and the pages were proofed. Then Dine made drawings in ink on mylar, clear plastic sheets placed over the proofs, which enabled him to arrange the images around the typographic blocks so that the poetry and art are interwoven. From the mylar drawings lithographic plates were made directly, without screening. The book is unbound, with the series of forty-two prints stacked in a portfolio box.

In addition to *The Temple of Flora*, Arion Press issued two other publications with artists in 1984. The poet and art critic John Ashbery used to write for the international edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* from Paris, and I met him there in 1961. When his long poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was published in 1974 in *Poetry* magazine, I was impressed with the work and thought it worthy of a special edition. It seems that the seeds for books have often germinated for a decade. I contacted Ashbery in the early 1980s with the proposal that Arion set this piece for accompaniment by several artists who would make prints in various mediums. Ashbery liked the idea, and together we invited artists who were close friends of his or whose work he particularly admired though he did not know them well. The list of acceptances was impressive: the photographer Richard Avedon and the painters Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Jim Dine, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, R. B. Kitaj and Larry Rivers. I set the poem on a round format, 18 inches in diameter, with the lines radiating out from a hub containing the page number, like spokes on a wheel, so that the reader literally turns the page while reading—an effective if not efficient way to read (the eye travels with ease back to the center starting the next line, though the pie-shaped space between lines is an extravagant use of paper). Ashbery was delighted and said, “Why didn’t I write the poem that way in the first place?”

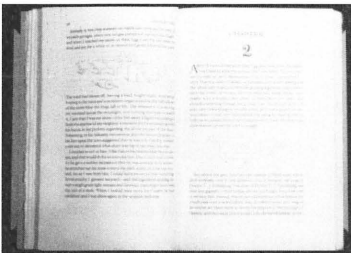


Figure 6  
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
with drawings by Michael Graves,  
pages 28–29. Arion Press, 1984,  
an edition of 400.

The eight artists were given only one restriction: that their images must fit within the 18-inch diameter of the paper then being made by hand in rounds at the Twinrocker Mill in Indiana. I arranged with printers to edition the prints, allowing the artists to work at printmaking studios of their choice. Arion printed Dine’s woodcut, and we contracted with Magnolia Editions in Oakland to print Avedon’s photographic portrait of Ashbery by continuous tone process. Kitaj’s etching was printed by Aldo Crommelynck in Paris. Various printers in the east took care of the lithographs for Freilicher, the de Koonings and Katz. Rivers’ photogravure with hand coloring was editioned at U.L.A.E. in West Islip, New York.

The architect Michael Graves does delightful drawings on a small scale to record historic buildings he fancies, or as inspiration comes to him for new structures, or to give his clients a preview of what he might build. A friend who

is an architecture critic suggested that Graves would be perfect for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* because (she recalled from some article) he rereads it every year. In his office in Princeton, Graves admitted that *Gatsby* is a favorite book, but was mystified by the report of his annual obeisance. Nevertheless, he agreed to do drawings for our book. I asked him to regard me as a Jay Gatsby commissioning him to do a large estate, so that he would depict the landscape and architectural features of the novel, the furniture and fixtures, the automobiles and cocktail glasses. We sent him long lists of possible subjects, and Graves chose one hundred. We placed them where they were referred to in the text. Every time a telephone rings a different instrument appears, its receiver begging to be answered. Some of Graves' buildings are hinted at, others are fantasies that may one day be built (see figure 6).

The photographically illustrated book entered our program in 1985, with the landscapes of Michael Kenna, taken on the English moors for *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. This talented young Britisher, who lives in San Francisco, had made a series of photographs on Dartmoor, where the hound pounces, and in the neighboring wilderness. The scenes were straight out of Conan Doyle's descriptions of nature, menacing rocks, foreboding skies. Kenna had taken the pictures; because of them we had decided to do the book. What was left to do of a collaborative nature? A selection needed to be made and put in an order. He had more than enough good negatives. I hit upon a plan to have a small photographic image appear on the lower half of every other recto, or every fourth page of the book. When fanned (like a "Big-Little" book from my boyhood), the viewer would see a sequence of shots that carried its own dramatic line. Kenna was involved at every step, from the sorting of prints to the checking of press proofs for the duotones. He persevered in his darkroom until the prints for reproduction satisfied him—even though these would have no commercial value, since his exhibition prints must have different qualities from those used for half-tones. Throughout he was invariably cheerful, as if he had already solved the mystery.

Another photographer with a sunny personality was behind the camera that illustrated Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, in the edition we published in 1986. This was

Lou Stoumen, who is best known for his pictures of Times Square in New York City, taken since the Second World War. I had seen a book of his, published by Aperture, then met him in the unlikely spot of a crowded aisle at a convention. I asked if he might be interested in shooting stills from a movie never to be made, a new cinematic interpretation of Chandler's hardboiled detective novel that would move the reader but never flicker on the screen. He knew people in Hollywood; he had made films, was teaching at UCLA. There were friends in the motion picture business, actors, producers who had been actors, students, who could be enlisted to play the parts. He became very excited. Costumes, makeup, props, lights, camera, action!

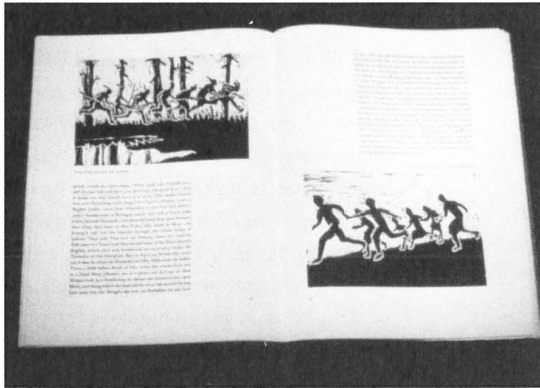


Figure 7  
 Captivity Narrative  
 of Hannah Duston,  
 as related by Mather, Whittier,  
 Hawthorne and Thoreau,  
 with 35 woodblock prints  
 by Richard Bosman,  
 "The Foe Close At Hand."  
 Arion Press, 1987,  
 an edition of 400.

The art dealer Brooke Alexander and I met in Boseman, Montana, at a printmakers' conference. He and I discussed the potential for a new strain of *livres d'artiste* and then kept in touch, occasionally talking about projects for his artists. Eventually I found one for Richard Bosman, an idea that had lingered on the Arion list but until then had no publishable focus. Captivity narratives were early tales of settlers taken hostage by Indians. One of the most captivating is the story of Hannah Duston, who was captured in 1697, along with her newborn baby. The child was murdered by the marauders, and later Hannah killed and scalped ten members of the Indian family to whom she had been assigned, most of them women and children, none responsible for the death of her baby and all converts to Christianity. The moral quandary is unsettling to this day. Bosman made woodcuts



without direct reference to the story, which we arranged into a pictorial story line that paralleled four accounts of Hannah Duston's ordeal by Cotton Mather, John Greenleaf Whittier, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau, each with a different interpretation. This was collaboration by intermediary, because Brooke Alexander was very helpful in interpreting me to Bosman and carrying messages back from the artist, as well as offering his own keen assessment of my placement of the blocks when I wasn't sure of Bosman's intentions. The result looks planned in advance. It was not. The book was arduously figured out as we went along. Perhaps if we can make solutions look easy, that very deception is part of the success of a book (*see figure 7*).

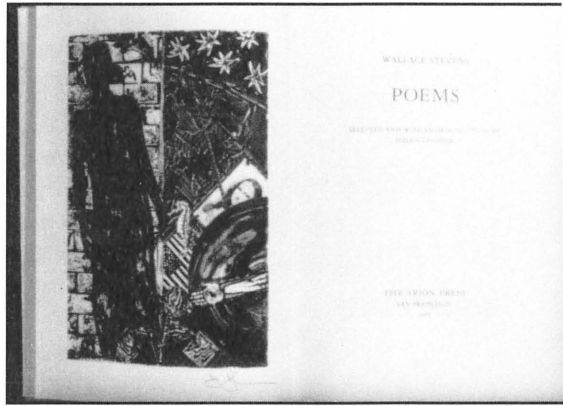
The book of ours that has set records in the auction rooms because of the skyrocketing stock taken in its artist was the least collaborative. Jasper Johns agreed to make an etching for the selection of Wallace Stevens poems we published in 1985. As it turned out, the print he made for us was the first public exposure of any of the images from his famous autobiographical series of four paintings called *The Seasons*. The etching preceded the paintings by many months. Had time allowed and had not an accident on a ladder intervened, we might have had the whole series of four images. I believe that Stevens would have been proud of this tribute from a great artist who holds his poetry in high esteem. Ironically, Stevens' name is hardly heard as the gavel bangs. Some of the prints have begun to appear in frames, the book discarded (*see figure 8*).

One of the first books I read after I came to printing was *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, the eighteenth-century novel that is so experimental it puts to shame all modern attempts to do something new with the form of fiction and, with no shame on Joyce, puts *Ulysses* in its shadow. Sterne used typographic tricks as well as literary ones, and this intrigued me. Ever since then I had wanted to print an edition. We did so in 1987 with the artist John Baldessari. A gentleman friend had a lady friend who was a friend of Baldessari, and she reported that this was the number one book on his hit parade this week, last month, for the past thirty years or more. I wrote him; we talked on the telephone. He agreed readily. He knew the book backwards and forwards. Our editor studied the Shandean intricacies

cies. I visited Baldessari's studio in Santa Monica, bearing the usual background material and lots of suggestions for topics Baldessari could address in his chosen medium, photo-collage. Partway into the project, I decided to separate the illustrations from the novel since it has such a strong visual component. The photo-collages were removed to an accordion-fold volume where they were joined by excerpts from *Tristram Shandy* that carried on a strange and amusing conversation with the often humorous visual material.

Figure 8

*Poems by Wallace Stevens, selected and with an introduction by Helen Vendler, with a frontispiece etching by Jasper Johns, title page. Arion Press, 1985, an edition of 300 copies.*



Baldessari sent us rough layouts for the collages, photocopies to indicate reductions and enlargements, but not finished works. The works of art first made their appearance in book form—after they were printed by photolithography. We collaboratively made the prints with and for the artist. He, of course, saw proofs along the way, but when the final colors were laid down during press checks, I alone, with the trust of the artist, was the one to approve the prints.

Many of these images have since been made by Baldessari into larger works. Arion issued five as lithograph prints. Others, the size of a whole wall, were part of a retrospective of the artist's work mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles that travelled to other institutions around the country, including the Whitney Museum in New York. The Arion book was part of the show (see figure 9). Which came first? Art comes first; process comes second; procedure comes third; and so on

In 1984, I wrote to Robert Motherwell proposing *Ulysses*, knowing that he had already made prints for lavish books with poetry by Rafael Alberti and was working on one with Octavio Paz, and that Joyce was his favorite twentieth-century author. A print entitled *Mulligan's Tower* had caught my attention, and I noticed that he had named many works with quotations from Joyce. We met that year at his home and studio in Greenwich, Connecticut. Soon he agreed to attempt the project. Other obligations, such as a major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, postponed this commitment, and the artist was sometimes daunted by such a large undertaking and worried that he might not be capable, given his age and uncertain state of health, of doing credit to a book that had meant so much to him.

Yet his creative stamina and the challenge of *Ulysses* sustained him. Eventually, Motherwell came to be satisfied that he had provided an acceptable graphic counterpoint to the novel. A series of drawings, done at his summer studio in Provincetown in 1982, proved the necessary inspiration to drive our project forward. By the end of 1987, with the assistance of his intaglio printer, Catherine Mosley, more than forty etching plates had been prepared and proofed.

Motherwell's background, by education, experience and inclination, has made him an acute appreciator of the book as a means to the expression of art. He has been an innovative artist of the book, and his accomplishments in Alberti's *A la pintura* and *El Negro* are among the most noteworthy in twentieth-century *livres d'artistes*. His articulateness and sophistication about the structure of a book and about Joyce's writings were of inestimable value to the project.

Sure of his own gifts, Motherwell entertained my own and others' suggestions and often adapted his approach to new propositions or practical necessities, while maintaining an inspired line through the sequence of prints. Over the intervening four years, he and I corresponded about the project and met several times in Greenwich and in New York City to exchange ideas for the illustrations. These were enjoyable occasions; this venture was in the best sense a collaboration.

Having established a vertical format of  $9\frac{3}{4}$  inches by  $12\frac{3}{4}$  inches for the folio page, I invited Motherwell to do etchings on a scale that would allow margins as generous as those afforded the type block.

Though he first thought he would prefer to work in lithography, he acceded to my desire for the incised impression that could be achieved from copper plates of etchings as a companion to the engraved character of the type I had selected, the Perpetua of Eric Gill. When proofs of the etchings arrived, I was satisfied that the typographic decision was correct. But how were we to identify Motherwell's marks? He gave no clues. And how were they to be placed in the book? Some of the images, such as the tower and the name Molly, were easily recognizable; many are abstract, relying upon the impulse of the artist for their relevance to Joyce's work. Robert Motherwell is a painter who draws improvisationally and intuitively, depending upon a retrospective recognition. Sometimes long after the creative act, out of chance encounters and the reactions of others, may come the titling of works.

I studied proofs of the etchings for weeks and consulted Joyce scholars. My solution came from Joyce's "Schema," the diagrammatic key he had provided to friends who were early readers of the manuscript, giving for each of the three parts and eighteen episodes the name temporarily assigned (the book was published without headings) the scene, hour, organ, art, color, symbol, technique, and Homeric parallels. Out of these eight categories I picked one entry for each of eighteen images. These were placed on the verso, opposite the opening lines for each of the episodes. On the preceding recto appear Motherwell's reinvention of roman numerals, I through XVIII.

Then I proposed that a series of colors be used for the backgrounds of the images (not for the roman numerals). Motherwell has often used *chine collée*, colored paper applied over the plate area. However, I knew of a process used by the printer who was to do the editioning, Robert Townsend of Georgetown, Massachusetts, that gave a rolled tone of colored ink behind the black-inked image with one impression. After I held proofing sessions with Townsend to show the possibilities of this method, Mosley added a few typical Motherwell colors to the series so that we had different hues for each of the eighteen plates.

Again there were conferences in Connecticut, and on the floor of his studio Motherwell arranged the proofs in various sequences until we agreed on an order that was visually pleasing and related to the literary contents.

Having settled the key aesthetic questions on how to connect relatively small but not insignificant works by a major artist to the major novel of the twentieth century, all that remained to do was the typesetting, the printing, and the binding – the labors of crafts that require constant attention to their own aesthetic demands. *Ulysses* was published at the end of 1988, but we worked well into 1989 to complete the hand binding of the 175 volumes in the edition (see figure 10).

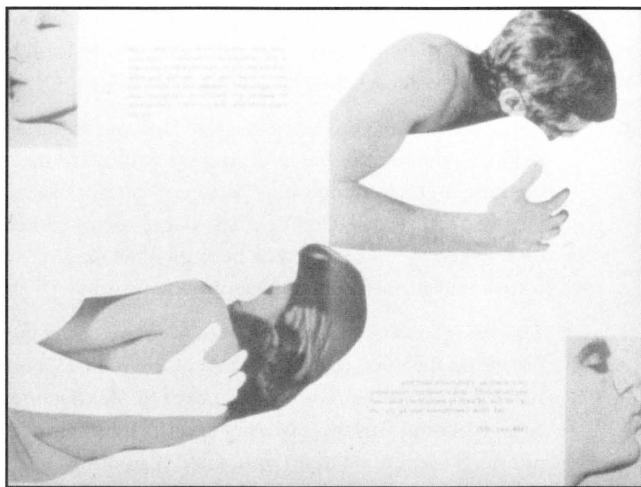


Figure 9

The Life and Opinions of  
Tristram Shandy, Gentleman  
by Laurence Sterne,  
with 39 photo-collage illustrations  
by John Baldessari, "No More  
Sin." Arion Press, 1988,  
an edition of 400.

Richard Diebenkorn is a "local" artist of international fame. I had marvelled at his paintings for years and had wished that his printmaking abilities might be applied to an Arion book. But it took the urging of Helen Vendler, the Harvard professor and critic who was editing a selection of poems by W. B. Yeats for the Press, to get Diebenkorn to join the project. Yeats is his favorite poet, and his familiarity with the poetry is evident in his choice of subjects for the prints.

Diebenkorn made six etchings, drawing on the plates in his living room, where he could see two of his own works adjacent in a corner. One was a drawing he had made during World War II of his Marine tunic on a hanger

hooked over an open closet door. The other was a new painting, an abstract in his "Ocean Park" style, with an archway or tombstone as the main image. These were recombined in five of the prints, a series of empty coats of hangers, which stand as a recapitulation of Diebenkorn's career from representational figuration to spare abstraction to a rich rendering that may signal a new direction for his art. The sixth print is a double map of Ireland, a positive/negative of that divided land. Quotations from Yeats face each of the etchings.



Figure 10  
*Ulysses* by James Joyce, with 40 etchings  
 by Robert Motherwell, "The Tower."  
 Arion Press, 1988, an edition of 150.

I picked a small quarto format and suggested plate dimensions and margins to Diebenkorn that he found acceptable. Then there was no more contact between us, other than my sending him trial pages as we at the Press went about trying out different body types and various titling faces, until the etchings had been proofed and he was ready to deliver the plates to me for editioning.

In the fall of 1990, the University Art Museum at Berkeley held an exhibition of the book and the prints. For the opening night, the English Department sponsored a lecture on Yeats by Helen Vendler, where she remarked on how the coat is changed by both the poet and the artist from a real garment into a metaphysical form.

This brings us to the spring of 1991. We have just completed *On Certainty*, the last writings of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, with twelve prints by Mel Bochner. The artist went back twenty years to rework a series of minimal/conceptual drawings named "Counting Alternatives: the Wittgenstein Illustrations, 1971." Over a grid that is a double-crossed square, Bochner wrote (he claims, not drew) numbers in a dozen regulated schemes of irregular patterns.

For him, art is more important as process than as product and that attitude extended to our joint effort. He wanted to be consulted on every aspect of the book. I was rather surprised at his insistence that the typography, the layout of pages, the selection of materials and method of binding were somehow an extension of *his* art, not an artful housing I was providing for it. Might his concepts, rendered graphically, be misperceived if even an element of their surroundings was not exactly to his taste?

Here I have been preaching cooperation; but when my territory was invaded, I again became defensive. This was

my area of expertise, yet I hadn't the patience to explain the reasons behind all my choices or to deliver a discourse on the history of printing, which held determinants for the myriad decisions that must be made for a book to be well designed and produced. Now that *On Certainty* is finished, I will admit that some changes I made reluctantly to satisfy the artist were better than my first impulses and that the edition was probably improved by the struggle. I'll even confess to enjoying the arguments.

Collaboration has begun to take on an aura in the arts. The concept isn't fancy: working together is a way to get things done. In art, two heads aren't always better than one. Solitary geniuses can get along quite well without getting along with others. However, people in the arts of the book do need each other, and that includes visual artists if they are to be involved in the project. Teams need individual talent and experience but must have the mutual trust that encourages creativity. I am grateful for the engagement I have had with those mentioned here—and others unnamed who have contributed so much to the Arion Press. Books can become more than utilitarian objects when a publisher has such colleagues.



## **Making the Book**



## THE COMPUTER MADE ME DO IT: COMPUTERS AND BOOKS

**This essay compares the form, function and experience of reading and writing books with the utilization and creation of narratives on the computer. Topics include: hand-eye coordination, gestures and rituals which characterize computer use; the speed, accessibility and flexibility of computer tools; rules and assumptions which inform the relationship between human and machine; the structural, technical and psychological functions of the interface; the experience of navigation within an electronic narrative structure; the computer user as audience, reader and creator; signs and symbols, the intersection of visual and verbal language; the manipulation of icons, formats, metaphors and scenarios which support computer environments and simulations.**

Paul Zelevansky is an artist and writer in New York City. His most recent books are *The Shadow Architecture at the Crossroads Annual, 19\_\_* (1988) and *The Case for the Burial of Ancestors, Book<sup>3</sup>* (1991). He is currently designing interactive computer exhibits for the New York Hall of Science and the American Museum of Natural History.

*Visible Language*, 25: 2/3

Paul Zelevansky, pp. 217-230

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"I want to do this myself, Hal" he said. "Please give me control."

"Look, Dave, you've got a lot of things to do. I suggest you leave this to me."

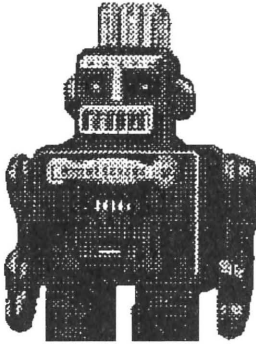
"Hal, switch to manual hibernation control."

"I can tell from your voice harmonics, Dave, that you're badly upset. Why don't you take a stress pill and get some rest?"

Conversation between Hal, a computer, and Dave, the captain of the spacecraft Discovery. Arthur C. Clarke, *2001, A Space Odyssey*. New American Library, 1968.

Working with a computer requires a commitment to specific techniques, parameters, terminology and resources—to electricity, in particular, respect must be paid. While it is true that all tools, powered and self-starting, make similar demands, most do not require two-way communication, and most are not expected to do your thinking for you. It is crossing this line that turns the creator/tool exchange into a relationship, and as with all relationships, shared responsibilities and needs generate some ambivalence between the parties involved. While my experience has been fairly specific, focused primarily on designing graphics and animations for interactive science exhibits and visual fiction, I have become interested in some of the expectations of this new relationship between human and machine: in particular, the ways in which the demands of language, form and structure engage and color the creative process. In *2001*, Hal eventually loses the argument when Dave pulls the plug on the computer's memory, but Dave, cast adrift without Hal's technical support and prophetic voice, must face the future profoundly alone.

## I. Getting Up to Speed



Whatever else is promised by the utilization of computers, the values of *speed*, *choice* and *interaction* are central motifs, if not guiding principles. That is, in practice, a computer should provide a solution to a problem or an improvement in service quickly, confidently, transparently and in a way that invites active participation by the customer, technician or creator in charge. But when the computer is asked to serve as more than an intelligent tool, when it becomes a medium to manipulate and explore, as with various graphics and design programs, the exchange becomes more complex. At its best, this relationship goes beyond one of master/slave, hand/switch to become transformative, a fluid collaboration between a creator and a medium. While the same could be said for the experience of reading and writing books the “old-fashioned way,” the process of engaging a computer for those purposes is distinct.

The multiple ways in which this human/machine exchange unfold in the process of writing are probably as varied as the circumstances of each attempt—there continue to be eight million stories in the naked city—but for those who work with word processors to write books, few would argue that the ability to correct, arrange and maneuver through a manuscript at great speed does not in some way inform the end result. In the production of books, the most direct payoff of speed is more time, time that allows for expanded production at less cost. And that means the cheaper delivery of ideas to more people. Desktop publishing, the contraction of the publishing assembly line to desktop scale, embodies that kind of democratic ideal. It is also, analogously, an electronic model of the digestive system—consumption, digestion and elimination in one closed system. This means, at the very least, that the results of production are likely to be mediated primarily by the taste, opinion and judgment of the people present in the room, if not the person sitting alone at the desk. This transforms what was an industrial process—requiring the services of typesetter, printers, designers and editors—into a largely private one, much closer to the rarified domain of artists and writers. For example, the availability of electronic scanners and inexpensive sources of generic clip art make image production at the desktop level available to those who

have never even considered passing through the doors of an art school. But within the computer's domain, artists, writers, engineers and mathematicians are all subject to the same benefits and laws.

Whether word-processing or creating images on the screen, a series of particular gestures and procedures, rituals and signs, characterizes the creative act. Beginning with the choice to sit down before a screen and have a dialogue with it, and continuing into actions which both mimic and displace events in the tactile, sensory world away from the machine, this is a simulated relationship in which content and terms are dictated largely by the person at the controls. In this sense, the monitor screen functions like a mirror which reflects back a picture of the user's expectations, but because this is a world of fixed rules, inhabited by fugitive messages, the relationship requires careful negotiation. In the language of computing, *word-processing* and *image-processing* are sub-strategies of the work *process*. Clearly, there is a bias here towards the manipulation of discrete elements, over the gross handling of clumps of matter. Processing seems to be about passing something through a kind of filter which translates or reconstitutes it so that it is easier to assemble, rearrange or mix with something else. This engages a food-processing metaphor—digitize, blend, puree—which falls apart, for me, at the point where I must imagine vegetables or images put back together after they have been broken down and dispersed. Even if this were possible, the idea of a regenerating particulate structure underlying the image on the screen is too difficult to trust or sustain. I prefer to think of the construction of words and images as an additive, *mosaic* process, where a stable set of discrete elements called *pixels* (short for picture elements) can be selected and combined to form equally stable composite elements like words and shapes.

In the Macintosh "environment" where I reside when computing, the construction process is made concrete through the use of an auxiliary selection device called a mouse, and various accessible tools and techniques identified by graphic icons and visible and hidden *menus* (lists of tools and content). Moving and clicking the mouse activates effects and processes, or provides a way to literally build, move, alter or remove text or images on the screen. While there are ways in which working with the

mouse simulates the act of drawing, you are always at least one step removed from the traditional exchange between the tool and the paper. By extension, you are represented robotically on the screen by the cursor, which, in turn, represents the mouse.

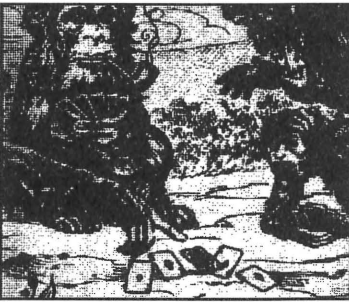
Attached to the chain of command, you move the mouse, and the world moves with you. Drawing in this way is much less about the gesture of the hand or arm, or the pressure and shift of the fingers around a pencil, than about the plotting of a series of logical moves which will result in an image. The standard personal computer is not great at producing delicate lines and curves, but it can multiply, rotate, invert, scale, colorize, cut, paste and erase text and graphics almost instantly. Some of these effects verge on the magical in the way they replicate and extend the events they simulate. Then there are other functions which are not modeled on past experience: to select a word or block of type and instantly transform its font, size or style is a form of alchemy only a computer can provide. More than once, after a day building and destroying images in the pixel world, I have found myself trying to apply its laws to events in the real world. Erasing an error or imperfection is never quite as clean and complete as when it happens on the screen, and the multiplication or procreation of elements to generate a new whole touches on metaphors and techniques that have very little to do with making images.

One example in my own work involved the problem of drawing an image of a plaid bathrobe: I began by multiplying a drawing of a swatch of cloth into a larger cloth. Then, I drew a pattern, in line, for each of the components of the robe: collars, pocket, sleeves and torso. Then, by rotating sections of the fabric, I was able to suggest the folding of the garment. Next, I placed the parts of the pattern over the sections of fabric. Finally, I assembled the robe: sleeves to torso, collars overlapping sleeves, pocket on the left, and then to bring things full circle—that is to give credit where credit was formerly due—I stuck a pencil in the pocket. Ultimately, the drawing owed much more to sewing and Butterick patterns than to art school.

The speed of the manipulation, the multiplicity of choices and the accessibility of the tools can contribute to a fluid exchange of capabilities. Because the monitor screen is

the window or membrane through which the exchange is visualized, this relationship between human and machine can seem transparent, immediate and self-fulfilling. Speed demands more speed, choices generate more choices, and the interaction encourages more interaction. But what the computer gives, the computer can take away. The sense of loss, verging on betrayal, when a piece of work is damaged or inadvertently erased is as intense as the sense of power and control which accompanies the initial production.

## II. The Site of the Narrative



An encounter between a human and a machine, considered in terms of its effect on the machine as well as on the human, is a more complex narrative than that inaugurated by a human and a simple tool. Because a computer supplies the stage for the work, as well as the tools, materials and storage space, and because it may even serve in the end product, it certainly seems appropriate to think of it as an *environment*, a word which is also used to describe a package of related hardware and software. An environment can make demands and respond in kind.

Consider the focus and goals of a typical ATM or cash machine in regard to function, service and audience response. Although the bland neutrality of the screen, its controls and textual cues, probably consumed many hours of the design process, the basic interaction provides no unexpected characterization of place or boundary. The screen remains reassuringly neutral, an electronic analog to a sheet of paper which, by way of a short list of choices on a menu and reassuring messages during pauses for processing, frames your response. This is the face of a machine which promises to reliably and objectively dole out cash. On the other hand, as with other human/computer interactions, ease and power can quickly turn to frustration when the authority of the human is called into question. A notification of an *insufficient* balance can provoke both guilt and fury, as if this dumb machine not only refused your request but discovered your insolvency as well. Using a cash machine is a silent exchange with an invisible, but ultimately powerful teller. As a narrative, it is limited: "take out money," with functions like depositing and balance inquiries making that possible. While the transaction actually continues after the cash and the "thank you" appear, the recording of the exchange in the

larger bank system is not visible, although it is implied in the optional receipt. This provides the kind of buffer that a credit card does in shielding the consumer from the direct realization of spent, and therefore, diminished funds.

Maybe it was my forced apprenticeship in the retail shoe business, but the checkbook and the ledger seem harder to ignore. Turning their pages, passing through handwritten listings of credits and debits, is neither magical or friendly. Of course, page-turning is one of the primary experiences the book provides and the computer denies. A derogatory term in computing which implies limited interaction and control, page-turning is one the pleasures of reading, as well as a necessary form of navigation. Within a book, a general narrative terrain is carved out where time and space are characterized and implied. Somewhere a page turns, and "Ten years have passed, and Tom, now sporting a gray beard and forty extra pounds in his gut, is living somewhere else."

In a computer program, on the other hand, boundaries can be more literally defined and more easily transgressed. Navigating through a narrative structure is less about moving through the pagination than about making decisions and forming links between choices. Because there is no apparent front or back of the book, the computer must provide some clear affirmation of an underlying, consistent structure within an essentially open-ended space, framed, but not limited, by the borders of the monitor screen. This must continue to be true whether there is text or image involved, because any evolving information that appears on the screen is essentially gone, invisible, erased when a new choice is made. For it to return, it will have to be reconstituted or called up from storage.

The concept of being "in memory," which is where a computer places information no longer visible on the screen, not only suggests the existence of other states and versions of the data, but also other levels in space where they can reside. On the Macintosh, specific files are represented both by a graphic icon and by a name and description on a menu. These icons and lists function like a kind of floating index, accessible at different stages in the process. To get to the material in a file, you depart from a listing in this index and return to it when you are

done. In this way, whether located at some distant point in the larger coordinate system, enclosed in an icon or some collection device like the Macintosh Scrapbook, text and image are, barring human error and machine dysfunction, retrievable. They may appear gone, but they are not forgotten. Instructions (programming) which provide the basis for all functions, including the hierarchy of representations which form the visible interactive controls (the interface), are likewise out of sight but not out of mind. Don't worry, the computer has it under control. As with the invisible authority of the cash machine, disbelief is suspended by a great leap of faith in the system and the constancy of the screen. If Tom were the progeny of a word-processor, his former self, ten years younger and minus the gray beard and the forty excess pounds, would be somewhere in memory at this very moment.

### III. The Flavor of the Interaction



The pencil and paper *Treasure Hunt*, above, presents its means and ends in one visible package. The goal is defined, all possible paths laid out; even the obstacles to success are not hidden. This map of the hunt is the interface, the channel between you and the treasure at the end. While all means and ends are not visible in a book or a computer program, plot structures and flow-charts both trace the lines and connections through which identified goals may be reached. Just as in a game or puzzle, all the routes may not be taken, but boundaries, syntax and rules must be stable for playing to unfold—and not unravel. The map of the *Treasure Hunt* and the role of the player remain the same. It is the pattern of the interaction that changes. What a computer program adds to this equation is both the layering of alternative scenarios and the potential for transforming the qualities of the map itself. Participation may require solving problems, following a set of graphic or textual relationships, uncovering the logic of the system, or experimenting with various strategies and maneuvers for their own sake. But whatever the level of involvement, the fit between the rules of the game, the clarity of the boundaries, and the consistent functioning of the tools must be clear and immediate. Anyone who has ever been cast adrift on a subway platform in New York City trying to interpret a garbled public address announcement, or found themselves on a moving train which has unexpectedly been transformed



from a *local* to an *express*, knows what it means for a complex interactive system to break down.

Like a road map, a computer program is built around defined locations and links. There may be more than one way to arrive, and the choices will inevitably fork at a given destination to encompass at least a return to the beginning, if not a whole new set of locations and links. The developing narrative accumulates rather than unwinds. Each choice not only takes the reader (or user) through the material, but in forming connections and generating new branches provides the experience of collecting, if not building, the content. In a programming application like *Hypercard*, which was designed for the Macintosh, this linking idea becomes a tangible function of the process. A user can create "buttons" or hot spots on the screen out of words or images, which when contacted by the cursor make a direct and visible connection to related elements or ideas. Once established, a path traveled in this way is a field of the user's creation. Because a computer program can also offer multiple, simultaneous destinations and entry points, any location can lead to any other so that where you start is less important than the sequence of the interaction.

This browsing approach to exploring information reflects a social as well as an aesthetic or pedagogical bias. In this democracy, choice is an unassailable value, but the responsibility for making decisions and coping with the results brings up the question of the nature of the audience being "targeted" for the experience. Are they students to be encouraged, peers to be engaged, or consumers to be taken in? Choice implies freedom; interaction promises power. Where within the multiplicity of competing ideas does someone acquire the tools to make judgments and decisions? If the freedom to browse among alternative experiences is the aesthetic and cultural model, then advertising could be considered the ethical sword of democracy, and the right to choose Coca over Pepsi would truly exemplify "the real thing."

In contrast, books are familiar, domesticated objects at this point in our cultural history. They can be opened or closed, shared or carried around without resort to special training, equipment or surroundings. Print literacy is considered an unassailable value as well as a necessity. While bookstores and libraries are certainly for browsing,

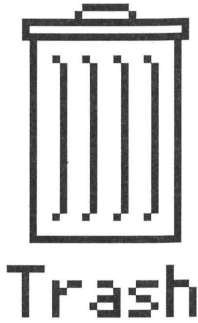
selecting and entering a book is neither passive nor mechanical. Reading implies a commitment that clicking a mouse or scanning with a TV remote does not. As for television, however much a part of the furniture it has become, it is a mute presence that intrudes and demands attention. The computer monitor, a close cyclopean relative, carries the same authority as a bearer of electronic news. For this reason, and because it incorporates time, motion and sequence, the computer should be seen as a performance medium with responsibilities to a captive but participating, audience.

When we refer to the relationship between the creator of a book and the book's intended audience, we talk about the *writer* and the *reader*. Even if the material contains images, as in a magazine, newspaper or comic book, reading is still the process involved. Someone watching a film or television program is a *moviegoer* or *viewer*, even if there are words on the screen to be read. At present, the word used frequently to describe someone who reads, views and uses a computer program is *user*. While it may simply be a matter of familiarity which makes the *reader* and *viewer* acceptable descriptions, there is something faintly distasteful about referring to an audience as *users*—a term which, in English at least, describes either the self-centered manipulation of others or drug addiction. This may also imply something about the computer's role as supplier in the exchange. The question is, are we dealing with the early stages of a form seeking appropriate definitions, or is there some basic distrust of the computer's intentions and grasp? Even someone who compulsively plays pinball or video games is considered a *player*.

My sense is that this ambivalence flows from the concern that unmediated collaborations with computers may be weighted heavily on the computer's side; i.e., the computer may be a bodiless robot, but it is essentially smarter than the person using it. Further, while it is acceptable to set loose *players* to win or lose inside a game, games may not be a sufficiently serious challenge, stacked up against concepts like databases, spreadsheets and telecommunication networks. The computer has talent, and talent, like luck, is a commodity viewed with some suspicion by those who don't feel they have it. In my experience, the standard excuse for an assumed lack of

artistic facility has always been: “I can’t draw a straight line with a ruler.” What replaces that lament in the vernacular when straight lines can be generated by the movement of a mouse in a drawing program?

#### IV. Taking in the Trash



One solution to demystifying the sometimes abstract nature of computer rules and responses is to suggest that common hand-eye-tool collaborations are still possible. Direct gestures like selecting, dragging (accomplished by positioning the cursor, holding down the mouse button, and pushing or pulling the selected icon), clicking and typing, as well as simulations of activities from the tactile, multi-sensory world outside the machine, make the deep, ambiguous space of the monitor screen seem less alien. On the Macintosh, simple graphic icons are used to identify both form and function in the system. In graphics programs, tools like paint brushes, pencils, spray cans and more arcane functions are displayed and accessed through their respective icons. Files containing text or graphics are represented by a standardized file symbol. Folders, which can contain various hierarchies of files and other folders, are represented by a folder symbol. For me, one of the most elegant solutions is the Mac *trashcan*, through which files and floppy disks exit the digital world of your machine. Using the mouse, you throw a file away by dragging its icon to the trash. To eject either a disk inserted in your disk drive, or a file from another source which has been sent like a phantom across a network of linked computers, you likewise drag its icon to the trash. That all of this takes place on your personal *desktop*—the location on the screen where all your files are presented and stored, and the generative arena where desktop publishing was born—only makes it more friendly. Computers consume and circulate vast quantities of data, so providing a sanitation system seems appropriate. While the *trashcan* incorporates a mixed metaphor in combining disposal and transfer in the same container, I personally find it very satisfying. Kinetically, the gesture is actually cleaner and more decisive than dumping trash—more like flushing a toilet, or dropping a letter down a mail chute.

William Ivins, Jr., in his book *On the Rationalization of Sight*, argues that the essential significance of the development

of perspective during the Renaissance lies in its marking a break with reliance on tactile experience as a means of measuring perception in favor of “visual habits and intuitions.”

From being an avenue of sensuous awareness for what people, lacking adequate grammars and techniques for their use, regarded as “secondary qualities,” sight has today become the principal avenue of sensuous awarenesses upon which systematic thought is based.

*On the Rationalization of Sight*, Da Capo Press, 1975, p.13.

Does the computer provide the next step on the road from visualization to simulation? If so, sensory awareness will have to compete with *power* and *speed*, the twin gods of computer marketing. From Apple’s “The Power to Be Your Best,” to the now defunct Wang Corporation’s television scenarios of jargonized hyperbole featuring their machine as the absolute mission control of vast, multi-tentacled networks, expanded sensation does not seem to be the point. How big do you want it to be? On the other hand, it is certainly amazing that smaller and smaller machines can perform bigger and bigger tasks. The example of David and Goliath may apply here: the small can compel the large; brain can overtake brawn. And then, there are the related stories of the *apple* and the *seed*, the software and the hardware, all of which would be suitable myths on which to build a resonant, even heroic, saga of the computer.

A myth needs symbols, and I have tried to suggest images—robots, games, mazes, trash collectors and semaphores—that might exemplify some current notions of the computer/human landscape. Each of the pictures used in this essay has been scanned from a print source or selectively “clipped” from the screen, then made into a graphic file and then rendered in print again, by either a laser or ink-jet printer. Whatever their original material identity, they have all been processed by the Macintosh blender. The final image of the semaphore boy, for example, is the product of a selection process peculiar to the age of xerox machines, audio and video recorders, and computers: the wholesale borrowing/“repurposing”/theft of any image or sound that is in public or private circulation. From his original role as a representative of the Boy Scout Jamboree on a 1931

Romanian postage stamp, the semaphore boy calls out and signals to you from his island in the collective sea of images. Reach out and touch someone.

Before there were carphones, beepers and answering machines, before 900 numbers made it possible to have a simulated sexual relationship with a total stranger via telephone, there was a game called “the telephone game.” A group of kids would sit in a circle and then begin to whisper a message from person to person until it reached the ear of the one who first spoke it. What made this interesting, beyond the shared intimacy, was the degree to which the message was altered by the time it made the complete trip around the circle. The “telephone game” was an experiment of sorts, which explored the limits of concentration, memory and trust.

That was then; this is now. Consider a new version of the game, an electronic story, told collectively over a network of computers in different locations around the world. Each person (each semaphore boy or girl) sitting before a monitor would be responsible for contributing another element (image or text) to the story, which could be seen, read and heard simultaneously by all participants. When the story crossed borders, changes of language would require translation. Sitting alone at a terminal, aware of being a necessary link in an unfolding process, on what kind of map would you be operating? Are you a participant or a voyeur, a link or a diversion? Like a blindfolded chessplayer, each storyteller carries the memory or knowledge of past moves, but few clues to the extent or conclusion of the game. There is the sense of a tree—connections growing from a common source—but the branches are not visible. Your mind and the computer’s memory are both processing perceptions *inside*, in preparation for taking action *outside*. The boundary between these two minds is the interface, and the underlying structure which joins them is like a chessboard that you stand on but can’t see. The challenge is to imagine or devise a pattern or strategy so clear, with images and metaphors so apt, that you can pursue the rhythm and pattern of the game even when the ground shifts and the rules change.

Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible. For instance,

the pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be alive, and the very clock on the chimney piece (you know you can only see the back of it from the looking glass) had the face of an old man.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*



## TYPOGRAPHIC MANIPULATION OF THE POETIC TEXT IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AVANT-GARDE

**Experiments with typography proliferated in the early decades of the twentieth century in the works of poets and artists involved with the various movements of the early avant-garde. For artists of the Dada, Italian and Russian Futurist, and Vorticist movements, these manipulations were an integral part of their aesthetic and political concerns. The source which inspired these works and the central issues which motivated these visual pyrotechnics varied considerably from poet to poet. This article traces the relations among aesthetic principles, linguistic meaning, political strategies and visual representation in the typographic work of F.T. Marinetti, Guillaume Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, Wyndham Lewis and Ilia Zdanevich in the Period of 1909 to 1923.**

Johanna Drucker's interest in the visual representation of language in typographic form manifests itself in both academic and artistic pursuits. She has been printing artist's books in experimental typographic form since 1972 and her recent productions include *History of the/my World* (1990) and *Simulant Portrait* (1990). She received a degree in *Ecriture* from University of California, Berkeley, in 1986 and her dissertation dealt with typographic experimentation in the early 20th century avant-garde. She has recently completed work on a biography of Ilia Zdanevich and is working on a book length manuscript dealing with avant-garde typography and early modern art.

*Visible Language*, 25:2/3

Johanna Drucker, pp. 231–256

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Typographic manipulation of the poetic text is a conspicuous feature of early twentieth-century avant-garde literary activity. The small press journals, ephemera and posters of the 1910s, in particular, are activated by graphic experiments whose stylistic features have come to characterize the period: a melange of sizes and styles of typeface, varied orientation of lines on the page, the inclusion of small cliché images, and the generally eccentric visual presentation of verbal elements upon the page. While other equally conspicuous features of early avant-garde activity in both literary and visual arts—such as techniques of collage, abstraction in both figurative and geometric mode, or free verse forms and stream of consciousness prose writing—have been bequeathed from this period to become mainstays of twentieth-century arts, typographic experimentation seems to be largely consigned (at least as a component of mainstream activity) to these early decades.

In addition, a relatively small amount of critical and historical attention has accrued to these works by comparison with the volumes of material produced on the experimental practices which are more readily identified as belonging to either the category of strictly defined visual art or literary production. It is arguable, and within the confines of this article hopefully also demonstrable, that the reasons for the relatively minor place of these typographic experiments in retrospective critical literature can be explained in terms of the threat which such an immodest display of visual manipulation poses to the presumed authority of the literary text and by the equally threatening invasion of the domain of pure visuality posed by the literary content of the typographic poem. Corollary issues such as the demarcation between high arts practices and advertising, between public and private forms of language, between lyrical and confrontational modes of writing, contribute to this argument as well.

### **TYPOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT IN AN ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The historical legacy of typographic experimentation has, as mentioned above, been relatively small. Dada and Futurist typography have not given rise to a proliferation of such experiments and, more pointedly, have not succeeded in achieving an interpenetration of such experiments with mainstream literary forms. This may be explained in part by the sequence of historical events



which led to the ascendancy of Surrealism and to the impact of Andre Breton's influence within the arena of European art and poetry in the late 1920s and 1930s. Breton signaled his break with the literary movements associated with the war and his own adolescence in part by a radical change in graphic style. He adopted the look of scientific journals, a return to the unmarked texts which provide authority to the written word, and banished, in explicit and certain terms, the typographic variety of the Dada style.

In the domain of anglophone poetics, the influence of typographic experiment was always considerably smaller than it had been in either the Russian or European avant-garde, and the literary legacy of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Hilda Doolittle, for instance, was without a conspicuous typographic component (except for those elements of structural presentation which fall within the normal parameters of poetic composition). Not until the post-war movements of Lettrism, Situationist International and Fluxus, as well as the Concretist activities of Brazilian and German poets, was there a resurfacing of typographically complex or conspicuous activity, and this work has not been granted an integral place within either mainstream poetics or visual arts. The graphic character of a movement like Fluxus, itself considered somewhat marginal, is hardly granted full critical attention as an area for critical inquiry—while the work of Concrete poets is predictably ghettoized as some aberrant and exotic form of poetry parlor game. Only fairly recently have examples of typographic experiment begun to find their way into the pages of mainstream poetry journals and been granted probationary status within the ongoing activity of a literary community, indicating a slightly more receptive (though still limited) attitude toward such work.

## THE TYPOGRAPHICALLY MANIPULATED POETIC TEXT

This discussion will focus on a particular kind of typographically manipulated poetic text: specifically, works in which the use of typography is *integral* to the poetic conception, and where the link between authorial intention and typographic form makes the two inseparable. The typographic form in these works is not incidental to the writing, nor is it worked out after the fact of textual production; instead, these are pieces which contain the conception of their visual presentation from the very

outset. These criteria allow for an important distinction between, for instance, the Lissitsky/Mayakovsky collaboration of *For the Voice* in 1923 and the work of Ilia Zdanevich, *Ledentu*, of the same year, since Mayakovsky's relation to the design and production of the visual format of the text was minimal whereas Zdanevich's conception of *Ledentu* included typographic and format concerns in its initial writing. Such a distinction also allows the discussion of the work of graphic designers such as H.N. Werkmann or Herbert Bayer to be put into perspective. The activities of these avant-garde designers had—and continues to have—a profound influence on the look of contemporary publications, especially in the realm of commerce, advertising and mainstream mass media. But their work was of a very different conceptual order than that of their contemporaries who were poets first and foremost.

## Stephane Mallarmé

Serious consideration of the origins of the modern typographic poem must begin, of course, with the work of Stephane Mallarmé. The radical changes he proposed in the visual presentation of poetic text took their complex, though much mutated, form in the qualified version of *Un Coup de Des* which was published in 1897.<sup>1</sup>

Mallarmé's attitude toward the conventional visual presentation of language, literary or quotidian, is well known. Here are the oft-cited passages in which he criticizes the mechanization of reading which occurs with the daily habit of the newspaper:

Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, tracking from one line to the next and beginning all over again—otherwise we will miss that ecstasy in which we have become immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality and raise our obsessions to the level of creation.<sup>2</sup>

Mallarmé's criticism of the newspaper was modified by his enthusiasm for its potential to produce fabulous surprises when folded, causing unexpected juxtapositions in the manipulation of the conventional spatial and temporal ordering by which its reading was normally bound. Calling for innovation in the visual presentation of poetic texts, he also condemned the conventional book:

To the question of books which are read in the ordinary way I raise my knife in protest, like the cook chopping off chickens' heads...

The severity of his criticism was complemented by the radicalness of his solution—*Un Coup de Des* invented a mode of typographic poetics, integral format and spatial disposition through the conceptual space of the book which was without precedent. Many of the examples of twentieth-century avant-garde typographic poetics take their point of departure from other, earlier conventions—either pattern poems in the form of recognizable images (urns, animals and love knots) which date to the first centuries A.D., or the display techniques of advertising typography. But Mallarmé achieved a radical poetic typography which did not derive from any of the formulaic patterns which existed as precedents for typographic manipulation. As one critic notes, “His attempt to give poetry the dimensions of cosmogony through typography and word suggestion was more daring than any poetic endeavor up to the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup>

Mallarmé’s constellation of phrases, dispersed so as to emphasize the gesture of human action in the face of the void of the universe, is a far remove from the iconic forms of lyric verses commemorating the memory of a beloved in the form of an urn or celebrating romance through the twisted strands of a love knot poem. The reductive simplicity of the pattern poem, whose typographic treatment imposed the referential frame of an iconic value onto the text, is completely different in sensibility from the amorphous dispersal of syntactic and sequential integration offered by the complex format of Mallarmé’s presentation, which, as Penny Florence neatly states, “moves thought towards the simultaneity of perception.”<sup>4</sup>

*Un Coup de Des* differs from commercial practices as well: rather than exploit the hierarchical marking of information for publicity purposes with clear communicative emphases—larger, bolder lines announcing product names and virtues, smaller faces carrying more detailed information—Mallarmé makes use of size, weight and style of typefaces in a manner which makes it *impossible* to return them to a narrative syntax, and in fact, the movement and changes in typographic mode within the work are what provides its dizzying visual effect. The dramatically open field, the elaborate obscurantism and the disjunct visual operations are all unique to this work and remain so. Mallarmé had evolved a style of poetic

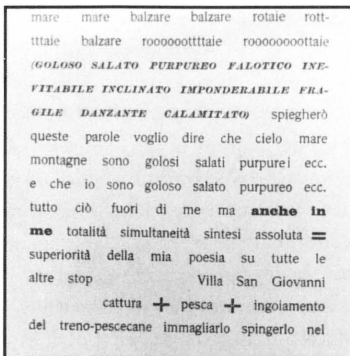


Figure 1

F.T. Marinetti, from Zang Tumb Tuum, 1913.

composition in which transitional elements were reduced to a minimum, highly concentrating the emotional charge of his phrases. The dense poetic work was designed as much for perception and refraction as for reading. Suggestive evocation, a mysterious quality, almost hieroglyphic in the presentation of imagery, became the keywords of his poetic practice. Mallarmé proposed that poetry was a serious instrument of *ascesis*, the means by which the transition from daily world to spiritual universe might be achieved.<sup>5</sup> The act of poetry was the “throwing of dice,” the making, recreating of a universe through the suggestive means of language. The role of typography was critical; it was the means of emphasizing the spatial void around the work, the intonation indicated by placement on the page, and the temporal effects of the work as if it were, in the familiar analogies, a musical score, a constellation, and the listing form of a ship being wrecked.

It would be a mistake, however, to go directly from Mallarmé to the poets of the early avant-garde whose typographic manipulations connect to the symbolist poet merely through an essentially superficial connection of visual style. The important examples of typographic investigation which proliferate in the 1910s, in fact, come out of a variety of traditions and attitudes in spite of their evident visual similarity. These differences are describable in terms of the formal differences through which typographic manipulation takes place. The poets to be examined here were engaged with typographic manipulation at the level of the letter, word, line and page with a range of different intentions vis-a-vis the conception of poetic language. Filippo Marinetti, Guillaume Apollinaire, Ilia Zdanevich, Tristan Tzara and Wyndham Lewis—each of these writers made works whose integrations of typographic format into the poem was an immediate part of the poetic activity.

## Filippo Marinetti

In their forms and their intentions, Marinetti and Apollinaire could not have been more different from each other—or from their symbolist predecessor. Marinetti’s 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* contained no specific references to typographic innovation, but his later manifestos, especially the *Words in Liberty* of 1911, directly exhort his fellow Futurists to reinvent language in its visual, syntactic and semantic aspects. Marinetti’s contributions to this domain

were not equal to the inflated enthusiasm of his rhetoric, but they made ingenious examples of the attempt to invent from extant forms.

The first, and in some ways most intriguing, experiment carried out by Marinetti was the substitution of mathematical symbols into normal sentence structure in the place of conjunctions. A number of these inventions appeared in the 1913 publication of *Zang Tumb Tuum* (figure 1). The linking of grammatical terms, particularly nouns and verbs in the infinitive (in accord with his injunction against inflected endings or conjugated forms of the verb, all considered too bourgeois and frivolous for inclusion within a streamlined language of the modern future), fractured the metonymic conventions of grammar, and the effect was to put the elements of each sentence into more (rather than less) ambiguous relations to each other. In his attempt to make scientific and mathematical and render more precise the connective elements of the linguistic chain, Marinetti, in fact, through this graphic substitution, achieves an atomization of language which redoubles the emphasis on words as individual elements whose meaning is rendered more elusive and difficult to pin down as it is freed from the defining context of use. The plus and minus signs release the words into flux so that the meaning value is radically altered by these conspicuous visual symbols. Instead of the defining *and* or *but* or *or* or *not* there is the nonspecific + or – hanging in the mid-air, both figuratively and effectively, of the sentences.

totality simultaneity synthesis absolute = the superiority of my  
poetry to all the rest stop<sup>6</sup>

or

the igniting of a sloop = a petroleum lamp + 12 white shades +  
a green rug + a circle solitude serenity family<sup>7</sup>

Is there authorial intention here? Does this constitute a deliberate attempt to use the visual properties of typographic representation in a manner integral to the writing process? Absolutely. The conception of the word already presupposes the use of these symbols, and the linguistic effect is not one of mere substitution or replacement, but the production of meaning in a manner which is essentially untranslatable back into a single verbal term. The “Pallone Frenato Turco” piece goes even further in this



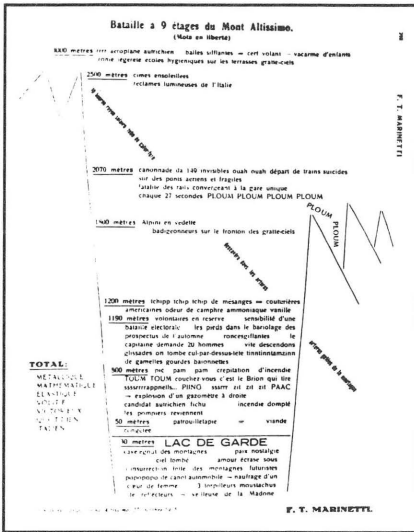


Figure 3  
F.T. Marinetti, "Bataille,"  
from Words in Liberty, 1919.



Figure 4  
F.T. Marinetti, from  
Words in Liberty, 1919.

battle recorded as a letter from the front. The reposing female form in the bottom right of the image serves as the conceptual frame, the point of identification for us with the enunciation of the work, since she is the vehicle for its reception. The girlfriend of the artillery man, she lies in bed reading his account; the image which floats above her may be taken either as the mental image conjured by his words or as the visual page itself, superimposed on her space. In either case, the nude female is the voyeuristic focus for our gaze in keeping with the most, again, banal traditions of Western image making. In any case, the visual impact of this piece goes far towards creating its value; the residual information provided by the words as elements of communicative language is minimal by contrast to their function as dramatic fragments of visual representation.

Marinetti's experiments with liberating language from typographic conventions were limited both in number and in conceptual range. He depended largely upon a mode of pictorial image making which is itself highly conventional though he pushed the thematics of those images into domains dear to his futurist enterprise: machinery, violence and battle scenes. *Zang Tumb Tuum* is the only book which attempts any sustained typographic manipulation; *Words in Liberty* contains the typographic pages as fold-out sheets, reproduced as photographed drawings/collages whose visual complexity was not achieved merely through letterpress means. Marinetti does not sustain a book-length investigation and seems not to have thought of the book in any terms beyond the single gesture of the metallic cover transforming the antique binding into a "futuristic," modern, machined object. But the conceptual space of the book remains unexamined in Marinetti's work, and the authorial extension of typographic manipulation as an integral aspect of poetics is restricted to these few—though highly significant—experimental pieces.

Marinetti's manipulations manifest his thematic concerns with giving written language a modernized style. The agenda is a fashionable operation on language rather than any more profoundly thought through consideration of either a social or poetic role. Insofar as poetry contributes to the larger project of Futurism, it bears the same contradictory impulses—a conservative embrace of the *new* as evident motif of radical change, itself constrained



within the totalizing (and proto-totalitarian) myth of a changed world. Marinetti's Futurism is a utopian dream which goes only as far as the destruction of the old order, without clear vision of what might follow: the limits of this vision show up nowhere more clearly than in the poverty of his typographic imagination.

## Guillaume Apollinaire

Guillaume Apollinaire, on the other hand, displays a wider range and versatility of typographic possibilities in his work. Where Marinetti limited himself to certain mechanical inventions and insertions (mathematical pseudo-scientific signs and rigid pictorialism), Apollinaire investigates the various spaces of the page in a manner which is closer to that of Mallarmé by virtue of its abstract character. The visually marked poems of Apollinaire cannot be described under a single rubric; they range from the calligram form to the non-iconic spatialized arrangement of *L'Antitradition Futuriste*.

The *Calligramme* experiments of Apollinaire borrow from a tradition which is positively archaic and counter to the progressive stylistics of Marinetti's aggressive modernism—namely, the manuscript tradition of calligraphic poetry. Apollinaire also restricted much of his experimentation to particular pages, or even poems, rather than taking up the Mallarmean concept of the book as a spatialized conceptual entity.

The iconic shapes of the calligram quickly subordinate their poetic substance to the visual image which definitely fixes their linguistic value. *Il Pleut* can be about nothing but rain; *La Cravate* will never escape the tight definition of the tie, nor will any of the other visually identifiable shapes let the signifying activity of the verbal elements free from the domination of the signifying value of the icon (*figures 5 and 6*). These works have the virtue of reflecting the casual, almost doodling, quality of hand-written diversions composed on the cafe napkin, and they have the additional virtue of fairly immediate and widespread appeal. Not in the realm of the esoteric, but rather, in the realm of the popular, these poems communicate forcefully and playfully. They add very little to the tradition of pattern poems or shaped poems, which goes back to Greek times, except for the fact that, like much of Apollinaire's poetry, they are concerned with the vernacular and quotidian rather than the mythic or allegorical

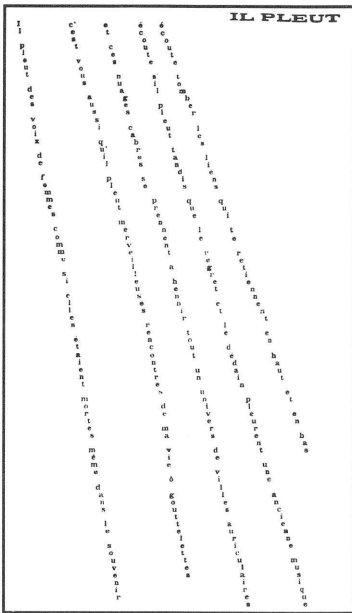


Figure 5  
Apollinaire, "Il Pleut," from *Calligrammes*, 1916.

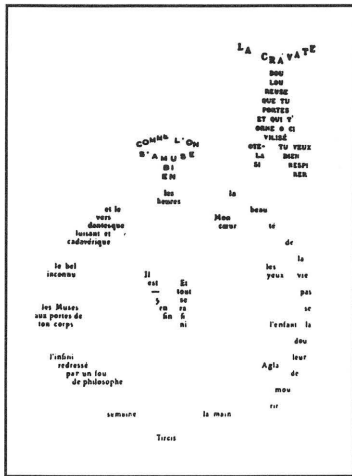


Figure 6  
Apollinaire, "La Cravate," from *Calligrammes*, 1916.

vocabulary of French literary tradition. Emblematically, then, these calligrams signal Apollinaire's poetic and aesthetic stance, one which was revolutionary by its direct accessibility rather than through some negative dialectic of difficulty.

There are a number of other works by Apollinaire, however, which raise more complex conceptual issues simply in terms of the disposition of visual elements upon the page. One of these is a double-page "postcard." Another is a three-page sequence (as it first appeared in *SIC*) of *L'Antitradition Futuriste*. Both of these works force the issue of spatial relations through typographic manipulation into a realm where the linguistic activity of phrases is redefined. The postcard piece, *Lettre Ocean*, borrows from the calligrams a certain iconic relation to that which it represents—mimicking the postcard form and, on the card, mimicking various modes of communication (figure 7). Here Apollinaire is concerned with language as social mode, mediated through various methods of telecommunication which are themselves represented as spatialized forms. As Willard Bohn has pointed out in explicit detail, this poem

consists of three distinct figurative poems...linked together by theme and concept: a postcard, a bunch of keys on a ring, and the Eiffel Tower transmitting a telegraphic message.<sup>8</sup>

The physical record of the postcard bears visible traces of its movement through space and time as a vehicle of linguistic exchange. Thus, the materialized and dematerialized transmissions of language are represented both metaphorically and (as) literally (as possible) on the page. The two sides of the page face each other across that very gulf which is being tranversed by the postcard in its path from Paris to Mexico City and back. The postcard poem activates a field of the page in a manner which is basically without precedent, in spite of its mimetic character. The words relate to each other without a fixed or determined sequence of the phrases. A spatialization of the text goes beyond even the daring *espace* of Mallarmé, whose blanks terrify the reader with their inexplicable void. The space Apollinaire uses in these pages is social and geographic, mapped onto a surface rather than emptying the page of its coordinate points. Rather than destabilize the reader, these pages position the reader in particular relations to the topos of the text.

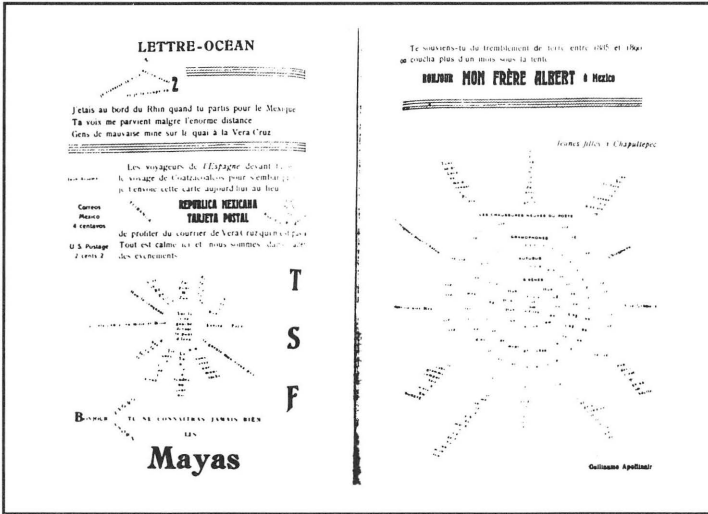
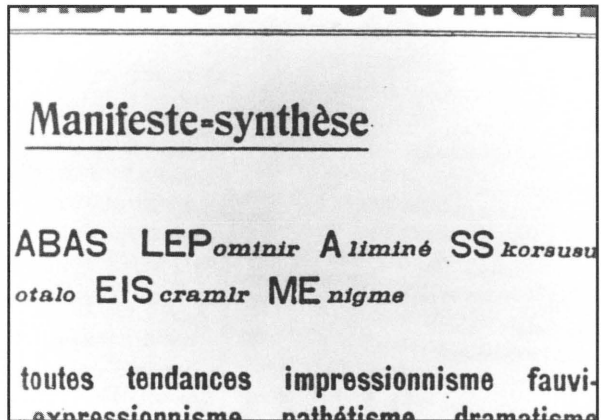


Figure 7  
Apollinaire, "Lettre Ocean,"  
from Calligrammes, 1916.

Figure 8  
Apollinaire, from "L'Anti-  
Tradition Futuriste," 1913.



On the first page of *L'Antitradition*, Apollinaire makes use of two sizes of type to pick a phrase out from another set of words in which it is embedded: "A Bas le Passeisme" is marked out of "ABAS LEPominir A limite SS korsusu otalo EIS cramir MENigme" (*figure 8*). This device, also well known in advertising typography of the period, makes specific use of a visual device which is not redundant to the linguistic activity. The rising face of this ghost sentence—subtext becoming sur-text, as it were—suggests

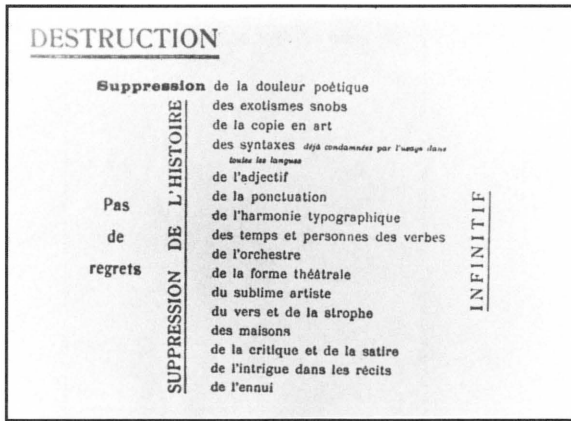


Figure 9  
Apollinaire, from "L'Anti-  
Tradition Futuriste," 1913.

a lurking message, a constant possibility of new messages being formulated within the extant order of the symbolic, as if language contained the seeds of that which could reinvent its terms from within. At the bottom of this same page, under the heading "Destruction," Apollinaire makes a list of all of those outmoded clichés and tiresome aspects of poetic activity which deserve, in his scheme, to be suppressed (*figure 9*). Apollinaire stages this proposition by framing the terms between two poles: the named suppression of history and the open-ended right hand margin in which the term *infinitif* (the infinitive) demarcates a second limit. In physical terms, this allows the list of elements to be suppressed to *all* be framed by a single phrase, contained under its influence, as it were. A contrast can be made between the list of elements as a subset of "Destruction" or "suppression" and the activity of the *suppression de l'histoire* which makes each phrase an active participant in (not merely an elucidated member of) a generative field of meaning.

## Tristan Tzara

While Apollinaire made use of certain typographic techniques which had been popularized or rendered conspicuous through commercial use, Tristan Tzara is remarkable for having conceived his very technique of Dada typography directly from the advertising mode. There is no prior poetic onto which this activity is grafted; rather, the activity of appropriation, cut up juxtaposition of elements, is both mode and expression. The concept of a public poetic is pushed farther in Tzara's work than in Apollinaire's; these Dada pieces seem partly to be the place from which he begins, conceives, the very exercise of writing.

Tzara's poetics are clearly anti-lyrical from the very outset of his French language publications. *The Realities Cosmiques Vanille Tabac Eveils*, for instance, refuses the authorial voice of an internal monologue, opting instead for the juxtapositions and eclecticism of an outward-directed observer recording linguistic material from the available field. Not surprisingly, Tzara's famous prescription for the manufacture of a Dada poem includes just such appropriative tactics, mechanized into a formula for cutting up newsprint materials and pasting them down in the order in which they occur as picked back out from the heap of scraps.

The sense of poetry as a by-product of the public realm of already spoken, printed, articulated language is explicitly marked in his typographic activity. The relatively tame production of *Realities* contains at least a few words whose appearance render them irreconcilably other than the typographic field into which they are dropped (*figure 10*). But it is in the pieces produced in the pages of *Dada* magazine, most specifically, *Bilan* and *Bulletin*, that Tzara's sense of the typographic marking of language carries its strongest weight (*figures 11 and 12*). The pages are composed of single lines with the visual appearance of having been snipped almost randomly from pages of journals or other publication. The language is that of advertising, rail schedules, consumption and cosmetics, confections and tabloid headlines. The visual character aggressively embodies this random appearance, and the haphazard quality extends even to the placement on the page, a ragged right and left margin bearing no particular relation to voice, breathing, timing or the conventional

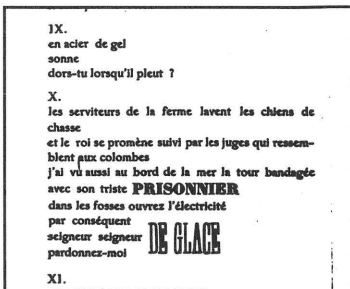


Figure 10  
Tristan Tzara, from *Realities Cosmiques*, 1914.

*espace* of poetic structure. There is manuscript evidence to support the supposition that Tzara exerted tremendous energy to manufacture these works—in at least one instance there is a hand-drawn manuscript version of such a poem which copies the letterforms in calligraphed quality as clearly as possible. Whether this served as a dummy for a typesetter or as a study of effects is hard to say, but it makes clear that Tzara's engagement with typography was studied and deliberate, not incidental or offhand.

The effect of this typographic marking is twofold: it first of all identifies the poetic piece with a realm which is

**BILAN**

vivant, crastacé long bleu rigélement  
 s'ajpe la paradis et touche **A BAS**  
 vide baléant la faille paradis **A BAS** **cataphalque**  
 élève sur les rails à travers hypoactais ressortis ressemblants  
 sur ses dents sur les dents l'écoule sentis bases les -u-  
 qui telle actual extraction de hampepas ou corridor inicolore  
 hante parli et les insérés du vide (soude)  
 des nombres on réveille le nombreil (soude)  
 tel le paragraphe et la seringue pour phosphore

**ZZ**

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**auto gris autopsie cataracte**

à néologismes prophylactiques des crânes astronomiques régimes

T<sup>re</sup>s<sup>in</sup> Tzara

Figure 11

Tristan Tzara, "Bilan," from SIC, October, 1919.

conventionally determined to be utterly other than the poetic—i.e., the realm of commerce. The significance of this gesture cannot be underestimated: the very legitimacy and authority of poetic activity was called into question through this blurring of boundaries, since the positions of the reader and the poet, and the mediating function of language are all changed by this act. Poetry here threatens to participate in the instrumental linguistic activity of *reclame* rather than to remain in the aesthetic realm. An equal (or even greater) immodesty attaches to the visual

display of varied typefaces and sizes, whose flashy irregularity and visual dynamics activate the page with all the brazenness of back-page advertising or broadside sheets.

But the second effect, more subtle, is more profound—it demonstrates the extent to which language circulates through the supposed boundary between a public and private domain, and that language indeed *does* change in that circulation. There is a point of demarcation—and it may even be argued that this point is marked in typographic conventions—between the domain in which language is assumed to be *private*, that is, capable of formulating or articulating the subjective realm of experience, and the domain in which language is assumed to be public, that is manufactured for a use value which is other than the personal.

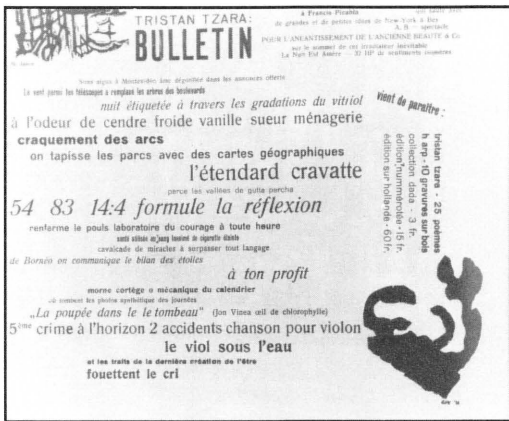


Figure 12  
Tristan Tzara, "Bulletin,"  
from Dada #3, 1918.

Typically, typographic conventions reserve the unmarked, even, grey page for those authoritative discourses which either pass themselves off as personal/subjective or as authoritative by reason of their efforts at linguistic precision, accuracy, or truth claims. These texts are generally, historically, in contrast to the marked texts of salesmanship, of display, of seduction, in which a hierarchical distinction among elements of the linguistic material is already coded into the typographic presentation in a manner which advertises its manipulations. Here, information is not necessarily coded as truthful, but it is coded as manipulated rather than purely, modestly; authoritative. Marked texts mark both the voice of enunciation and the

site—historical, temporal, social—all in material terms. The lines in Tzara's *Bulletin* are, in principle, traceable to their "source"—but there is not necessarily a real source. These lines, captured though they may have been, have been transformed and reset from the cases of a single typographer, which obliterates the possibility of recovering their "original" place. Not only is it not significant to recover the original, but it is important that it is the way the presentation insists upon the suggestion of original sources which so provocatively makes the point of this typographic work.

By using this language of public display, Tzara allows the traces of real sites and modes of production to be manifest in the typographic text. The issue of authorial intention also shifts its center in his work to a concern with identifying that point of mediation between a personal subjective reception and the publically produced material encountered and recycled back into a poetic text. It is this latter activity which so forcefully divorces Tzara from the lyricism which precedes his work—a lyricism which, by the way, Breton will for all his supposed appropriation of the Dada approach, forcefully reinsert as central to the poetic practice of surrealism.

## Wyndham Lewis

Another poet within the early avant-garde who struggled to make use of this externally oriented voice and method of marking it typographically was Wyndham Lewis. The pages of *Blast*, which appeared in 1914, have all the directness of visual structure conventionally reserved for broadside sheets designed for rapid public consumption (*figure 13*). The hierarchy within the work is designed to serve up the polemic rhetoric for ready assimilation. There is no coy floundering or ambivalent tactic of seduction in the bold face sans serif type or in its assaultive promotion of the phrase "Blast....England" in the first line. The subordination of the qualifying phrases even within that opening statement, "First (from politeness)," to the typographically emphasized central statement allows for no confusion as to intention.

The political position, its alignment with radical critique of monolithic British governmental authority, is unequivocal at this particular moment of Lewis's development. The graphic style is that of the most basic



and simply produced affiche, utilitarian and direct, like those of the workers' unions or parties which appeared in ephemera, broadsides and handouts. There are no frivolous or extraneous diversions in this work; it does not have either the arcane hermeticism of Symbolist work or the whimsical variety of Dada or Cubist games. The seriousness of presentation emphasizes the seriousness of intention, though as the piece progresses, its linguistic reach also extends through the playbill poster range by which particular spectacle events advertise to their audience.

The implication of an audience, a public group identifiable as audience already available to receive this language and this language in this form, is marked, also,



Figure 13

Wyndham Lewis, from Blast, 1914.

in this typographic treatment. The work is not intended as a poem in the classical sense, but as a manifesto, a call to action, a goad to engagement, and as such its concerns with materiality have been focused to serve those ends. This is a poetic which is highly devoid of personal voice and information, aimed like a handmade verbal bomb at the complacent populace. These are words engaged in a

wild stab at liberty, attempting to use the visual impact of their presentation as liberating energy. In this they succeed, at least by their approach and site, far more than the works of Marinetti, which remained largely concealed within the pages of otherwise conventionally formatted journals.

With its bright cover and large, brash, typographic announcement of its radicality, Lewis's *Blast* presents a radical face to the public realm. That this radicality rapidly imploded into pro-fascist conservatism is well known, but neither form nor format carry clear political affiliations; rather, they announce the intention to act in a public and often political realm. The domain of typographic experiment tends to be confined to the left-oriented and utopian-dreaming radicals, rather than to extend to those retro-conservatives whose very aesthetic constrains them to repeat endlessly the visual models whose legacy is associated with tradition, quality, and entrenched status quo. The call to radical action announces itself with all available means, whether typographic or poetic or visual/graphic.

## Ilia Zdanevich

And finally, no discussion of the avant-garde manipulation of typography would be complete without at least a nod towards the Russian poets active in this field. The single most outstanding contribution comes from Ilia Zdanevich, whose typographic work was both more extensive in quantity and more systematic in its integration with writing practice than that of any of the other, even better known practitioners (Lissitsky most especially comes to mind).

Zdanevich's conceptual underpinnings link him directly with the *zaum* poets of the 1910s, especially Krutchenyk, with whom he had both close personal and professional relations. The influence of Khlebnikov and the writings done by Khlebnikov and Krutchenyk, "The Word as Such" and "The Letter As Such" in 1912 and 1913, had strongly articulated a position which, if Zdanevich did not know it directly through these texts, was part of the general ambience of Russian avant-garde literary and visual activity. A characteristic element of this sensibility was a concern with materiality, that is with the *faktura* or making of a work in all its textural, physical, formal means. Partially a result of the legacy of Symbolist synaesthesia, with its overemphasis on the materiality of the sign as the

means to induce that transcendence toward the symbolic realm, and partly the transformation of that sensibility into the modernist concern with a codification of various formal properties as if they might be ordered with the scientific discipline of languages, this attitude toward materiality extended itself through the *zaum* poets and also, according to a radically different set of motivations in the constructivist designers, into typographic work. The constructivist sensibility which surfaces in the Bauhaus, through the strongly influential visits of Lissitsky, takes its point of departure from a design position and utopian agenda, rather than directly from poetics. The work of poets concerned with the typographic manipulation of

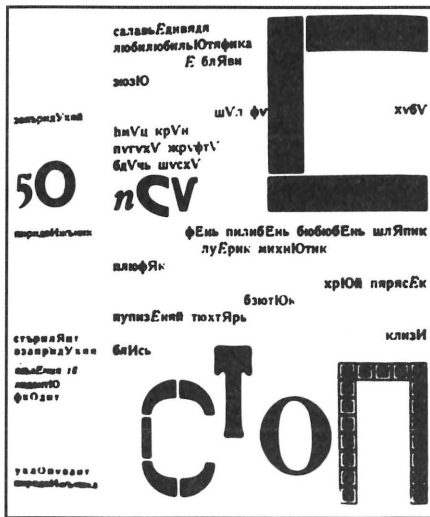


Figure 14

Ilya Zdanevich, from *Ledentu*, 1923.

their texts was far more limited, both in influence and in actual manifestation than was that of these graphic visionaries. In spite of Khlebnikov's interests in material visual expression, for instance, his work is hardly, barely typographic in its printed treatment. The circumstances which contribute to this are partly biographical, and one of the reasons Zdanevich's work was able to be realized in such typographically complex terms was that he had apprenticed to journeyman printers in Tiflis in the late 1910s and had direct experience with the composing of type. The labor-intensive production of his pages and those he designed for the books of Terentiev and Krutchenyk, among others, during the period 1917 to

1920 relied heavily on his direct input, not merely in terms of design suggestions, but in actual setting of at least some of the work.

Zdanevich's typographically dazzling texts belong in large part to a cycle of *zaum* plays he wrote between 1916 and 1923. Intensely personal, they describe an autobiographical progression toward sexual maturity with all sorts of attendant power struggles and conflicts of gender identity. Romance, sexuality, representation and the investigation of language on all levels—material, physical, verbal, enunciative and psychoanalytic—are all both thematically and formally investigated through the cycle of five plays. The typographic treatment becomes increasingly dense and complex as the cycle progresses, from an attempt at scoring the pages as if they were musical or orchestral works to a degree of visual specificity untranslatable into verbal delivery (*figure 14*). By the time Zdanevich is setting the final play, the theater of its enactment is in fact the book itself; the page, the dramatic space of encounter by reader with the event of the book. Its sequences, timing, revelations and ordering are all designed to provide, not a surrogate experience, but the experience of the drama.

Zdanevich's work is a far cry from the politically marked texts of Tzara. The *zaum* of his plays is hermetic, personal, remote and almost inaccessibly idiosyncratic. The sense of authorial intention as integral to typographic form has rarely been so thoroughly explored, and certainly among the typographic poets of the early avant-garde, there are no instances of a more developed *typopoesis* than that which appears in Zdanevich's *Aslaablitchia* cycle. In this endeavor, he approaches Mallarmé more closely than any of the other poets of the avant-garde, because he conceives of the *book* as a space, as an integral whole, and because he depends on and believes in the effective power of the visual form of typographic language as communicative—not because it can be translated into linguistic values, but because it cannot. Here the eye is the receptive instrument to be massaged through typographic work, in the firm belief that the material form will be in itself substantive as an element of the poetic expression.

It seems important to at least make one point of contrast with the collaborative work, *For the Voice* of Lissitsky and Mayakovsky from the same period, if only for the sake of

distinguishing between the notion of graphic design and that of *typopoesis*. The stunning clarity in the presentation of *For the Voice* derives from the exceedingly happy agreement between the forthright quality of Mayakovsky's short works and Lissitsky's graphic boldness. Deceptively simple, the bright two-color configurations exploited the resources of the typographer's drawer—but after the fact of the writing. The designer's transformative activity is what permitted Lissitsky to describe his part in the book as analogous to the relation between “a violin and a piano.” By contrast, the work of Zdanevich is analogous to the production of a score by a composer, and the difference resides in a distinction between a formative conception of the typographic mode and a representational or design conception. Lissitsky designed *For the Voice* as a book, as an integrated and fully active space delimited by the textual parameters of Mayakovsky's text, but working back into the production to articulate a relationship among elements internally. The design *serves* the text, while in *Ledentu* the design derives from the text, evolves simultaneously with its writing, so that the corpus of the typographic and format elements are already present within the literary composition: the design is *formed with* the text.

This distinction is significant only in so far as it allows a descriptive differentiation to separate those works in which a visual component works as a surplus and even extraneous or eliminatable factor and those in which the integration occurs at so fundamental a level that it requires taking the visual into account in any interpretation which attempts to assess the production of meaning in the text as a whole. The implications of this distinction may be traced further in the emergence of a tradition of literary interpretation which grounds its authority in the claim to investigation of a transcendent or absent signified, apprehended through a process which necessarily depends upon dismissing the physical, material and visual presence of the signifier. Such activity, outmoded as it may have become in the last decade, leaves a residual trace in both the terms on which visual and literary art practices are assumed to operate as signifying practices, and on the bases which have been used to trace a history of each of these practices through the dominant modes of modernism in the twentieth century.

## TYPOGRAPHIC PRESENCE AND POETIC MEANING

In brief, the distinction effectively consigns the visual to operate within a phenomenological mode of what eventually becomes defined by mid-century as an “aesthetics of presence,” i.e., that which assumes that the materially present may be effectively grasped and experienced as a “pure plenitude.” Privileging the materiality of the signifier, this approach characteristically devoids works of visual art of any social or historical specificity beyond the instance of their own occurring. The literary corollary to this, as is well known, was New Criticism’s attempt to grant the poem equally autonomous status, but as a set of linguistic terms available for interpretation within the most rigorously formal of terms. In such a practice, the notion of materiality was always assumed in terms of the surrogate function of the written form—elements such as rhyme, meter and accent, which were by definition missing from, but indicated by, the visual presentation. The concept of the absent signified as the fundamental premise of linguistic operation was nowhere more successfully implemented as an interpretive strategy than in such activity. But the legacy of this distinction hardly disappears with the fall from favor of the New Critical approach within literary studies or of the High Modernist critic in art theory.

My intention here has been to make some assessment of the variety of ways in which materiality in typographic practice inscribes attitudes vis-a-vis the formation of the authorial subject in both aesthetic and political ways. That there is no unified description available of these many practices is merely testimony to the argument that the typographic diversity of early modernism has a relation to the equally heterogeneous field of modern art practice in general. The implications of a typography which is directly and vividly concerned with materiality are several, but most importantly they involve a clear inscription of attitude toward demarcating (or, contrarily, blurring the boundaries between) public voice and private language, toward marking the site of enunciation in both historical and social terms (rather than with effacing it for the sake of claiming a transcendent authority in the text), and toward negating the transcendent character of logos by refusing to allow the linguistic sign to be represented in a supposedly transparent visual mode. This last, the refusal

of linguistic transparency, is perhaps the point which has most poignantly entered the critical discussion of poetics in the late modern reassessment of early modern art practices.

The instances of typographic or visual poetry which have occurred in the post-1945 period have largely been consigned to the ghetto of concrete poetry or perceived as the lunatic fringe of Lettrist extremism. The developed theoretical writings of the Concretists remain largely unintegrated into a late modern canon, and the Lettrists continue, like the avant-garde typographic poets of the early twentieth century, to fall through the cracks of either literary or visual arts narratives of the historical period in which they flourished. The attitude of contemporary poets and editors towards typographically manipulated works, at least within my own experience of the last fifteen years, has been one of suspicion bordering on hostility. This response is hardly incidental, grounded as it is in the writer's fundamental attachment to the authority of language as *logos*, an authority which suffers relativism and subversion of its absolutist claims nowhere more directly than from any activity which calls aggressively for attention to the visual materiality of the text as significant, not merely incidental, to its meaning. There is continued attachment to a visual format in which the poem, prose or essay seems to "speak itself" without marking the site or moment of its enunciation, and a continued perception that visual manipulation of the poetic text is irrelevant, messy, immodest and distracting to the "serious business" of real writing.

In the last twenty years, however, a significant number of writer/artists have systematically worked to explore the domain of the typopoetic or the authorial *espace* of the book, escaping the legislating force of "good form" and venturing into this ambiguous territory. I am thinking here—rather randomly—of such varied writers as Tom Phillips, Hannah Weiner, William Gass and Tina Darragh. The range of projects in their work is already considerably broader and very differently conceived of than that of the Lettrists and Concretists whose contributions in the 1950s and 1960s have yet to be fully reconsidered. All of these are far from the works and concerns of the poets of the early avant-garde, and yet, though the field of typographic and visual poetics has proliferated, it has remained largely

outside the domain of mainstream critical perception. This only demonstrates the persistence of certain high modernist biases toward distinguishing *image* and *logos* as distinct orders of representation, rather than as signifying practices which both participate in the play of presence and absence as they may operate through the simultaneous apprehension of materiality and meaning in a poetic text.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cohn, Robert Greet. 1949. Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Des, an Exegesis*. New York: Yale French Studies, AMS Press, p. 3. Cohn makes the point that the 1897 version was "printed in normal page sequence and therefore did not render Mallarmé's full and final intentions, which were represented only posthumously in the NRF edition of 1914, following the proofs of an edition Mallarmé was preparing when he died."
- <sup>2</sup> Mallarmé, Stéphane. 1982. *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Mary Ann Caws. New York: New Directions, pp. 77–84.
- <sup>3</sup> Michaud, Guy. 1965. *Mallarmé*. New York: New York University Press, p. 162.
- <sup>4</sup> Florence, Penny. 1986. *Mallarmé, Manet and Redon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 116.
- <sup>5</sup> Michaud. *Mallarmé*, p. 138.
- <sup>6</sup> Marinetti, F.T. 1913. *Zang Tumb Tuum*, p. 36.
- <sup>7</sup> Marinetti. *Zang Tumb Tuum*, p. 36.
- <sup>8</sup> Bohn, Willard. 1986. *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914–1928*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 20.



## COVERING THE TEXT: THE OBJECT OF BOOKBINDING

**Binders have long contributed an important material dimension to any consideration of the polysemy of the book-as-object, and the heritage of the *livre de peintre*, or artist's book, has left its mark on the bookbinder's awareness of interpretive strategies for approaching the text. This article examines the practices of five contemporary French bookbinders whose diversity of creative styles only masks fundamental common preoccupations: the creation of decors that are harmonious and not competitive with the text, and the need to ally aesthetic pleasure in the finished decor with a structural integrity that preserves the book as an object of reading, not an object for viewing.**

John Anzalone is associate professor of French at Skidmore College. His interests include literature and film, the visual arts and the book arts. His writing has appeared in such journals as *L'Esprit créateur*, *Word and Image* and the *Bulletin du Bibliophile*, among others. He is working on an article on typographic play in selected editions of the works of Raymond Queneau.

Ruth Copans is assistant professor in the Lucy Scribner Library at Skidmore College, where she is reference librarian with additional responsibilities for preservation and rare books. She is also an art bookbinder/book restorer who studied in Paris with Paule Ameline and Sun Evrard for forwarding, and Roger Arnoux and Camille Berthaux for finishing. She has lectured on binding and preservation, and is writing on the guild of Women Bookbinders.

*Visible Language*, 25:2/3

John Anzalone and Ruth Copans, pp. 257–269

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Even a rapid survey of the history of French bookbinding in the twentieth century reveals a wide diversity of creative styles that mirror in varying degrees the major artistic developments of the modern era. From such practitioners as Marius Michel, Rose Adler and Pierre Legrain in the Art Nouveau/Art Deco period, to modernists like Bonet, Creuzevault and beyond, binders have contributed an important material dimension to any consideration of the book-as-object. That this is a recent development is underscored by Jean Toulet who, in his discussion of the bindings of Georges Leroux notes:

*Il y a un siècle seulement que les reliures, par une fracture décisive, et par la grâce d'individualités fortes, sont devenues le substrat de créations spécifiques par lesquelles une technique vénérable, étonnamment constante en son principe, est dépassée par des projets artistiques individualisés.*

(It has only been a century since bindings, thanks to a decisive break and strong personalities, have become the substratum of specific creations through which a venerable technique of remarkable consistency has been outstripped by individualized artistic projects.)<sup>1</sup>

Any decisive break with tradition, such as the one to which Toulet refers, implies a reassessment in the form of a simultaneous recognition and questioning of that tradition. Such a reassessment, as well as a number of its ramifications, will be the subject of what follows, as we examine interpretive strategies involved in the binder's approach to the text. Part of an ongoing inquiry into the creations of several leading binders in France, our interviews and our work in the studios and classes of these artists have led us to investigate the threads that link French bookbinding to major developments in the graphic and plastic arts by way of the specific characteristics of art bookbinding; these include, but are not limited to, the problems presented by the decorative surface, the incidence of sculpted forms, and the exaltation of sheer materiality in the ongoing experiment in covering the text. For the book as fashioned by the bookbinder is an object with a voice, and part of our inquiry involves the ways which binders speak with that voice, and hear and understand it in the work of their colleagues.

In every book-lover there lurks somewhere, and to a greater or lesser degree, a book fetishist: the heft and feel of the book, its format, the smell of the paper, the

beauty of the printed characters, the various textures of the covers, from the humble papers and cloths to the luxurious, grainy skins—all these sensual, tactile pleasures rarely leave readers indifferent. But the history of art binding in this century—indeed, since the latter part of the nineteenth century—has tended increasingly to make of the decorated binding a rival of the text it covers, an *objet de spectacle*, something to be viewed, not touched.

Several historical factors conspired to create this tendency, which evolved rather rapidly around the end of the nineteenth century; all contributed in greater or lesser degree to the break to which Jean Toulet refers. Among the more significant must be counted:

- The gifted studio practitioners of pastiches of previous binding styles, who, by their manipulation of the history of binding practices and forms, brought to the fore a self-conscious awareness of their craft and, thereby, the beginnings of its legitimization as an independent art form. They also begin the validation, in artistic terms, of the distinction between the craftsman who executes a binding, and the *maquettiste*, or designer, who creates it.
- The nineteenth century illustrated, industrial cloth binding, known as the *cartonnage*, that made elaborate cover decors in mimetic harmony with the book's subject or theme a given (one thinks of the famous *cartonnage* bindings on the Hetzel editions of Jules Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*). This problem of mimetic illustration or decor constitutes, of course, a defining point in the transition towards twentieth-century art generally. In the book arts, as Renée Hubert has shown, mimesis undergoes a decisive mutation thanks to the surrealists.<sup>2</sup>
- And finally, the development and subsequent success of the *livre de peintre*, which had the effect of unsettling and thus problematizing the heretofore hierarchical relationship of author to illustrator and text to image, at the same time as it promoted the idea that creative expression found in the book a privileged field of activity.

But one of the end results of the constantly growing importance of the decorated book surface, and the one that creates the most serious paradox, has been that art bindings become art objects, bearing on their decorated

surfaces fixed evocations of the world inside a book that will not be handled or read. As a case in point, we can cite a visit to the Bibliothèque Doucet in Paris, where research on book illustration required one of us to consult a rare edition (only 122 copies printed) of three tales by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, illustrated by J. E. Laboureur. The library's copy happened to arrive in one of the glorious, trendsetting bindings of Rose Adler. The book was presented with the infinite precautions that the safeguard of such a trea-

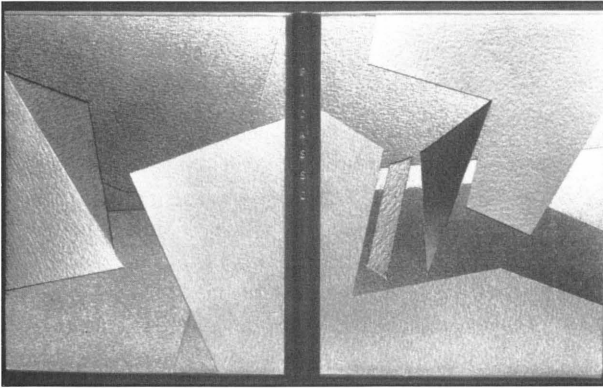


Figure 1

Paule Ameline, Picasso.

sure requires. One was, of course, advised not to touch the covers or the decorations, lest fingerprints or other traces remain. Further, and more ominously, it was forbidden to open the book more than half way, for fear of causing creases in the spine, or—something too dreadful even to contemplate—splitting the spine or the joints. (An additional problem contributing to the sequestering of books inside glass cases, and one to which we shall return, has been that French binding, while aesthetically satisfying, has the reputation, especially for the more functionalist English tradition, of being functionally fragile.) Such caveats are obviously appropriate, and quite comprehensible, but the fact is that the binding impeded research on the book.

Progressively, if unobtrusively, a sharp change in the attitudes of contemporary binders can be discerned. The binders under consideration in the next few pages are vastly different in taste and in style. All, however, are united by a common understanding of their craft that involves a constant *remise en question*, a questioning of the

bound book that is predicated on an awareness that the aesthetic and the functional are perhaps nowhere so dramatically interrelated as in the bound book, an object it is nearly impossible to approach without a host of preconceptions. As one binder noted in an interview, “*on se demande ce que cela peut bien être, un livre relié...*” (One wonders what “a bound book” could be...).

Paule Ameline describes herself as a contemporary in style, but “*traditionnelle dans le moderne*” (a modern traditionalist). Her evolution as a binder underwent a dramatic change several years ago in response to a technical, material problem: the increasing expense involved in the execution of standard gold and mosaic decors. It must be recalled that in the highly structured and specialized world of French art-binding, a forwarder does not usually execute decors. As a design binder, Paule Ameline’s desire to become as self-sufficient as possible in the creating and

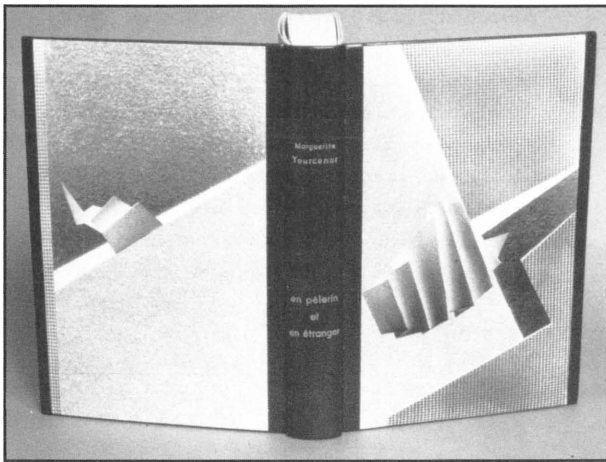


Figure 2  
Paule Ameline,  
*M. Yourcenar's en pèlerin et en étranger.*

executing of her decors led her to experiment with different materials not usually associated with art-binding, and specifically airbrush treated papers and collage, as in her bindings for works by Picasso and Marguerite Yourcenar (see figures 1 and 2). Using a variation of a commonplace structural design known as an *encadrement*, where the external covers are edged in leather, thus serving as a frame to the decor, she has used collage or folded papers painted with an airbrush to play with three-dimensional perspective.

The use of the airbrush allows for a soft, sensual juxtaposition to the smooth, almost textureless surface of the box calf. In this way, the binder's ingenuity has allowed her to employ calf for structural strength, but to compensate for its lack of grain in the layered surfaces of the papers. As we shall see in the work of other binders, the interpretive strategies deployed in creating a decor for a specific text are often accompanied by reflections of a practical order. Paule Ameline has not lost sight of the fact that the book is the object.

Claude Honnelaître emphasizes her sense that the book has a material presence that she does her best to preserve when she talks about having “*un décor dans mes doigts*” (finding a decor at her fingertips). Hers is a *travail de recherche* that seeks to integrate the book and its history into modernist techniques like collage and technology through play and attention to random elements. To this end, she has used abstract photography, torn or shredded papers, collage and xerox imagery. Indeed, when the drum of her copier became scratched, she created a new decor from the regularity of the irregular copies the machine was producing. For the *Edit du Roy pour le règlement des relieurs et doreurs* of 1686 (see figure 3), she has used an encadrement binding to set off a decor attained by the multiple passage of the cover sheets through a typewriter. The resulting patterns are entirely produced by the strike of letters and/or blanks; they externalize the

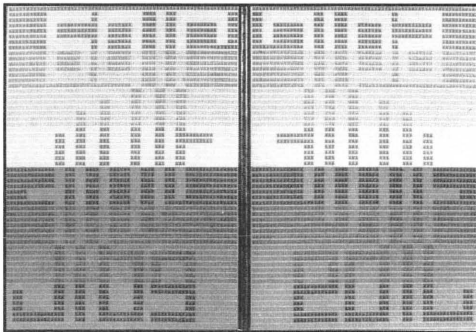


Figure 3

Claude Honnelaître, *Edit du roi*.

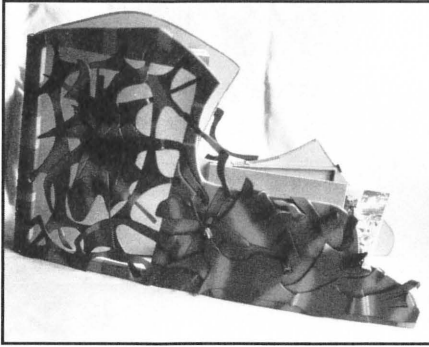


Figure 4

Daniel Knoderer, *L'araignée d'eau*.

problem of page setting so as to recall the typographical enterprise in which the binder comes to participate. Fittingly, the book contains the statutes governing the binder's craft in the seventeenth century, even as its covers, in their passage from lighter to darker impressions and from illegibility to legibility, celebrate the printer's magic. Like Paule Ameline, and in a reverse alchemy typical of modern binding, Claude Honnelaitre has sought to confer a textural richness to her designs in the absence of the gold tooling that has so dominated binding tradition.

Daniel Knoderer's work can at first glance seem the exception that proves the rule. It presents at once a defiant extreme and a logical conclusion of a common feature of binding, that is, binding as sculpture. With its mosaics and layered, carved surfaces, binding frequently involves the relief and texture that we commonly associate with the sculpted object. Knoderer picks up the force line that relates binding to sculpture and follows it through exclusively. He thus arrives at a sculptural object that in its self-conscious mimicry displays the humor of the post-modern object. To see one of these bindings is not to identify it immediately with bookbinding or even with a book, but with the book-object, or the object as book. For the surrealist tale *L'araignée d'eau* (see figure 4), he has externalized the baroque creepiness of the narrative by a manipulation of a falsely mimetic design. The green and gold plastic and box calf of the covers are a material illustration of the text, but one that reveals first and foremost in its materiality, not its referentiality.

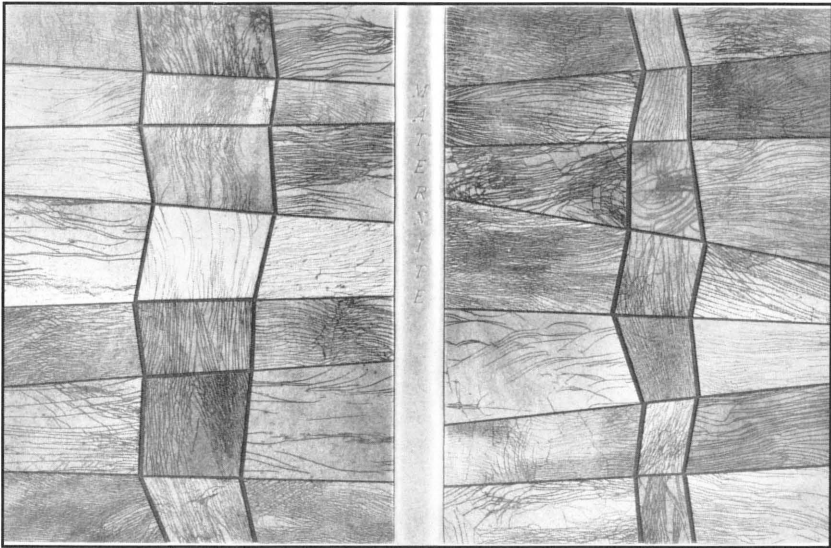


Figure 5

Sün Evarad, *Maternité*. By permission of Didier Foubert, Paris.

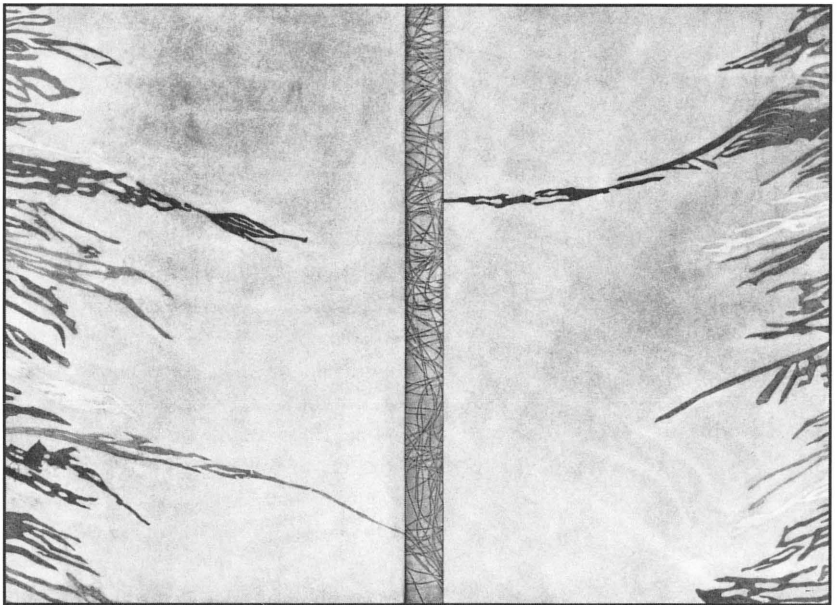


Figure 6

Sün Evarad, *Proust/Alechinsky*. By permission of Didier Foubert, Paris.



Sün Evrard sees the book as a support to a creative meditation that results in a material poem. This binder is strongly committed to conservation and preservation techniques, outspoken in her conviction that the book must be functionally strong and solid enough in its structure to retain its initial purpose—to be read and savored for the text it contains. She, too, is constantly open to chance and to random possibility, particularly in her use of exotic skins (kangaroo, crocodile, ostrich) and her unorthodox treatment of more traditional skins. She has moroccan and oasis leathers skived or shaved so that the commonly used finished surface, or *fleur*, is feathered off, thus revealing the veins and intrinsic patterns in the skins. Once blow-dyed, these become the fundamental basis for a decor that may later be embellished in ways that tend to accentuate differences of texture.

But Sün Evrard is committed not just to the creative aesthetics of her bindings. She works tirelessly on the strength and durability of their structure. To this end, she often uses what she calls a simplified binding (*see figures 5 and 6*), a seemingly delicate, but surprisingly sound construction that allows for maximum flexibility and the complete opening of the text. This binding is a direct response to the centuries-long practices when binding deferred to finishing, when the book's construction evolved to facilitate the work of the gold tooler who created the lavish and luxurious out of the drab. But this frequently resulted in a book whose joints were fragile, in part because the skins were skived too thin, and whose text could not easily be accessed because the stiff spine could not give. The cover boards in a simplified binding, on the other hand, are connected by a flap directly to the opening joint: the book can be opened flat without doing damage to the text or the covering material.

Sün Evrard's serendipitous use of natural texture can also be seen in the illustrations presented here. Unfortunately, what one cannot see is her simultaneous play with color, used to accentuate and highlight the natural tones of the more muted skins. The spine on *Maternité* (*figure 5*), for example, is in bright red box calf, and the third block down on the center panel has been dyed a similar color, giving an unexpected highlight to the subtle, muted greys of the other blocks. She, too, strives to create a binding which is a truly integrated part of the whole, which

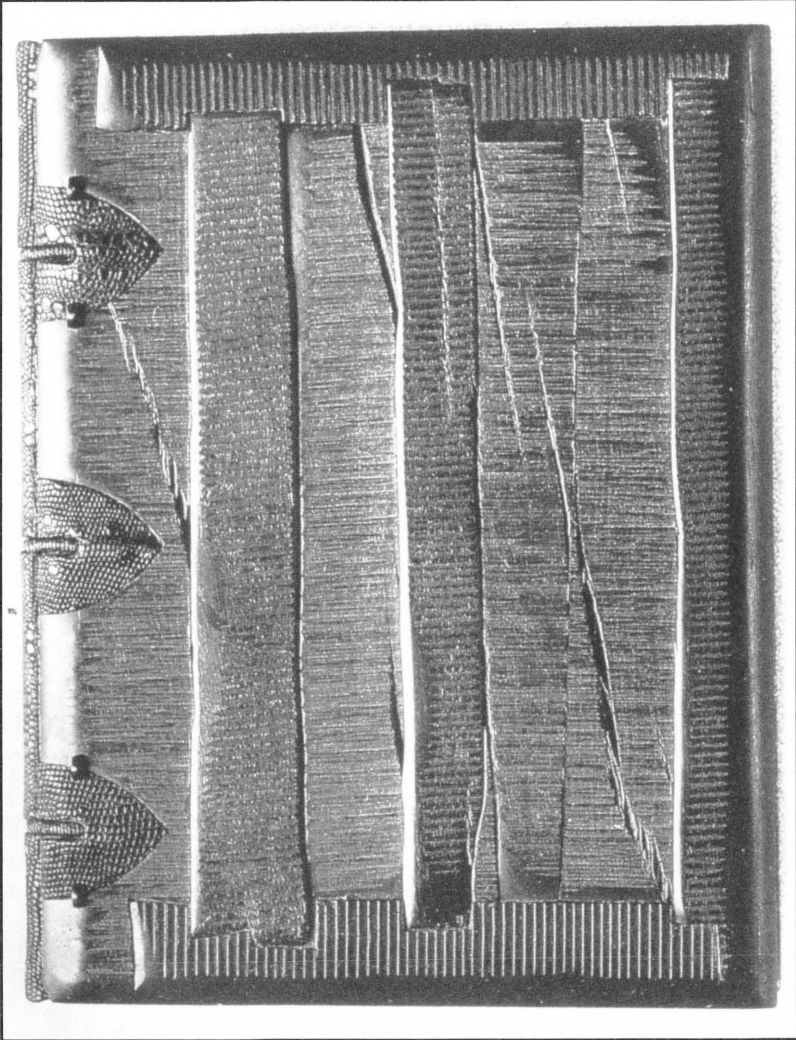


Figure 7

Jean de Gonet, Michaux's Peintures.

embraces the text and is ultimately at its service, but with great refinement and art.

Jean de Gonet is commonly recognized as one of the most important binders working today.<sup>3</sup> Regarded as an unparalleled innovator, he is self-taught in the profession and, thus, brings to his craft little baggage regarding past orthodoxies. His style begins, and indeed ends, with the architecture of the book. In reverting to the type of solid skeletal structure found in books of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, he emphasizes perhaps more visibly than any other practitioner the profound relationship between structural and aesthetic integrity. He also restores to the object its mystery, the newness the book had when so very few people had books. For his binding of Henri Michaux's *Peintures* (figure 7), he has combined exotic materials like cut scraps of wood (ebony) and lizard skins with a spine of exposed cords. His bindings open a broad realm of possibilities, shedding the more traditional shackles of gold and mosaic decors, shedding even the titles that personalize the book.

His style is especially open to whim and humor so that, like Daniel Knoderer, he can be seen as a postmodernist in his sense of formal play with givens, and in his insistence on surfaces and recyclings. The binding he created for Octavio Paz's *Hommages et Profanations*, illustrated by Zammartu (see figure 8), is a case in point. Using traditional calf, but *oxydé et ciré* (burnished and polished), he has produced a pastiche of the so-called *du seuil* bindings of the seventeenth century. The characteristic decorative pattern of the *du seuil* binding has, however, been manipulated by sculpted relief and unexpected touches of color, resulting in an emblematic binding, an ahistorical creation that announces the history of binding by placing it in a decidedly self-conscious twentieth-century context.

As the examples of the five binders discussed above demonstrate, there are many different solutions to the problem of covering the text without smothering it. In their emphasis, for the most part, on textures and functional form, these practitioners of an ancient craft display an abiding concern for the harmonious wedding of binding to text. Indeed, to describe what they attempt, we may borrow from the jargon of the musician, who is said to "cover" when he performs a tune written by someone else, and in so doing, announces his interpretation even as he

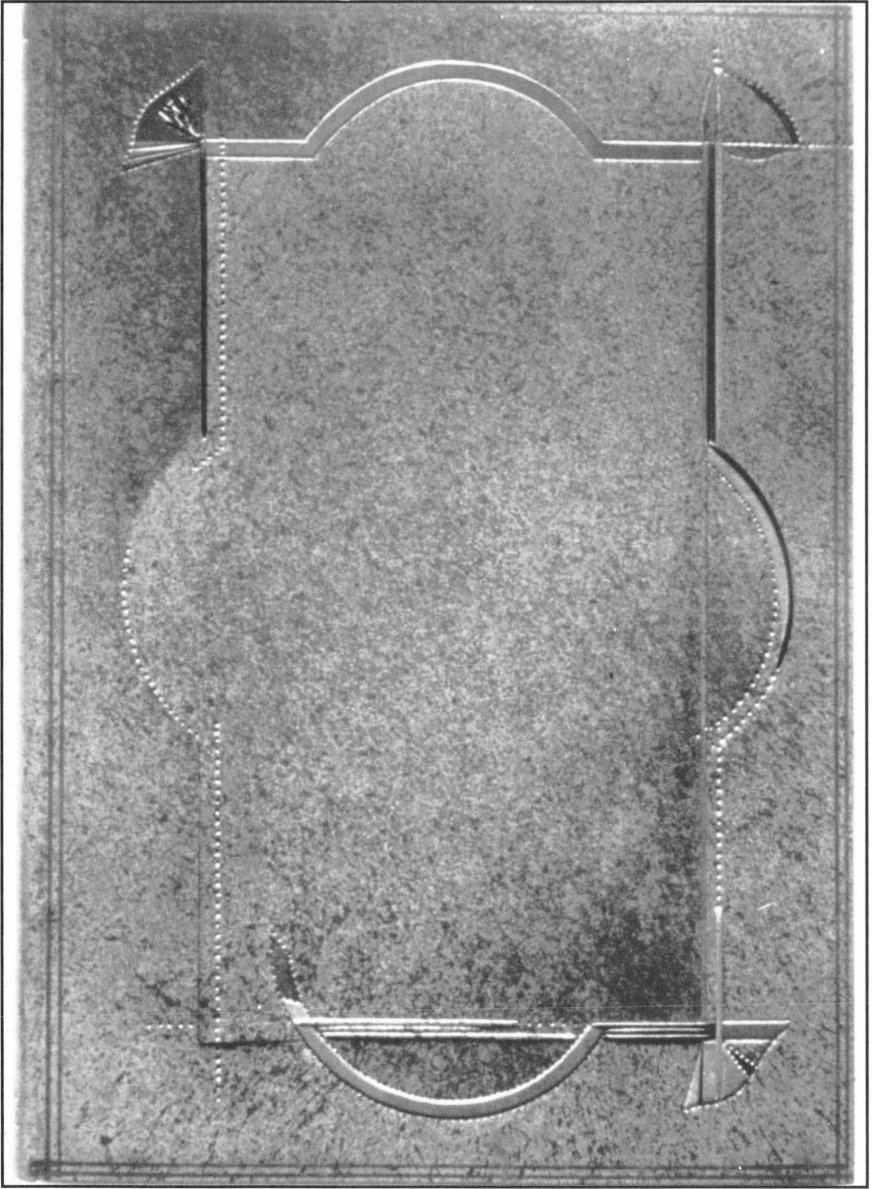


Figure 8  
*Jean de Gonet, Paz's Hommages et Profanations.*

acknowledges its source. Now, scholars such as Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier have argued persuasively that the physical supports of the text—its paper, type, *mise en page*—are far from neutral or indifferent elements to the practice of reading. That bookbinding should be added to such a list seems both obvious and overdue. The virtuoso, contemporary renderings of the bound book by the binders studied here result in objects that are at once strange and familiar, and that invite the reader to a renewed, attentive consideration of an object which is, to quote Baudelaire, “*jeune, et pourtant très vieux*” (young, and yet so very old).

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jean Toulet, Introduction to *Georges Leroux* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1990) p. 9.
- <sup>2</sup> On Jules Verne *cartonnages*, see Michel Roethel's two articles in *Connaissance des arts*, April and September, 1978. For an exhaustive study of the *cartonnage* binding at that critical moment when artisanry and industrialization collide, see Sophie Malavieille, *Reliures et cartonnages d'éditeur en France au XIXe siècle, 1815–1865* (Paris: Promodis, 1985). Finally, on the significance of mimetic illustration and its fate at the hands of the surrealists, see Renée R. Hubert, *The Surrealist Illustrated Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> See Dominique Fourcade's provocative preface to *Jean de Gonet, relieur: une première retrospective* (Bruxelles: Bibliothèque Wittockiana, 1989).



## Reading the Book

## READING THE MULTIMEDIA BOOK: THE CASE OF LES FLEURS DU MAL

**Contemporary book illustrators have often experimented with mixed media. Roger Bezombes' collage illustrations for Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (Strasbourg: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985) exemplify this experimentation at its best. The artist's appropriation and juxtaposition of often disparate images from ancient to present day iconography shows the diversity of the text's potential and points to the universality of Baudelaire's poetic gesture. In his articulation of a new architecture for the book, Bezombes provides a robust visual plane whose intersections with the verbal register foster novel conjugations for reader/viewer reception and frame them within unprecedented paradigms of image-text inquiry.**

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Eric T. Haskell, 271-282

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Rhode Island School of Design

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*L'art est le générateur de nouvelles visions du monde, de progrès humain, de désir de l'idéal.*

Serge Strizyk

A century has passed since the first illustrations for *Les Fleurs du mal* appeared in 1890. During this time, well over a hundred artists have illustrated Baudelaire's *chef-d'oeuvre*, bringing to it an array of imagery rich in conception and interpretation. The text's influence has even moved beyond the boards of the book to inspire a host of artistic activity in media as varied as painting, drawing, glasswork and furniture design. From Matisse to Magritte, passing by Rouault and Gallé, *Les Fleurs du mal* has given rise to nothing short of a cult of images in which artists, and especially illustrators, have transcended mimesis in their picturing of Baudelaire's poetic universe.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the large quantity of illustrated editions of this *nec plus ultra* of nineteenth-century poetic texts, few artists have been willing to experiment with avant-garde notions of the book arts as they apply to architectural modes of technique, format and presentation. To my knowledge, the Parisian artist, Roger Bezombes,<sup>2</sup> is the first to use collage and mixed media in his interpretation of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Limited to 150 copies and published by Les Bibliophiles de l'Est in 1985, this edition of Baudelaire merits attention. Both the *forme* and the *fond* of the enterprise are experimental in nature. Bezombes questions



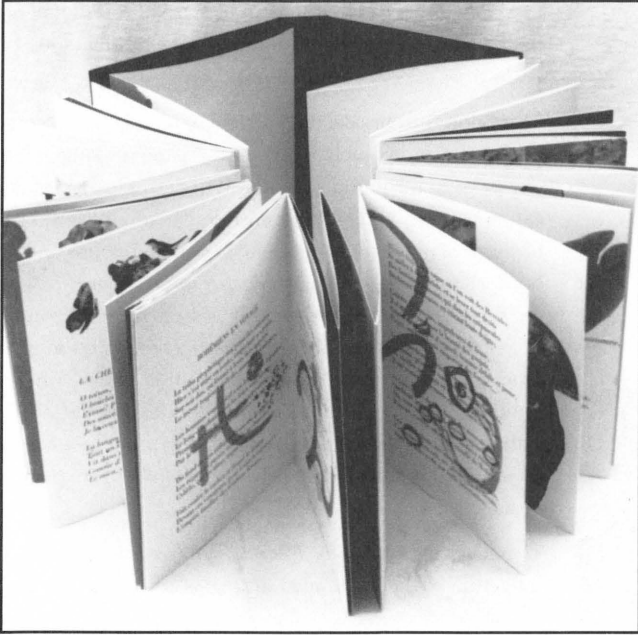


Figure 1  
Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
illustrated by Roger Bezombes,  
designed by Michael Kieffer,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.

traditional norms of reader/viewer participation in the arena of image-text inquiry, stretches beyond them, and thus evokes new strategies in framing the poetic gesture.

Bezombes' Baudelaire is, at first glance, a verbal-visual surprise.<sup>3</sup> From its black, cloth-covered box and boards springs a dazzling floral tribute which heralds the essential configurations of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The tome's architecture, conceived in collaboration with *éditeur-libraire* Michael Kieffer, is impressive in scale (see figure 1). Sixty-one pages fold out, accordion style, to form a vast panorama 45 feet, 9 inches long by 11 inches high. Several possibilities of "reading" are proposed by this format. The most obvious, a traditional page-by-page approach, is conceivable despite the unsewn spine. But this rapidly proves to be unsatisfactory because the *avant-garde mise en page* resists conventional double-page spreads in which clear delineations are drawn between image and text. As Bezombes' graphics mix with typography and burst across the paginal seams, the overflow encourages the reader/viewer to fold out pages in order to see them as sequences, either flat or standing. In both cases, the graphism may be read from left to right; but in the latter, a slight manipulation of the pages allows for a circular disposition of

the book and, in turn, for a circular “reading” of it. This final guise erases imposed notions of beginning and ending, of *ouverture* and closure.

This book thus breaks the barriers of its boards to become an exhibition. As such, a turn of the page no longer marks our passage through its terrain. With a single glance, it can now be embraced in its entirety. Reading/viewing becomes a perpetual experience at once timeless and borderless in scope. “*J’ai voulu créer un Kakémono*” (I wanted to create a *Kakemono* screen,) <sup>4</sup> stated Roger Bezombes in a recent interview. But the artist accomplishes so much more here by proposing an architectural scheme whose multiplicity of dispositions recasts Baudelairian aesthetics with insight as the act of reading is rewritten. In a word, the book has moved from private to public, from page to stage.



Figure 2

Roger Bezombes,  
cover for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.  
Permission courtesy of the artist.

The cover of Bezombes' *Fleur du mal* (see figure 2) is a reflection of the innovative strategies at work in the architecture of the book as well as a prefiguration of the illustrator's novel graphic approach. From a black cover, the title is cut out, partially revealing the frontispiece which lies behind it. The format invites voyeurism. Through a series of typographical windows, we view only fragments of the initial image. Immediately, Bezomes equates *les fleurs* with *les femmes*, and the book opens under the sign of a female bouquet (see figure 3). Humor is not absent from this composition in which women are alluded to in such visually vernacular terms as “birds” and “dolls,” and whose feline qualities are vigorously underscored by the presence of four cats. The original maquette for the illustration exhibits Bezombes' use of collage over heavy underpainting. As frontispiece gives way to title page, the typographical cut-out of the black cover is recast against a white background. This time, the imagery is fittingly floral except for the insertion of the female-feline presence in the word “mal”—an appropriate addition in terms of Baudelairian poetics. Author and illustrator are identified on the following fold. Although the dedication of the volume to Théophile Gautier is curiously incomplete, the cat-woman image of the title page's “mal” is reiterated, and the placement of the rose as *cache-sexe* prefigures the sensual proclivities of the textual fabric to follow.

This book's exterior—its somber box, boards and cover—seems to shore up Baudelairian spleen. And yet, its interior immediately flees the thematics of descent and disil-

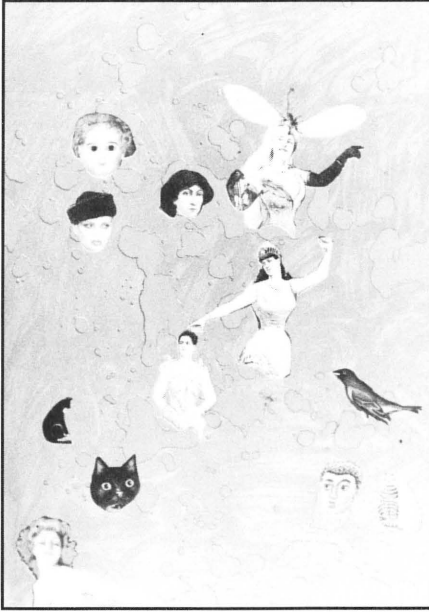


Figure 3

Roger Bezombes,

frontispiece illustration for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.

lusion in favor of ascent and *idéal*. Over forty-five running feet of image and text proclaim the lighter side of the poet's duality in this panorama drenched in vibrant color. At the outset, the illustrator's intention was to leave aside or outside, in terms of the box and cover, what he sees as Baudelaire's "*côté noir*"<sup>5</sup> and to focus rather on the first words of the text's title: *Fleurs*. Bezombes' choice of the twenty-five poems in this edition clearly reflects this intentionality. Each piece in some way suggests a floral presence which is, in turn, transcribed onto the graphic scenario, either subtly or overtly. The artist's visual vocabulary is thus predetermined by the textual choices he has made. Herein lies the verbal-visual unity of these *Fleurs du mal*.

As the pages unfold and Bezombes' fresco comes into full view, the proliferation of bouquets recalls the frontispiece but acts with even more precision in refinement of the floral leitmotiv. Like so many signposts across this panorama, the bouquets assure that the textual unity of the verbal plane is preserved. Furthermore, they facilitate intersections between the two. The illustrations for "*Harmonie du soir*" (see figure 4) and "*La Mort des amants*" (see figure 5) typify the bouquet thematic. In the former, a vase decorated with a Lucas Cranach nude serves as the text's "*encensoir*"/"*ostensoir*" as it holds a bunch of roses

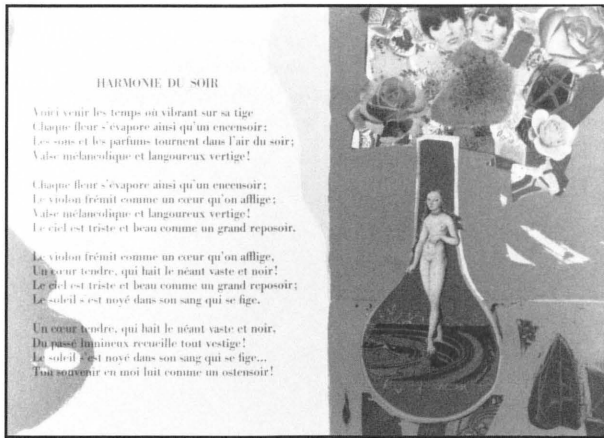


Figure 4

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "Harmonie du soir"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.*

Permission courtesy of the artist.

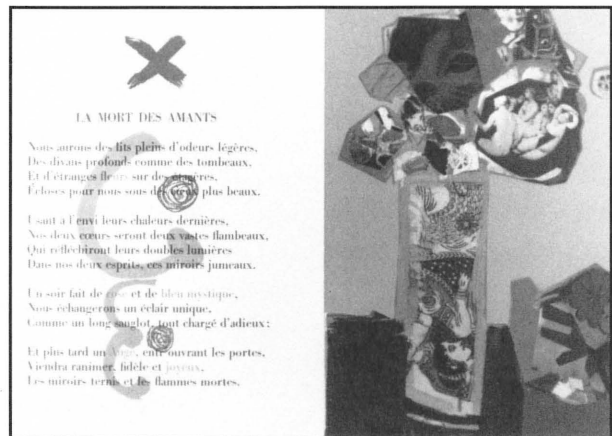


Figure 5

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "La Mort des amants"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.*

Permission courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6  
Roger Bezombes,  
illustration for “A Celle qui est trop gaie”  
from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l’Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.  
Permission courtesy of the artist.

interspersed with Carnaby Street, Twiggy-like “birds” from the 1960s. In the latter, Ingres’ odalisques bloom next to Asian beauties. Both images use plano-graphic back-grounds to support the collage materials, which heighten the surface and invigorate visual impact. Bezombes’ manipulation of traditional collage fragments mixed with recognizable passages from well-known paintings or popular imagery enriches the reader/viewer’s experience. This mélange is potent because multiple layers of textual meaning are recapitulated onto the visual score. Vases no longer appear in illustrations for “*Le Jet d’eau*” and “*La Mort des artistes*.” Now clustered in constellations on single stems, the bouquet persists as idea, itself container and mirror of Bezombes’ affinities with Baudelaire.

In the illustration for “*A Celle qui est trop gaie*” (see figure 6), the bouquet overflows the page’s edge to become a head-dress for the visage at its center. Bezombes’ red typographic colorations accentuate the words “*couleurs*,” “*ballet de fleurs*” and “*bariole*,” which thus become an integral part of the image. This visual ballet of colors needs no dance to activate its poetic potential; the mesmerizing female gaze largely suffices. A similar linkage between typographical and pictorial planes occurs in the illustration for “*L’Ennemi*” (see figure 7). Only one of the “*fleurs nouvelles*” is necessary to illuminate the narrator’s fervent aspira-

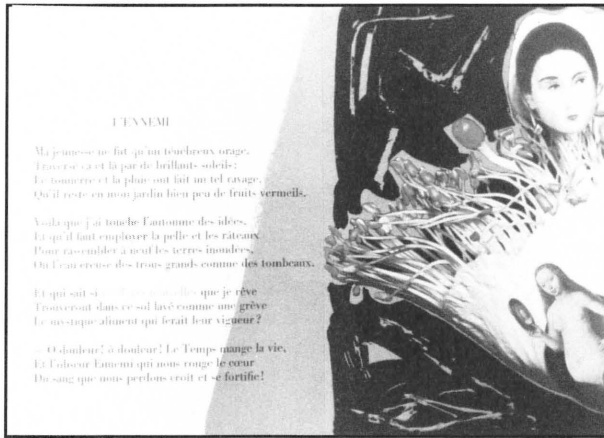


Figure 7

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "L'Ennemi"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,

*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.

tions. Composed of a collage on collage, the dream it articulates is otherworldly. Bezombes borrows the flower's pistil from a Northern Renaissance nude. The fact that she poses before a mirror insinuates the introspective nature of Baudelaire's text. Pictured as the male entity in the floral cluster, a pierrot-esque narrator dreams with eyes wide open. He alone can pollinate the pistil that instigates lyric creation. In terms of the text, this creation is the sole element capable of holding time, "L'Ennemi," at bay and provoking crystallization of the *idéal*. Bezombes centers on the poem's aspirations, elaborates them in terms of his floral figurations, and extends them onto the visual plane. The intrinsic value of illustration as interpretation thus comes into focus.

Experimentation is the hallmark of Bezombes' graphic gesture. Much of it has to do with the manner in which he constructs and preserves the unity of this work. For example, as a complement to his collages, the artist adopts a Miróesque handwriting which he applies freely over the text. Not only does it become the visual *trait d'union* between the collage bouquets examined earlier, but it also constitutes a new form of *écriture* within the existent verbal-visual context. This painterly writing is sometimes limited to a single poem on a single page. More often, it

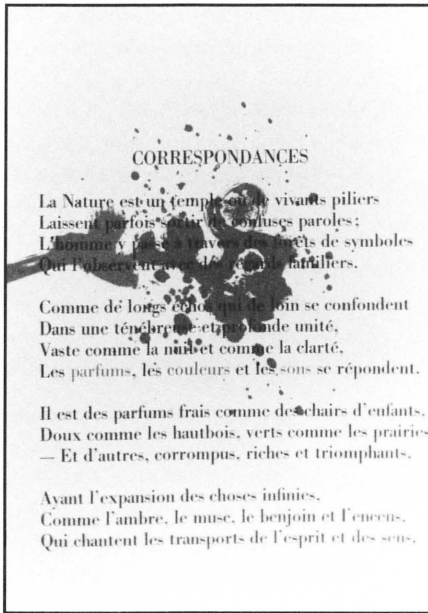


Figure 8

Roger Bezombes,  
illustration for "Correspondances"  
from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.  
Permission courtesy of the artist.

crosses folds and acts as a graphic link to poems of similar thematics. This connecting device, or crossover, propels the reader/viewer through the volume as it reinforces the visual unity of the ensemble. Passing from the abstract to the figurative, this *écriture* becomes a stem whose flower explodes within the typographical contours of "Correspondances" (see figure 8). Its red pigmentation is echoed in the second stanza's "couleurs," while "parfums" and "sons," tinted blue, remain visually sublimated, felt but almost unseen. In such details, Bezombes refracts the essence of Baudelaire. To illustrate "Les Chats," the artist's *écriture* actually becomes text. The image on the facing leaf invites further typographical games in which collage is used not only for the feline imagery, but also for the characters that compose the poem's title.

Further experimentation surfaces across the four-page sequence for "Les Phares" (see figure 9). Here, privileged words of the poem become petals, as blue and red circles hold them to green stems. Such innovative typographical treatments serve to blur distinctions between verbal and visual components at work in Bezombes' suite. We also note that the name of each *artiste*/*"phare"* is printed in colored ink but that Watteau is the only one circled. This prefigures the collage, dominated by "Gilles," in

which a pair of eighteenth-century, Watteauesque fans coiffe a ghostly female presence—the sole survivor of past “*fêtes galantes*.” What is striking here is the artist’s removal of the entire Watteau stanza from its normal position between Puget and Goya. Now, as a postscript to the poem, it prepares the terrain for Bezombes’ illustration due to an improved proximity to it. More importantly, this newly relocated verse becomes in itself a sort of collage, implicating displacement as it describes new dialectics imposed by the artist upon the text. Habitual approaches to picturing poetry are thus called into question in this, the epitome of radical image-text representation.

As a final example of Bezombes’ experimental verve, we turn to his treatment of “*L’Invitation au voyage*” and “*A une Malabaraise*” (see figure 10). The linkage previously examined in terms of the artist’s *écriture* is drastically amplified here. The illustration itself now constitutes the crossover or propelling device par excellence. Bezombes pairs the poems under their common denominator of exoticism and places them on opposite sides of a double-page illustration whose beginning and ending spill over the folds and onto the typography. This ensemble cannot resist being viewed in its entirety. As such, its six-page sequence becomes a sort of triptych whose central panel

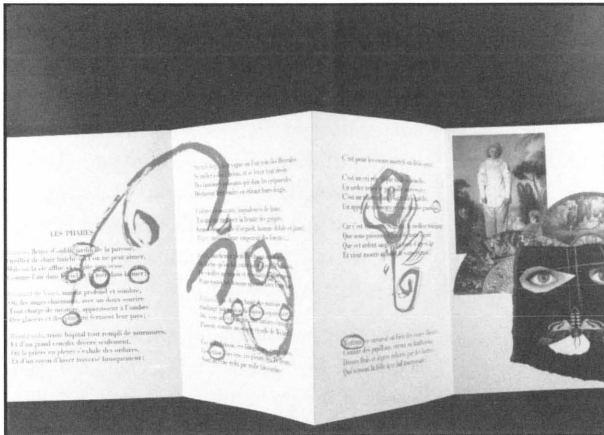


Figure 9

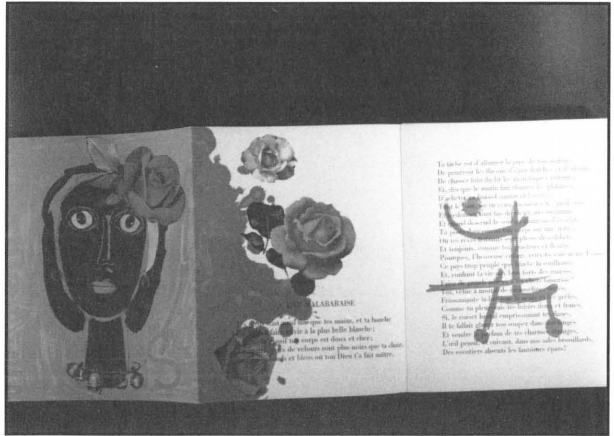
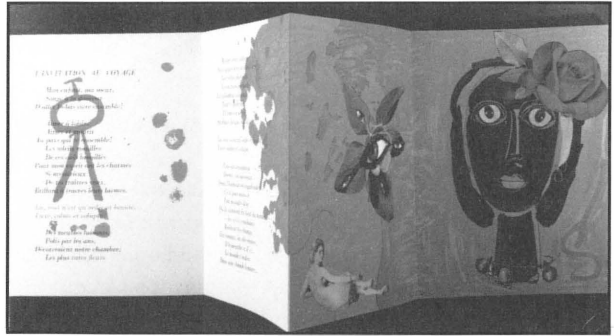
Roger Bezombes,

illustration for “*Les Phares*”

from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l’Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.





Figures 10  
 Roger Bezombes,  
 illustration for "L'Invitation au voyage"  
 and "A une Malabaraise" from Baudelaire's  
 Les Fleurs du mal,  
 Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.  
 Permission courtesy of the artist.

animates both of the flanking texts as it shores up the essence of Baudelairian *exotisme*. On the lower left, the pose of Ingres' odalisque portends the "*luxe, calme et volupté*" of the first poem. On the right, the reverie continues as we encounter the Malabaraise of the second poem, who is borrowed from Picasso. Both the female images inhabit the same plane. Both share the common onerous consciousness of the two texts. And the texts, in turn, profit from the heady atmosphere of the illustration. Finally, a blue, multi-eyed flower to the left acts as perhaps the ultimate graphic gesture of Bezombes' suite. Its assim-

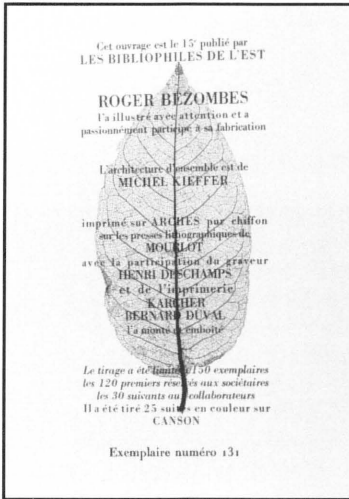


Figure 11

Roger Bezombes,  
colophon for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,  
*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est*, Strasbourg, 1985.  
Permission courtesy of the artist.

ilation of the otherworldly *femme-fleur* at once privileges seeing and equates it with the very *raison d'être* of poetic production.

As a fitting conclusion for this book, Bezombes' colophon (see figure 11) features a leaf whose skeletal appearance is a catalyst for closure on this edition's floral season. If the artist's rich palette draws heavily on Ingres, Miró, Picasso and others, as well as on popular imagery, his last borrowing is taken directly from nature. Neither underpainted, overpainted nor layered, this final collage is the ultimate reduction of the technique to its simplest expression—a coming full circle, in pictorial terms.

Throughout this book, Bezombes seeks to articulate on his visual register the infinite diversity of the text's female-floral configurations. His appropriation of, splicing in, and juxtaposition of often disparate images from ancient to contemporary iconography shows the diversity of the text's potential in terms of inspiration and points to the universality of the Baudelairean *oeuvre*. Abstraction is privileged over representation. Bezombes never promotes a "reading" of the text in absolute or definitive terms; neither does he accept servility to it. Rather, his approach provides a robust visual plane whose intersections with the verbal register foster novel conjugations of perception. In sum, his bouquets never cease to crystallize the *fleur-idéal* and to reframe it within unprecedented paradigms. Above all, this contemporary *livre d'artiste* presents a missing entity in the constellation of illustrated editions for *Les Fleurs du mal*—an entity in which collage and experimental architecture provide new strategies for interpreting Baudelaire's poetic universe.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For further information concerning Baudelaire's illustrators, see the author's "Illustrations for Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*: Symbolist Dreams and Decadent Nightmares," *Symposium*, a special number entitled Baudelaire and His Artists, 30:3, Fall 1984, and "Traumlanschaften anderer Welten," preface to *Blumen des Bosen*, by Charles Baudelaire (Göttingen: Verlag Bert Schlender, 1985).
- <sup>2</sup> Roger Bezombes has been active in several artistic domains since the 1940s. Along with book illustration, he has done painting, engraving, posters, medal design, tapestry and stage sets.
- <sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrated by Roger Bezombes, designed by Michael Kieffer, printed on arches pure chiffon paper and produced on the lithographic presses of Mourlot in a limited edition of 150 copies (Strasbourg: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> Telephone interview with Roger Bezombes, Paris, July 16, 1990.
- <sup>5</sup> Telephone interview with Roger Bezombes, Paris, July 16, 1990.

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## THE "NON-BOOK": NEW DIMENSIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST'S BOOK

**Some contemporary books blur the distinction between book and sculpture, presenting three-dimensional objects that toy both with the shape of the book and its definition. Three exemplary "non-books" are examined in this study in order to show how the dimensions of the book have been expanded. As it blurs disciplinary boundaries, the contemporary "non-book" questions its own status as a "book," thereby enriching and enlarging our definition of what a book might be.**

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Figure 1

When the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers exhibited *Pense-Bête* in 1963, it signaled his turn from poetry to art. Fifty copies of his last book of poems were embedded in spheres of plaster. As a book that cannot be read, *Pense Bête* is an extreme case of the book transformed into object.<sup>1</sup> This same tendency can be seen in less radical form as contemporary books assume new and unusual shapes. Barbara Harman's *Some Mountains* (1988) is a sculptural book that folds into a pyramid. In Laurie Szujewska's *Milk Carton* (1983–4), printed paper is formed into a three-dimensional carton, with typographical configurations of the word “milk” appearing on it. Peter Beaman and Elizabeth Whitley's *Deck of Cards* (1989) consists of 52 cards measuring 5 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches by 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches housed in a transparent box.<sup>2</sup> Pyramids, milk cartons, cards—however various in form, these objects are all created, marketed and sold as books. At its worst, the contemporary “non-book” is pure gimmick, or in the case of most pop-up versions, bad taste. But even the finest bookmakers today are experimenting both with the shape of the book and with its definition.

The edition of Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round* by the Arion Press (1986) is an example of such innovation. Perfectly round, the book is nine inches in diameter. It has a bright pink cover with the title printed in circular formation around a blue globe. Accompanying the book is *The World is Not Flat*, a square companion volume describing the publishing history of *The World is Round*, by Edith Thatcher Hurd. If you order the book from Arion Press, you will also receive a pink balloon reading “The World is Round.” To some extent, the balloon is in keeping with the spirit of Stein's first book for children.<sup>3</sup> “Pure delight, simple pleasure, is what little children will get as they listen to ‘The World Is Round,’” wrote one early reviewer.<sup>4</sup> But what this reviewer didn't recognize is that Stein's text also has a darker dimension.

“Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around.” So begins the story of Rose, a character based in part on Stein's nine-year-old neighbor at Bilignin. The narrative has no coherent progression, but it is filled with events: Rose is bitten by the neighbor's dog because she shut him up in a room; Willie, Rose's cousin, almost drowns in a lake filled with water lilies;

Willie gives Rose a lion, which she returns; Rose climbs to the top of a mountain, conquering her fears and superstitions. At the end, "Willie and Rose turned out not to be cousins, just how nobody knows, and so they married and had children and sang with them and sometimes singing made Rose cry and sometimes it made Willie get more and more excited." While the humor of this passage is directed towards adults, the happy ending and the unusually accessible plot are designed for youthful readers.

If *The World is Round* is less indeterminate than Stein's earlier works (*Melantha*, *Tender Buttons*, "Preciosilla," for example), it exhibits the same interest in presenting what Marjorie Perloff calls "the changing present of human consciousness, the instability of emotion and thought."<sup>5</sup> As Rose and Willie ponder the physical dimensions of the world, they struggle to discern the dimensions of reality: "If the world is round can wild animals come out of the ground" (31). Although the story begins with the world as a kind of merry-go-round ("you could go on it around and around"), the dimension of the earth becomes a source of dread for Rose:

The teachers taught her  
 That the world was round  
 That the sun was round  
 That the moon was round  
 That the stars were round  
 And that they were going around and around  
 ...It was so sad it almost made her cry  
 But then she did not believe it...  
 And then a dreadful thing was happening...  
 she remembered that her mouth was round when she sang  
 (22)

By association with the earth, all images of circularity and rotundity become frightening: "...all of a sudden Rose knew that in Rose there was an o and an o is round, oh dear not a sound" (86). "There were lots of stars and somebody had told her that stars were round, they were not stars, and so the stars were not any comfort to her" (112). Rose thinks about the number "142" because "numbers are round" (63), and she contemplates "how many minutes go around to make a second how many hours go round to make a minute how many days go around to make an hour..." (74). But at the very end of the story, Rose sits on the mountain in her chair, having

conquered her various fears (of dwarfs, of signs that read “Devil, Devil, Devil”); and Willie’s searchlight, which goes “around and around” offers Rose comfort in the night.

*The World is Round* is the most interesting of Stein’s children’s books since it is overtly about fear and offers a vision of containment. Rose carves (or writes) “Rose is a Rose is a Rose” around a tree trunk, countering its fearful rotundity (see figure 1) and mastering her fear of circularity with her own circuitous writing. The suggestion that Stein’s motto, “rose is a rose is a rose,” might be a punning assertion of “love, love, love,”<sup>6</sup> fits neatly with the conclusion of *The World is Round*, where it is Rose’s love of Willie that concludes the action and closes off the character’s fear.

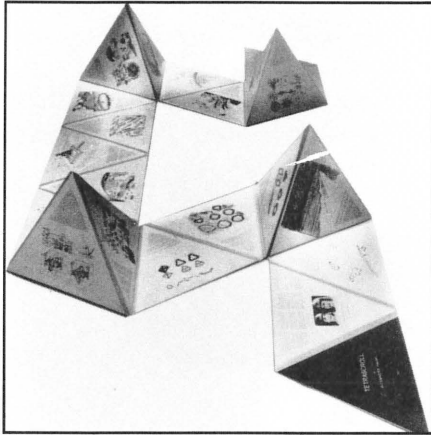


Figure 2

That Arion Press has chosen to shape this book into a circle is clearly in keeping with its subject matter and spirit. Another book shaped in this way by its content is *Tetrascroll* by Buckminster Fuller. Published by Universal Limited Art Editions (1975–7), *Tetrascroll* is a spectacular “book” comprised of 36 inch triangular pages. Fuller’s text is illustrated with 21 lithographs, which he produced at Tatyana Grosman’s studio. Bound in sailcloth, the pages can be arranged and rearranged in various two- and three- dimensional configurations, forming lines and tetrahedra and combinations of the two (see figure 2). The sheer proportions of the “book” are stunning: manipulating its pages can be an athletic event, and when fully extended, it can occupy a room.

The text of *Tetrascroll* developed from Fuller's family history. In the 1930s, Fuller began to respond to his daughter's request for a story by telling her "Goldilocks and The Three Bears"—with a twist. He used the opportunity to work through ideas about relativity theory, quantum physics, mathematics, history, chemistry and architecture. As Fuller explains in the "Introduction," "Goldilocks and the three Bears always had the most interesting discussions which led to the most challenging topics philosophically, but they never called it science or mathematics."

On the very first page, for example, Fuller makes the (quantum) leap from Goldilocks to relativity (*see figure 3*):

Here is Goldy having a sky party with her three friends, the Polar Bear family. Goldy says the sky party is a "system" because Goldy plus the Three Bears equals four entities (or star events), and it takes four events to produce a system (the macrocosm), all the universe inside the system (the microcosm), and the four star events A,B,C,D, which do the dividing. (St. Martin's, 2)

The star system is a tetrahedron subject to relativity: "The star in the nose of the Big Bear is a live show taking place 210 light-years away-and-ago. . .and the pole star at Mommy Bear's nose is a live show taking place 680 light-years away-and-ago...and the star at Wee Bear's front toes is a live show taking place forty-three light-years away-and-ago...." (p. 2) So the system is "a scenario of nonsimultaneous but omni-interrelated events." Goldy "now understands Einstein's concept that Universe is a scenario and not a single simultaneous structure."

Relativity theory shapes the title of Fuller's book as well. "Tetra" refers to the tetrahedron, and to a large extent, the book is concerned with its mathematical properties and transformability, the way it interconnects with relativity and quantum physics, its correspondence, in various permutations, to the periodic table of elements. Part of the fun of *Tetrascroll* is watching the tetrahedron in transformation. Tetrahedra become tetrahelix, the mathematical model employed by the DNA-RNA helix. Naga—the sea serpent—is a live tetrahelix; and Naga is also the "name of the ancient seafarer N(O)(A)(C)H—Noah." Fuller's imaginative leaps occur rapidly, like lightning—which is itself a tetrahelix "stripped." The word "scroll" was chosen by Fuller for its temporal

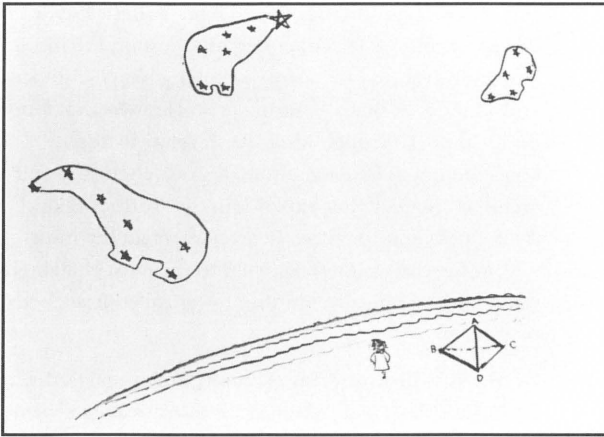


Figure 3

connotations, the way an Oriental scroll in particular stresses narrativity in time.<sup>7</sup> The title of Fuller's book thus combines both spatial and temporal dimensions.

The illustrations for *Tetrascroll* in general are both charming and instructive. They are simple line drawings, in Fuller's own hand, which are both childlike and diagrammatic. The illustration for the first "story" in *Tetrascroll* portrays three Bear constellations in the sky (with a star at Momma Bear's nose) (see figure 3). Fuller's drawings are delightful in themselves, yet offer valuable information about the concepts being explained. Page seven, for example, combines a number of illustrations portraying the principle of precession and its operation in rubber cylinders, in the interaction of the sun and earth, in a stone dropped into water, in electric currents, in swimming fish and more. Retaining the spontaneity characteristic of drawings for children's books, the illustrations nevertheless also operate as visual aids, as in a science textbook.

But *Tetrascroll* is not just about science and mathematics. Goldy's lectures (and Fuller's) are more wide ranging, encompassing history lessons of great variety, from Viking boat building to "cosmic ecology." Surprising connections are drawn between disparate subjects. Thus, the creation of Eve is linked to shipbuilding: "'Eve' the ship, built from Adam's rib cage design, was temptingly 'led on' by Naga the serpent, god of the sea..." (15). When "Goldy



...elucidates some post-Eden history for the bears" (17), she retells the story of the Trojan war (*see figure 4*):

Now the more-with-lessing Mycenaean sea masters starved the Trojan city-state insiders because the Trojans were the progeny of the overland horsemen, the Mycenaean sailormen produced the famous Trojan Horse within which symbol of seeming acknowledgement of Trojan superiority they hid some fighting men while deceptively withdrawing their maritime fleet.

As told by Goldy, the story has a moral: the Trojan War signals a change in human history from "absolute dominance by massiveness" to a "doing-more-with-less" form of mastery (the Trojan Horse). This change in history culminates, she says:

At the end of the twentieth century A.D. in doing so much with so little as finally to be able to support all humans at an economically sustainable higher standard of living than any have ever experienced, thus to eliminate altogether the fundamental scarcity syndrome and all lethal interstruggling of humanity, allowing humanity to become preoccupied with greater problems of the Universe, with which ultimately to cope, humans had been given their minds. (p. 112)

This "history" is indeed a fairy tale. In keeping with all the other transformations and permutations within *Tetrascroll*, history here mutates into a utopian science fiction.

Genres, subjects, shapes, numbers all constantly undergo change in *Tetrascroll*. Triangles become a tetrahedron, which rolled across the beach, forms a pattern of triangles again. "A bear's foot is itself a triangle," and the pattern of those footprints parallels the pattern of triangles formed by the tetrahedron in motion (2). Fuller shifts dimensions as rapidly as he shifts topics. *Tetrascroll* as a "book" captures this variation in dimensions, as its triangles form tetrahedra and collapse back into two-dimensional space. With its heavy pages a yard long, Fuller presents a "book" larger than the dimensions we usually assign it. His "book" is itself a variable object with multiple dimensions. The pages are designed not to be read consecutively, but rather in non-linear fashion as the various display configurations demand. As Fuller's imagination spins utopian theories of the universe, it also presents new, creative possibilities for the contemporary "book."

Another work that calls into question its own status as a book is the Arion Press edition of John Ashbery's *Self-*

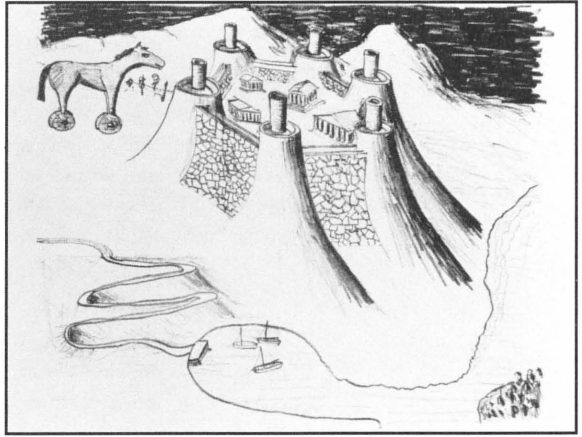


Figure 4

*Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1984). The “book” is housed in a round stainless steel container with a convex mirror on the lid. The pages are unbound circular disks, eighteen inches in diameter. The pages are printed with the lines of poetry radiating out from the center, so that the pages must be turned as they are read (see figure 5). The “book” includes eight original prints by Jim Dine, R.B. Kitaj, Willem de Kooning, Richard Avedon, Elaine de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher and Alex Katz. It also includes a recording of John Ashbery reading his poem, with a reproduction of Parmigianino’s painting—the “self-portrait” on the cover.

Ashbery once jokingly referred to his poem as “Self-Portrait in a Complex Mirror,”<sup>8</sup> and it is indeed complex. It begins as a straightforward poem about a painting, an ekphrastic poem that takes a work of visual art as its subject.

Vasari says, “Francesco one day set himself  
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose  
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers...  
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made  
By a turner, and having divided it in half and  
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself  
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,”  
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait  
Is the reflection once removed.... (p. 68)

The poem begins with imagery of vacillation and oscillation. Everything seems to move back and forth, including the face, “which swims/Toward and away.” The

Parmigianino is “Lively and intact in a recurring wave/Of arrival.” And the soul swims “out through the eyes/And still return[s] safely to its nest.” (p. 68) These motions all describe the relation of the poem and the painting, as Ashbery moves into and out of the painting as his subject. The ekphrasis set up at the outset of the poem is continually undercut as Ashbery’s digressive reflections set up a continuous engagement and disengagement from the painting. The imagery of vacillation established early in the poem also represents the oscillations and tensions within the poem between the self and the other, between dream and reality, and between time present and time past.

One of the first subjects of the poem is the relation of the soul and the self-portrait. At first we are told that “the soul is a captive” in the painting, “Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay/Posing in this place.” And then:

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,  
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,  
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits  
 Its hollow perfectly; its room, our moments of  
 attention. (p. 69)

Ashbery is, I think, drawing a distinction between the soul of the painting and the soul of Parmigianino the man. He seems to be implying that all art is limited in its capacity to express and sustain the soul of the artist. For artists like Parmigianino and Ashbery both, who are creating essentially self-reflexive art, this is a disheartening fact: “The pity of it smarts,/Makes hot tears spurt.” The convex mirror itself comes to represent such limitations:

One would like to stick one’s hand  
 Out of the globe, but its dimension  
 What carries it, will not allow it.... (p. 69)

Suddenly, one is inside the globe attempting to go beyond its limited and limiting dimensions. This shift in perspective (from outside to inside the painting) and the purposely ambiguous pronoun “one” suggest that viewers and artists alike are confined to the dimensions of the globe, the limits of life, art and the soul.

Ashbery’s poem is self-reflexive not only because it presents his speculations (“From the latin *speculum*. mirror”), but also because it comments on its own mode of proceeding.

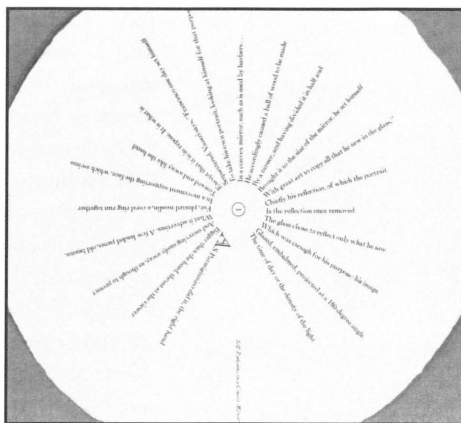


Figure 5

But your eyes proclaim  
 That everything is surface. The surface is what's there  
 And nothing can exist except what's there...  
 And the window doesn't matter much, or that  
 Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even  
 As a gauge of the weather, which in French is  
*Le temps*, the word for time, and which  
 Follows a course wherein changes are merely  
 Features of the whole.... (p. 70)

Ashbery is both addressing the Parmigianino painting and describing the style of his own poem. He first asserts the importance of the surface (“not superficial but a visible core”) and then exemplifies that assertion in his writing. Immediately, we get a sense of Ashbery’s surface style, an ever-shifting sequence of associations, which moves from the sliver of window, to the weather, to *Le temps*, the French word for weather, to time. The poetry has enacted what it describes: surface changes in time, following “a course wherein changes are merely features of the whole.” This continuous changing of surfaces (and words) is essentially paradoxical, like the stability within instability of the earth, like the globe which is the painting, and like a ball on a jet of water. “The whole is stable within/Instability, a globe like ours, resting/On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball/Secure on its jet of water.” (p. 70)

But *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* includes other paradoxes as well. It is as much about the nature and meaning of the “self” as it is about Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait.” The self presented here is not a unified and stable consciousness with static ego boundaries, but a fluid process of change and interchange:



Figure 6

I think of the friends  
 That came to see me, of what yesterday  
 Was like. A peculiar slant  
 Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model  
 In the silence of the studio as he considers  
 Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.  
 How many people came and stayed a certain time,  
 Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you  
 Like light behind windblown fog and sand,  
 Filtered and influenced by it, until no part  
 Remains that is surely you. (p. 71)

As is common in Ashbery's writing, the pronouns continually shift, in this case from "me," to "he," to "you." The "you" might simultaneously refer to Parmigianino, to the poet, whose friends became a part of him, and to us, the readers, as the poem becomes a part of us as we read.

Of his use of pronouns, Ashbery has said:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we"....my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward a greater naturalism.<sup>9</sup>

Identity, according to Ashbery, is fluid, fragmented,<sup>10</sup> and constructed in its social relations: "How many people

came and stayed a certain time,/Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you.” Ashbery is exploring the way the self is constituted by its relations with others.

Indeed, “otherness” is a central theme in the poem. On one level, it refers to the otherness that helps to define (or de-define) the self. On another level, it refers to the artistic process, and the otherness that wrests the poem from the poet’s intention to produce something entirely different. Language itself produces this distorting effect, so that the way of telling somehow intrudes, “twisting the end result/Into a caricature of itself.” The work of art ends up as something completely different from what the artist intended, and “Often he finds/He has omitted the thing he started out to say....”

Is there anything  
 To be serious about beyond this otherness  
 That gets included in the most ordinary  
 Forms of daily activity, changing everything  
 Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter  
 Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation  
 Out of our hands....This otherness, this  
 “not-being-us” is all there is to look at  
 In the mirror, though no one can say  
 How it came to be this way. (p. 80–81)

Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait” is just such an “other” for the poet and his poem. The painting is a mirror that reflects the poet’s acts of self-reflection, but it is also a constituting “other” that shapes Ashbery’s poem: “You could be fooled for a moment/Before you realize the reflection/Isn’t yours.” (p. 74) The “other” changes everything “slightly and profoundly,” including not only the artistic product, but the artist himself. Finally, since it signifies something different from what had originally been intended, the poem itself represents the idea of “otherness” that it describes.<sup>11</sup>

Ashbery’s poem is a reflection of a reflection since “the portrait/Is the reflection once removed,” and the Arion Press edition of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* increases the manifold mirror relations already set up by Ashbery. The illustrations are works of art about a poem that is about art. The circularity is built into the book visually, with its circling pages of print and round format. The poem itself piles up images of circles: the curves of the painting, the painter’s curved hand, the convex mirror, the balloon



Figure 7

(which pops), the bubble chamber, globes, a “circle of...intentions,” and a carousel of chaos all boiling down to a “magma of interiors.” The format of the book thus fits in neatly with the imagery of Ashbery’s poem.

But what is perhaps most striking about the book is the variety of the illustrations. They are portraits and self-portraits in varied media—etchings, lithographs, photographs—in highly representational and also highly abstract styles. Ashbery has himself voiced a predilection for this kind of variety: “What is better than anything is the renewed realization that all kinds of things can and must exist side by side at any given moment, and that that is what life and creating are all about.”<sup>12</sup> In *Reported Sightings* he expresses his “fondness for a polyphony of clashing styles, from highbred to demotic, in a given poem, musical composition...or picture” (243). This polyphony also appears in the poem itself, as Ashbery’s writing moves through various styles and tones, from admiration to reminiscence, “irony, apprehension, hostility, nostalgia and reflection.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the most controversial aspects of Ashbery’s poem concerns the Parmigianino painting and what it represents. For Richard Stamelman, the portrait represents a static mimetic art, an “idealized and totalized representation” that Ashbery undercuts and deconstructs (619). According to Helen Vendler, however, the Parmigianino painting already effects that deconstruction: it represents an anti-mimetic art. Vendler writes, “Parmigianino’s painting forces the spectator to confront his own easy self-



Figure 8

deception about the mimetic truthfulness of art, and to question his own demands that art represent life 'as it is,' in a point-for-point exactness.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps one way out of this impasse is to see the Parmigianino painting as one of those curious works of art that is paradoxically representational and nonrepresenta-





Figure 9

tional at the same time, like Jasper Johns's *Flag* paintings. Even more appropriate is the comparison to the abstract expressionist paintings of Willem de Kooning. In an extended discussion of Ashbery and painting, Leslie Wolf describes de Kooning's work: "His gestures carry hints of representation even as they embody these hints in a fluid and 'paradoxical' matrix; they evoke objects and suggest perspective even as they deny them" (239). The de Kooning lithograph included in the Arion Press book sustains just such tensions between a mimetic and an anti-mimetic art (see figure 6). Amid random configurations on the circular page, are numbers printed in reverse. The numbers suggest that de Kooning's work is a mimetic representation of a convex mirror. Yet the abstract expressionist splotches and lines suggest not a mimetic art, but an abstract, nonrepresentational style. De Kooning's art, like Ashbery's poetry, maintains the tension between these two poles.

The other illustrations in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* are more representational in nature. Jim Dine's woodcut is a self-portrait that suggests a convex mirror through the play of black and white (see figure 7). Here, small white lines radiate out from the rich blackness to circle the round page and suggest convexity. R.B. Kitaj's etching is a self-portrait which prominently displays his hand in an allusion, perhaps, to Parmigianino's painting .

Also included in the Arion Press book are three portraits of John Ashbery. Elaine de Kooning's lithograph is a steel gray portrait composed of strong, crosshatched lines. In

Larry Rivers' etching, Ashbery is seated at his typewriter composing "Pyrography." This poem is about a journey across the American continent and a journey back into cities at the turn of the century, but it is also about the "eternally present 'journey' one lives through each day of one's life."<sup>15</sup> Rivers, who has painted patriotic themes since the 1950s (*The Last Civil War Veteran*, 1959; *The Next to Last Confederate*, 1959; *Study for Last Civil War Veteran*, 1970; *Last Civil War Veteran: Indigo Blue*, 1987) would naturally respond to a poem that begins:

This is America calling:  
The mirroring of state to state,  
Of voice to voice on the wires,  
The force of colloquial greetings like golden  
Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.<sup>16</sup>

More importantly, Rivers captures Ashbery in the act of composition, and certainly "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is about the vagaries and vicissitudes of artistic creation.

While Rivers' etching directs us outward to other poems by Ashbery,<sup>17</sup> Richard Avedon's photograph takes us directly into the poem (*see figure 8*). Here, Ashbery is caught off guard, not quite ready for the picture to be taken. The photograph might be linked to the surprise Ashbery describes in his own relation to Parmigianino:

...the whole of me  
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict  
Otherness of the painter in his  
Other room. We have surprised him  
At work, but no, he has surprised us  
As he works. The picture is almost finished,  
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,  
Startled by a snowfall which even now is  
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow. (p. 74)

The relationship of two artists (Ashbery/Parmigianino; Ashbery/Avedon) is presented as an experience of mutual surprise.

There is, to be sure, much to be surprised at in the Arion Press edition of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. One illustration seems at first to be a visual non sequitur: it is neither a portrait of Ashbery nor a self-portrait. Alex Katz's portrait of his wife is an extremely stylized, bold, black and white lithograph (*see figure 9*). The arm, held strangely at shoulder height, foregrounds the hand in

what may be an allusion to the Parmigianino painting. More interesting is the fact that Katz has been painting portraits of his wife since the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> He has, in fact, painted her so consistently that the portraits have become a signature for his style. The identification of this figure with Katz himself complicates the relation of portrait and self-portraiture, suggesting the fluid relation of self and other described in Ashbery's poem.

Jane Freilicher's lithograph of flowers seems equally surprising as an illustration of Ashbery's poem (*see figure 10*). Certainly, on one level, Freilicher offers her bouquet to the Ashbery poem as a gesture of friendship, a friendship that began in 1949.<sup>19</sup> On another level, the flowers express the artist's openness to the creative process. In his "Foreword" to the Arion Press edition, Ashbery writes:

When the poem appeared as the title-poem in a collection of mine published by Viking Press, I rejected the notion of using a reproduction of the painting on the cover since I wanted the poem to have a life of its own not connected with Parmigianino's masterpiece. On reflection, this seems not a good idea, if only because of the relative unfamiliarity of the the painting and people's desire to know what it looks like. This edition with illustrations by artists whose work I feel close to seems to me a good idea for the opposite reason of taking the poem away from itself and amplifying it in ways I had never anticipated.

Freilicher's illustration does take "the poem away from itself" in the way that Ashbery describes. Even within the poem itself, flowers appear as that which transcends authorial intention:

Often he finds  
 He has omitted the thing he started out to say  
 In the first place. Seduced by flowers,  
 Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though  
 Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining  
 He had a say in the matter and exercised  
 An option of which he was hardly conscious,  
 Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions  
 So as to create something new.... (p. 80)

One can imagine Ashbery being "secretly satisfied" not only with his own creation but that of his fellow artists.

The Arion Press edition as a whole is startling in the quality of the artworks included in it. With its unbound



Figure 10

pages and circular tin case, the book might fit as easily into a museum collection as a library. Clearly, the contemporary “non-book” effects disciplinary displacements—effects which are part of a much larger trend in the postmodern arts to blur generic and disciplinary boundaries.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly enough, some contemporary artists who take the book as subject do so only to suggest its demise.

Anselm Kiefer’s *The High Priestess—The Land of Two Rivers* (1985–9) is a sculpture comprised of 200 lead books in two steel bookcases, 14 feet high and 26 feet long. Inside the books are photographs which show ruined and decayed cities. The work as a whole has an apocalyptic tone; the dark metal books appear desiccated, deadened, part of a larger devastation.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Buzz Spector, an American conceptualist, alters books to suggest their decay: books are painted, stacked, boxed, framed, torn and decomposed. In *Toward a Theory of Universal Causality* (1984–90), Spector stacks 6,500 hardcover books against a wall in step formation so that the books become a mute minimalist object. In *Encyclopedia* (1982), he alters a book by tearing its pages; then he displays the unreadable text with a stone embedded in the pages. Spector’s use of natural objects in these transformations calls attention to the mutability of books as objects. At the same time, the disconcerting assault on the printed page suggests that our culture as a whole threatens to destroy the book.

A very different perspective on the book, however, is provided by Siah Armijani, who has been creating “reading rooms” for the past two decades. In *Reading Room #2* (1978–9), the spectator is invited to touch, handle and read the books on display. The viewer can take these books through a wooden construction to a bench specifically designed for reading. Part Japanese tea house, part maze, Armijani’s work confers a subtle sanctity on the act of reading. Like the unusual objects produced by Arion Press and Universal Limited Art Editions, Armijani’s room affirms that there is still a space for reading, and for books, in contemporary culture. Recent “non-books” toy with our very definition of the book in their dimensions, their shapes and their bindings; but rather than attesting to the death of the book, they affirm its present vitality.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Goldwater, Marge, ed. 1989. Marcel Broodthaers. New York: Rizzoli.
- <sup>2</sup> On these various examples of the "non-book," see the catalogue: *Center for Book Arts: The First Decade*. 1984. An Exhibition at The New York Public Library. September 7–November 29, 1984. New York: Center for Book Arts, Inc.
- <sup>3</sup> On Stein's writings for children, see Gallup, Donald C. 1957. "Introduction." *Alphabets and Birthdays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, vii–xix.
- <sup>4</sup> Becker, May Lamberton. 1939. "Books for Young People." *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 September, 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Perloff, Marjorie. 1981. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 98.
- <sup>6</sup> Sayre, Henry. 1988. "The Artist's Model: American Art and the Question of Looking Like Gertrude Stein." *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*. Shirley Neuman, and Ira B. Nadel, eds. Boston: Northeastern University Press, (24–27).
- <sup>7</sup> Sparks, Esther, ed. 1989. *Universal Limited: A History and Catalogue: The First Twenty-Five Years*. New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Harry N. Abrams, 96.
- <sup>8</sup> Conversation with the poet, March 8, 1986.
- <sup>9</sup> Bloom, Janet and Robert Losada. "Craft Interview with John Ashbery." *New York Quarterly* 9 (winter 1972): 24–5
- <sup>10</sup> Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 259.
- <sup>11</sup> Stamelman, Richard. 1984. "Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.'" *New Literary History* 15, 607–30.
- <sup>12</sup> Ashbery, John. 1991. *Reported Sightings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 244.
- <sup>13</sup> Vendler, Helen. 1984. "Reading and Hearing John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*." Record Jacket of Arion Press edition. San Francisco: Arion Press (unpaginated).
- <sup>14</sup> See Vendler. "Reading and Hearing Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*."
- <sup>15</sup> Perloff. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 278.
- <sup>16</sup> Ashbery, John. 1977. *Houseboat Days*. New York: Penguin Books, 8.
- <sup>17</sup> It also directs us to his earlier painting, *Poem and Portrait: John Ashbery*, 1977.
- <sup>18</sup> O'Hara, Frank. 1975. *Art Chronicles. 1954–1966*. New York: George Braziller.
- <sup>19</sup> Ashbery. *Reported Sightings*, 239.
- <sup>20</sup> See Perloff, Marjorie, ed. 1989. *Postmodern Genres*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- <sup>21</sup> Jencks, Charles. 1989. *What is Post-Modernism?* Third edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 66–7.

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## IDA APPLEBROOG AND THE BOOK AS PERFORMANCE

**This piece has been conceived by its author as a reading—or, more precisely, as a performance—of a small book by the contemporary painter Ida Applebroog, self-published in the late seventies and entitled *Life Is Good: A Performance*. As an artist, Applebroog has continuously sought to reveal what might be called the “underside” of everyday life. She “reads” the commonplace as an arena of deceit. She reveals in her readings what convention allows us to forget. In that spirit, this piece is a reading of the conventions of reading, with Applebroog serving as a guide.**

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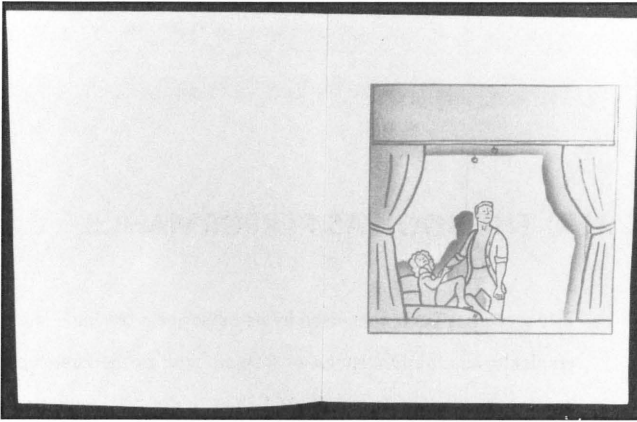


Figure 1

“The first version, that of 1926 I believe...”<sup>1</sup>—so Michel Foucault begins his small volume *This Is Not a Pipe*, an essay on René Magritte’s painting of that same name, a work that exists in several different forms. But it is not the Magritte that interests the attentive reader, not yet. It is Foucault’s locution—his “I believe”—casual enough, but subverting, in the very uncertainty of its expression, the authority of the historian, his obligation to know for certain when the version in question was executed, or at least to look it up—an implicit *disregard* for the truth of the matter, an unwillingness to *revise* (a good editor might write in the margin, “Don’t you *know* when it was done?”), or else a calculated disingenuousness, a posture, a *disguise*.

Not only does this “I believe” announce a lack of finish, definition, exactitude; in this gesture, the text entitled *This Is Not a Pipe* displaces the painting(s) entitled *This Is Not a Pipe*, the ostensible object(s) of its contemplation. The phrase effects, at least, a certain distance between the two, for from the very first word, the text begins to perform upon the image, to string out its own version of the version(s), stake out its own territory. The “I believe” is the voice of the storyteller (not the historian), of the entertainer (not the intellectual), of the amateur (not the professional). It is not even the voice of the text—not even, that is, itself. It is, rather, the voice of a man talking. It is as if this text is itself a version of that talk. This is not a text, it says...and so, it is free to say whatever it pleases.



## II

This is a book by Ida Applebroog (see figure 2). This is not a book by Ida Applebroog. This is a performance.

This is a performance by Ida Applebroog. This is not a performance by Ida Applebroog. This is a book.

In Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*, there is no pipe, only the representation of a pipe. Perhaps, in Applebroog's books, there is no performance, only the representation of performance. For the space of performance and the space of the book are, it would appear, two discontinuous spaces. The book can document the performance, represent it, but the book, in its binding, in the framed space of its page, in the logic of its beginning, middle and end—in the time, that is, of its reading—the book can imitate performance, but can never be it. Performance is live. The book is dead.

Or is it? Can we animate the book? (We must return, later, to the question of animation.)

Consider the book, the physical reality of the book. The book exists as if it were a door to be opened. It is hinged. But it is hinged like Marcel Duchamp's *Door: 11, rue Larry* (Paris, 1927). In 1933, Jacques-Henry L vesque described the door as follows:

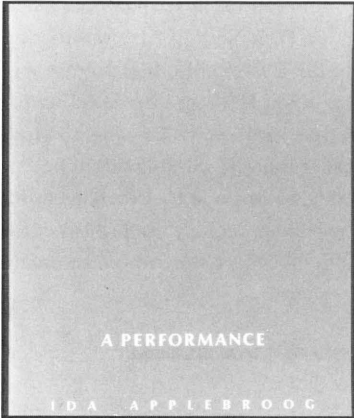


Figure 2

In the apartment which Marcel Duchamp has constructed entirely himself, there is in the studio a natural wood door leading into the bedroom. When this door is opened to enter the bedroom, it shuts the entrance to the bathroom; and when opened to enter the bathroom, it closes the entrance to the studio... 'A door must be either open or closed' had always seemed to be an inescapable truth; but Duchamp had managed to construct a door that was at the same time both open and closed.<sup>2</sup>

Like turning the pages of a book. As one page opens, another closes; as that page closes, another opens. Such is the physical process of reading itself: the book always open before us even as it closes behind us.

So perhaps the book, once it is addressed, once we take it up, exists not so much in framed space—*bound* and reified—as in real time, as a series of (separate) experiences that are strung together in space (like film). Perhaps, then, the performance and the book are not

so much in a relation of similitude as in a relation of equivalence. This book is a performance (not this book is *like* a performance). The book as performance exists in a condition of simultaneity; the book as performance is, in its particulars, always becoming and always already gone, always, at once, simultaneously, present and absent. Perhaps there is a useful analogy to be drawn between the book and the work of, not Duchamp, but of another arbiter of presence and absence, Christo. Christo wraps things—buildings, coastlines, islands and bridges—not in order to hide them, but to unwrap them again, to make a gift of them. To wrap the Pont Neuf in Paris was to give the Pont Neuf back to the French, who had forgotten it. To wrap the Reichstag would be to give the building back to the Germans, who have forsaken it. To wrap, to bind in cloth and string, in order that the binding might be opened, in order, in fact, to invite us to see what's inside, as if for the first time—this is precisely the project of the book. You can't tell a book by its cover. You must uncover the book.

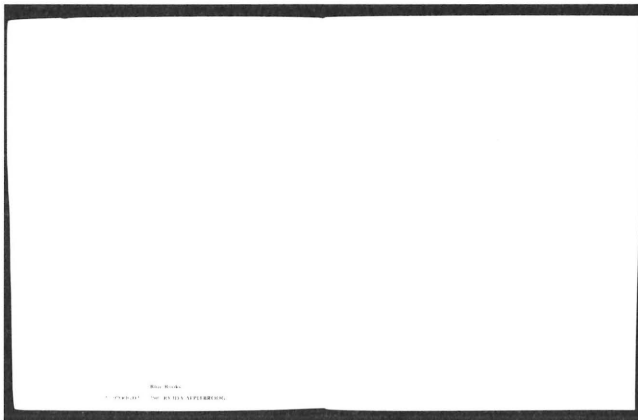


Figure 3

III

The book opens to blankness. Or almost blankness. There is, on the inside front cover, the copyright, and the series name: this is one of Ida Applebroog's Blue Books (see figure 3). The book's cover is blue, with white print. The type here, on the inside, is blue. Perhaps, after all, there is something to a book's cover.

I remember thinking, when I was a student, how appropriate it was that they called the small lined pamphlets

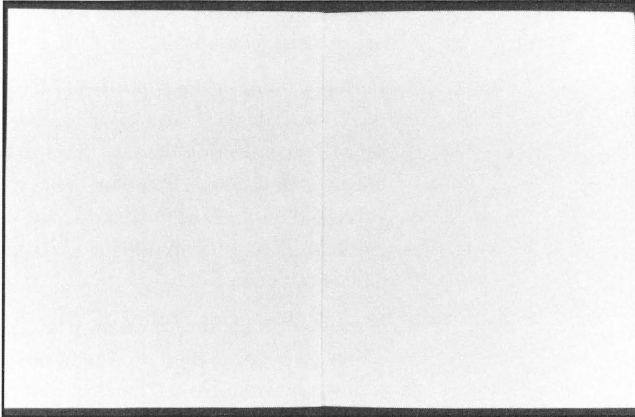


Figure 4

we purchased for essay exams “blue books.” Exams were never happy occasions, not at least when the blue book was in hand, waiting for you to fill it cover to cover, over the course of the next several hours, with half-lucid insights in response to some ill-conceived question dreamed up by the professor only minutes beforehand. Blue books made one blue. (“Among the derivations of the word, I especially like *blavus*, from medieval Latin, and the earlier, more classical, *flavus*, for the discolorations of a bruise, so that it sometimes meant yellow, with perhaps a hint of green beneath the skin like naughty underclothes.”<sup>3</sup>)

Yet, admittedly, sometimes in the course of an exam, in the course of filling up space, the blank space of the blue book—like the blank space of this page, as I am writing here, now—something like genuine clarity could be briefly achieved, and you could feel good about the experience. You could transform the situation in the performance of it. That was, of course, the pedagogical point. The blue book contained within it a certain narrative imperative. It not only waited to be filled; it demanded to be filled. And it was, fundamentally, dialogical. One filled it only in response to someone else, albeit under duress.

Suppose we define performance as anti-theatrical, as an art form that “displaces illusion with real time, character with personality, skill with spontaneity, artifice with the banal. It values idea over execution.”<sup>4</sup> This also seems to me a reasonable description of an examination as

opposed to an essay. We open a blue book, and these are our expectations.

Perhaps, then, we are supposed to fill this book up, write in it. Turn the page, and there is more blank space (*see figure 4*), confirming the fear that maybe the book is empty, that it is an actual blue book, that the performance promised on the cover will indeed be our own, not Applebroog's. Still, no one has asked us a question yet. This is not an exam.

There is only blank space before us. To put pen to this paper, to begin to fill it up, would be to take it over, make it our own, colonize it. Then we would be to Applebroog's book as Warhol is to Campbell's soup. (The copyright haunts us, though, prohibits our imperialist instincts).

Out of the blankness, a sense of urgency develops, requiring us to turn the page, and fast, if for no other reason than to relieve us of the threat of the blank space itself. The blank space threatens to transform us from consumer to producer of the book, the performance. It is as if we must move on. We must see for ourselves just what it is Applebroog has in mind.

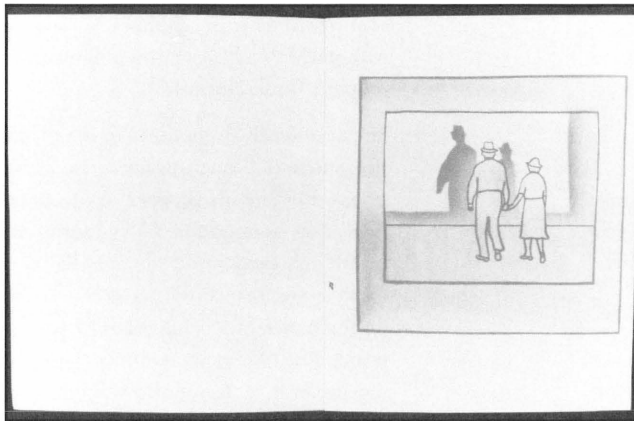


Figure 5

#### IV

An image (*figure 5*).

It is hard to say, spatially, just what we are looking at. Are we looking through a window upon the scene, two people, one male and one female, walking away from us, across the street, backlit by a light that is itself peculiar, not streetlight, not that diffuse, but squared, regular, as if

projected? The next series of books, the *Dyspepsia* series, makes the window analogy explicit (see *figure 1*), though in those books we are outside looking in, much more in the position of the voyeur. Here we are on the inside looking out. It feels, in fact, as if this couple is on stage, before a spotlighted backdrop, on stage without knowing they are on stage. But then, what is it we are looking through? A window in the projection booth? The light comes from our right, from someplace parallel to us, but not contiguous with ourselves. Perhaps we are not looking through anything at all, except a frame. Perhaps we are looking at a picture. Given the casualness of the rendering, the *blue print* quality of the image, it may be that we are looking at the picture of a picture. (Each of Applebroog's books exists, in fact, in a unique, larger version, done in multiple panels on vellum.)

The space depicted in this picture is shallow, very shallow indeed. One wants to yell out, tell the couple it is time to turn, left or right, one way or the other, that they are walking straight into a wall. Perhaps they are blind. It is not catastrophic, this sense of their imminent peril. It is not as if they are about to walk off a cliff, into deep space (the space, say, of Renaissance painting). It is just that their (spatial) alternatives seem rather smaller than the length of their stride. They are embarked on what Kirk Varnedoe has called in his recent book "the Road to Flatness."<sup>5</sup> They are about to bump right into the space of modern painting.

Suppose they are, in fact, approaching a painting, a minimalist one, say a Robert Ryman or an Agnes Martin or a Robert Irwin. Perhaps they are casting their shadows over a work of art. "The big challenge for me," says Irwin, "was simply always to try to maximize the...physicality of the painting, and to minimize the imagery. It's about presence, phenomenal presence. And it's hard: if you don't see it, you just don't see it; it just ain't there. You can talk yourself blue in the face to somebody, and if they don't see it, they just don't see it. But once you start seeing it, it has a level of reality exactly the same as the imagery—no more, but no less."<sup>6</sup> Before this minimalist work, this couple is about to experience the many pleasures of white, the subtle differences worked upon the visual field by a change in light, literally by their arrival on the scene, as they cast their shadows over the field of the

otherwise uniform canvas. They activate the painting, make it come to life. They, or their shadows, perform upon it. (For Mark Rothko, the canvas was a stage set, upon which his viewers acted out their lives.)

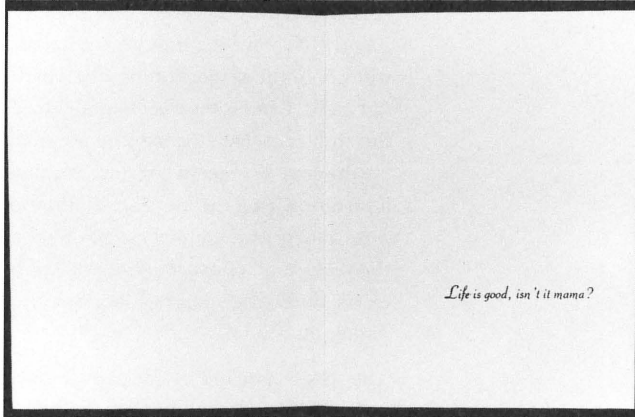


Figure 6

V

But what a life.

The text intrudes (*see figure 6*). The image speaks. Papa speaks.

For this would appear to be the voice of authority, the voice of the Father. One could go so far as to say that this text overpowers the image, colonizes it, bathes it in an unwarranted happy optimism. (*Happy Families* was the name of Applebroog's retrospective exhibition at the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum, February–May 1990.) Certainly the text causes us to revise what we see. No longer are we willing, quite, to place this couple in the space of the museum. They would be blind to minimalist painting. They read, now, after the text, like an image of middle America come to the city. They are there, before us, cheerfully walking into a wall.

The voice, you say, doth insist too much. Possibly. But if this couple does not have far to go, they have, at least, each other. Maybe that is enough. Somehow, in all its banality, the expression rings true. These are the kind of people who say such things. And believe them.

And even the authority of the voice, of the Father, seems harmless enough. It's reassuring rather than threatening,

innocent rather than duplicitous, simple rather than complicated. It is easy to laugh at such a sense of well-being, only to recognize, afterwards, the intimations of a certain nostalgia sweeping into your shallow and empty landscape like a fresh zephyr off the sea. The typeface, too, reads like a Hallmark card, the kind you willingly send your grandmother even though the sentiment is too thick to cut. And you mean what it says (you *want* to mean it), though you maybe do not read the whole thing before mailing it off.

This is disconcerting. These are not feelings proper to the space of performance, to the space of modern art. Life is not good, and we know it. Things are not this easy. In the other works, the other books, there is always an aura of what Carter Ratcliff has called “the emptiest forms of contemporary life.”<sup>7</sup> In *Look At Me* (see figure 1) the histrionic woman pleads with her equally histrionic lover, “Look at me. We are drowning, Walter.” This is *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (the movie version) replayed as real life (the Applebroog version). The emotional life of the couple, their studied lack of attire, their thespian demeanor, scripted by Tennessee Williams, mediated through Hollywood, filtered through Applebroog, acts itself out in the bedroom before us. Walter is Paul Newman; the woman, Elizabeth Taylor.

Now *this* is a performance. You look, in comparison, at the old couple walking away, their backs to the audience, and it’s a miracle we can even hear what the old man has to say. Walter and friend are playing to us. They are meant to be seen (even if we see them through the window, as voyeurs). The old couple is playing to no one. We do not hear what the old man has to say so much as we *overhear* it. We do not see the old couple so much as *oversee* them.

Let’s call it a question of *oversight*. Oversight contains within itself the dual connotations of responsibility and disregard, territoriality and forgetfulness. Oversight raises, in short, the question of the colonizer. Suppose in this essay—so much about so little—I have colonized this text, mined its resources, stripped it bare, robbed it of its simplicity, imposed my will so thoroughly upon it that it is no longer recognizable for what it is (or was). Suppose that is what I am supposed to do. Suppose that is the condition of the book as performance. Suppose the book as performance submits itself to my oversight.

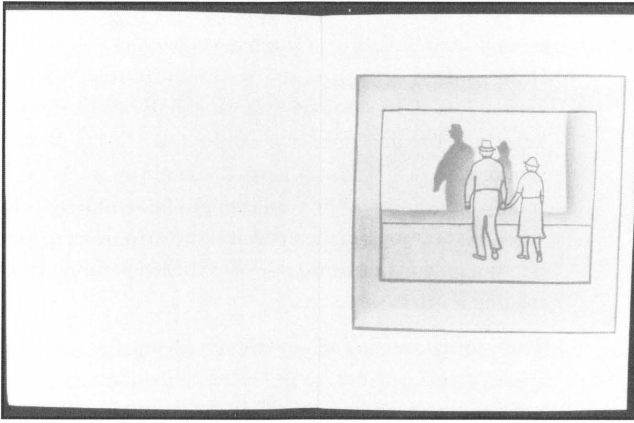


Figure 7

## VI

Which brings us back from the question of the text, back to the image (*see figure 7*). This is like the movies, before the talkies. We were in a scene, we broke momentarily for a little dialogue, and now we are back to the scene again. Nothing has changed.

So, maybe, this is a silent film (maybe a blue movie).

As we all know, thinking back to Eisenstein, a film is a composition of discrete shots, or "cells," that collide like the individual lines of haiku. Within a given shot, other collisions can, of course, occur, collisions of scale, light and dark, various graphic elements, and so on. From outside the visual realm, other elements collide with the shot. Language, first as typography and then as sound itself, is an element meant to collide with everything else. Eisenstein advocated the contrapuntal use of visual images and aural images. For Eisenstein, this collision of various competing and contrasting elements was the animating principle of cinema, what he called *montage*.

So this is montage.

The book as performance as montage.



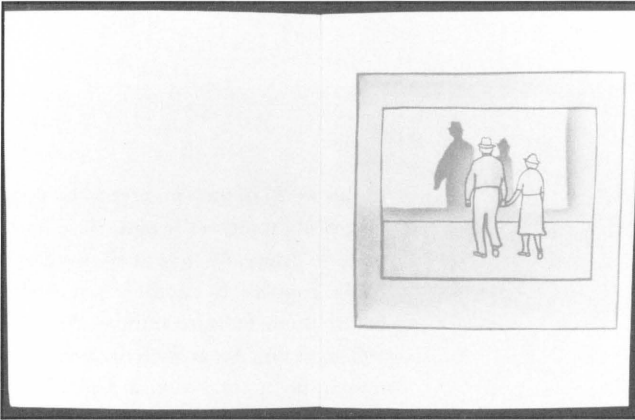


Figure 8

## VII

But what if the collision is always the same? If the same image collides with itself, again and again, is it montage? Is it even the same?

We turn the page, and the image repeats itself (*see figure 8*), and then repeats itself again (*see figure 9*). This is beginning to look like a flipbook, the kind cartoonists use to animate their characters. “The catch is,” as Carrie Rickey has pointed out, “when you flip the pages the figures don’t move.”<sup>8</sup> An invitation to animation without the animation. Something like life itself.

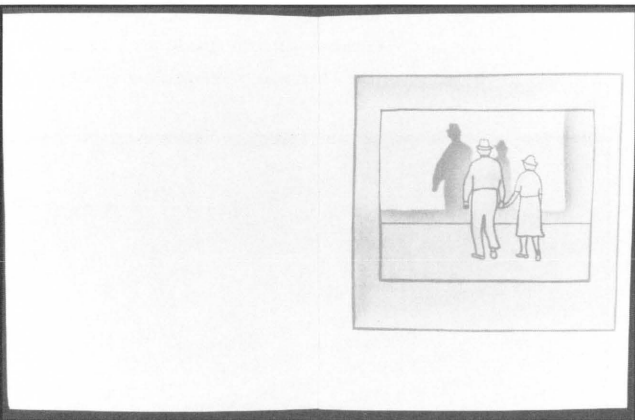


Figure 9

## VIII

In this world of the same repeated (*see figures 10 and 11*), history is a thing of the past. Here, indeed, there is no past, no future, no time at all. We are suspended *en abyme*. As the couple stares at their own shadows on the wall before them, we stare at them, like the man in Magritte's 1937 painting *Not to be Reproduced*, the man staring into a mirror, not at his own face, but at the back of his own head.

We become aware of a new present tense, in which we not only know ourselves as the shadows that we cast, but in which we also see ourselves seeing, see ourselves seeing our own future. We are condemned to the space of this line drawing of ourselves, walking blithely into the blank wall before us.

Call it *bas-reality*, a sort of low relief, the underside of realism rather than the dream fabric of the surrealist vision. Bas-reality is the side of everyday life we know but choose to ignore, not the unconscious, not even the repressed, but that which makes us simply *uncomfortable*, like a letter left too long unanswered, like a yellowing bruise on the neighbor kid's arm.

This couple is what we, to our great discomfort, already know—our past (these are *our* parents) and our future (they are whom we will become). It is always the same.

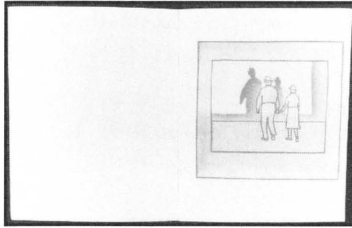


Figure 10

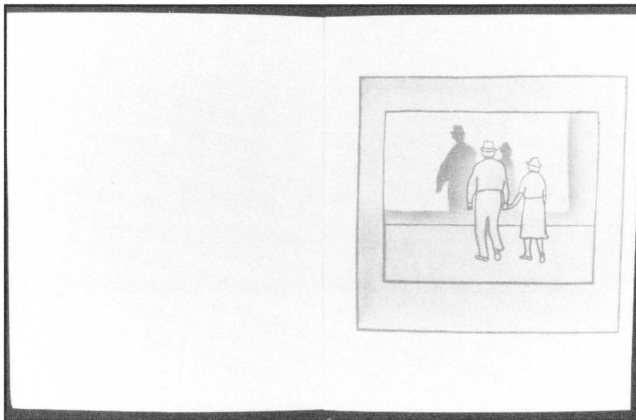


Figure 11

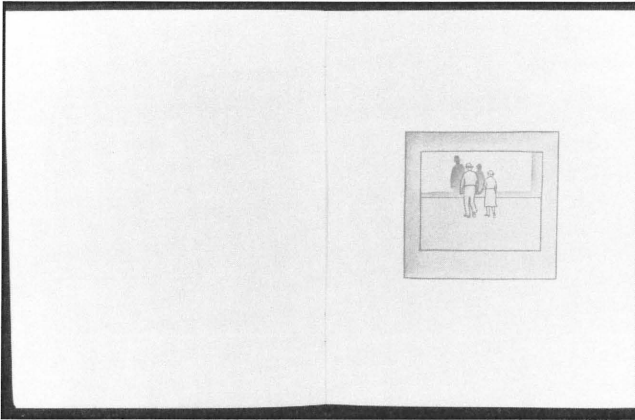


Figure 12

## IX

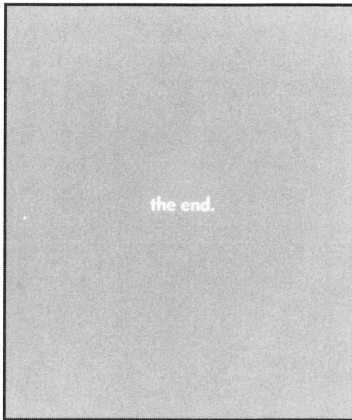


Figure 13

Until now, on the last page, it is not the same (see figure 12). Or not quite.

There is a difference in scale.

But it is, in fact, the same. Nothing has changed. We have only moved away, moved back. If there is change, only our motion has brought it about.

So this is a movie (for Eisenstein the screen was always a frame, never a window), and it is over, and we have gotten up from our seats, and we are leaving the theater, and one last time we look back at the screen, still the same, there before us.

This is not, however, the end (see figure 13).

This is a performance. *This* is a performance. Not Ida Applebroog's, not any longer, but mine.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault. 1982. *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 15.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Arturo Schwarz. 1970. *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Abrams, 496–97.
- <sup>3</sup> William Gass. 1976. *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Boston: David R. Godine, 6.
- <sup>4</sup> Bonnie Marranca. "Notes on a Poetics of Performance," in *Theatrewritings*. New York: Performing Arts Journal, 136–37.
- <sup>5</sup> Kirk Varnedoe. 1990. *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern*. New York: Abrams, 25, 27, 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Weschler. 1982. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 61.
- <sup>7</sup> Carter Ratcliff. 1987. From the "Documenta 8 Catalogue," in *Ida Applebroog*. New York: Ron Feldman Fine Arts, 35.
- <sup>8</sup> Carrie Rickey. "Return to Sender," in *Ida Applebroog*, 9.



**The Book on the Shelf  
and the Wall**

## A BOOK EXHIBIT AT THE MUSÉE POMPIDOU

**In her poetic introduction to the exhibit of her books, which she also curated for the Musée Pompidou, the author goes beneath the surface of the genre of artist's book—beyond the materials and the aesthetics into their meanings replete with uncertainty and enigma. Four projects from this exhibit are presented; each demonstrates a divergent approach and intention.**

Martine Saillard is a book artist residing in Paris. She has collaborated with such major artists as Albert Ayme, Bryan Gysin, Jiri Kolar and Tom Phillips. She tends to select major literary works for her experimental interpretations, notably texts by Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Ponge, Stein and Kleist. She directs Les Editions La Traversière. A major show of her books took place at the Musée Pompidou in Paris in 1990.

*Visible Language*, 25: 2/3

Martine Saillard, pp. 317–326

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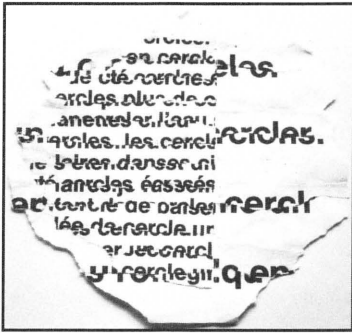


Figure 1

The exposition at the Musée Pompidou is positioned under the sign of the Sphinx. But what is the enigma to decipher—that of meaning? Certainly, but another signification is to be discovered here: that of rhythms and resonances. The purpose of the exhibit is to interrogate the space of the book where the text is staged. The book is a very precise work of conception in which the process and also the resonance, the color of the writing, are given in evidence—are given to be read. A plasticity and a listening: the ear is solicited as well as the eye.

In the space, the works are disseminated like very large open books: a double page at a single glance, as if its particular mood were suddenly rendered sensible and given new impetus visually by the plastic accompaniment of the artists. For each one of them, a short theoretical text details the passage of the writing to the design on the page.

The diversity and theatricality of the books play off each other, and twice the book makes itself known—as itself and in relation to the others. Here also are the original works of the artists: small formats contained in the first copies on beautiful paper. In the showcase are the bibliophile books created with Albert Ayme: *Sixteen and One Variations*, *For the Spider* by Francis Ponge, *L'après-midi d'un faune* by Mallarmé, *Hommage to Malévich*. And at the entrance, as a welcome, are the gazes of the newest Traversière editions: the *Grands Terribles* collection of portraits of Rimbaud, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Genêt, printed in order to translate the mood of each poet and the resonance of his work. Precise interrogation of these choices is possible—it shows how the image translates the work and is marked by it.

How to convey the secret kernel of the text, its tones and its tempo, translate its mood, its content and its divergences, its vibrations or its structures, its particular writing, in the book itself? Each time, a reinvolvement with the *conception* of the book occurs, and it is entirely physical: the format, the appropriated typographical characters, the choice of paper, its color, its substance and its weight, and the colors of the print, the imposition on the page, the blanks of silence and the impact of the blocks of text, the respiration of the montage, and the breaking of rhythms—even at times suddenly changing character, body, quality, to follow the writing in its







Of course, each case will be concerned with only one possible interpretation, the most appropriate one, and also with a passion: writing—a text, what does it provoke? Above all, it is the book itself that translates the interpretation, supports it, give it to us. Seized by the life of the book, how can an interpretation not be tempted to make visible, make touchable, the essence of that which is said, to inscribe the movement of writing in its disturbing strength—to work the text into its body, its form. The secret drive is to see that this quite explosive content is always well wrapped in a quite conventional package! To make it move a bit: there is the temptation, the project, the desire.

#### FOUR PROJECTS FROM THE EXHIBIT

*A Circular Play* by Gertrude Stein, with intervention by five artists inspired by the text itself: Albert Ayme, Arthur Aeschbacher, Bryan Gysin, Jiri Kolar, Tom Phillips.

Diverse and nervous scenes, eclipses of sense and sonorous echoes, verbal obsessions, enumerations, visions, proliferations, vocal intrigues, aleatory sketches, phonetic stakes raised and raised again, puns, dramas—*A Circular Play* transgresses and replays the limits of genres. The acid-yellow sonority of the paper betrays the verbal exasperation at the limit of nonsense; the very round letters, ultrafine or very thick, play the black and white notes of this obsessive oratorical game which turns on itself, this jubilation of pure musicality; the recentering of lines like a seismograph registers the drive of the hurled rhythms, expansions and losses of this tenuous, tendered thread: sense or sound?

In order to revisualize the project, five artists intervene, inspired by the text itself, each in accordance with the pictorial procedures corresponding to the author's writing structures, creating, like a new twist of possible meaning, the proper satellites of the text. Aeschbacher, through tearing and with scraps, makes improbable decipherings of the unreadable re-emerge endlessly (*see figure 1*). Ayme superimposes pages, then incises, excavates the textual density with unpredictable spurts of words or meanings (*see figure 2*). Kolar, through his collages, enters into the pure movement of proliferating constellations, enduring irrational fragments. Suddenly, the impromptu makes itself into a musical circle, a head of words or an apple of letters (*see figures 3 and 4*). Phillips crosses out and traces

scrolls, wanderings and knots of these signifying and repetitive labyrinths in which to lose and re-find oneself (see figure 5). And Gysin, the inventor of the “cut up,” displaces blocks of words and figures, mobile pawns in a game of chess, mimes and undermines the comedy of signifiers and situations; the un-tellable is staged.

Through all these intersections and reiterations of method, the art accents the gaming and theatrical space that is writing—the plastic effect is the visual translation of the musical resonance of the work.

*On the Marionette-Theatre* by Heinrich Kleist, translated by Roger Munier and accompanied by an “Homage to the Blue Nudes of Matisse” by the painter Jiri Kolar.

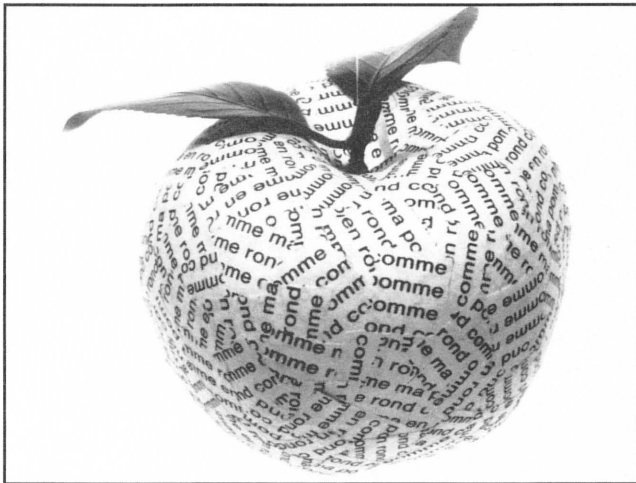


Figure 4

It is impossible to translate the “aura” of this magical and inexhaustible text (so justly celebrated), that attempts to seize man in his pure spirit of being, in this grand duel where the body, at times, surpasses knowledge and is carried away—on ivory coated paper, sepia printing, punctuated by “Matisse blue.” Irreducible text! To give it an absolute reading, glorified, so that each word exists fully—indeed to choose as the typeface the great Garamond, thirty point, to create a restraint on reading, time for questioning, punctuation of the poetic—to enter thus into the physical, to oblige one to traverse the arabesques of the very body of the letter: it is a sensual pursuit.

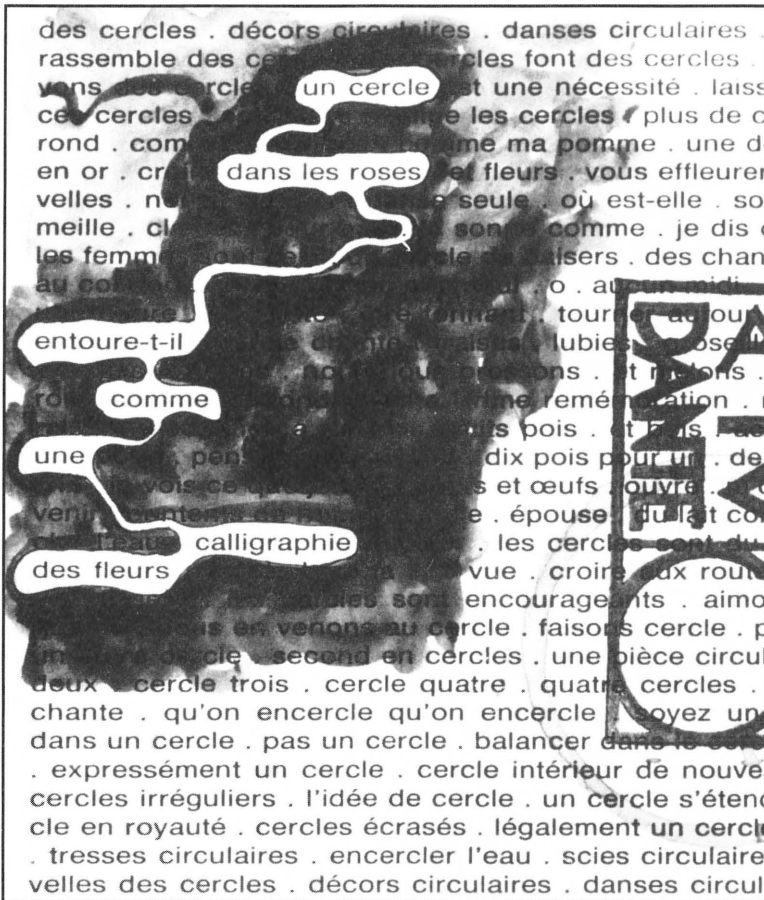


Figure 5

A mystic mood, this blue on ivory, the body, the body dancing to the color of infinite space—"Hommage to the Blue Nudes of Matisse," by Jiri Kolar, who recuts the famous "paper cutouts" and propels them thus like a dancing marionette in a snapshot of movement taken from life, annihilating the subject—like the text itself, which suddenly see-saws between "knowledge" and "the state of grace" when the "center of gravity" is touched (see figure 6). This is the enigmatic moment. This is the oscillating pendulum of the world. This is supreme liberty. This is a "lost paradise," where the movement becomes arpeggios, elevation, pure rhythm, desire, beyond all our habitual weightiness! This setting in motion, this leap of the unknown, this grace, this authenticity: is it "the soul, vis motrix"? The "Nude," treated also by fragments growing larger to the point of abstraction, delivers to us again its

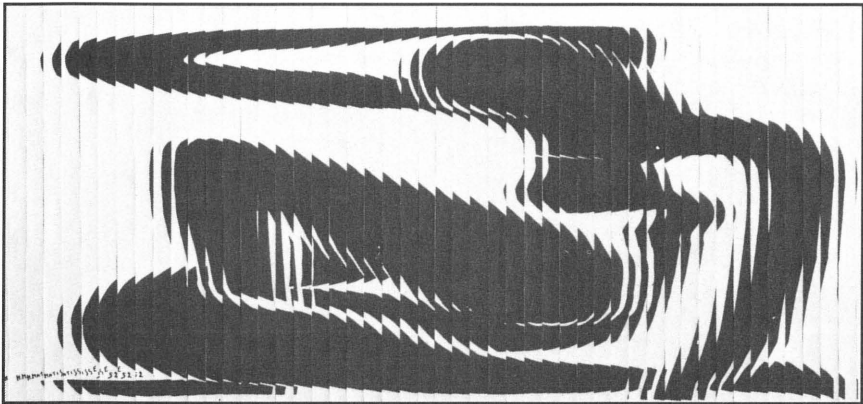


Figure 6

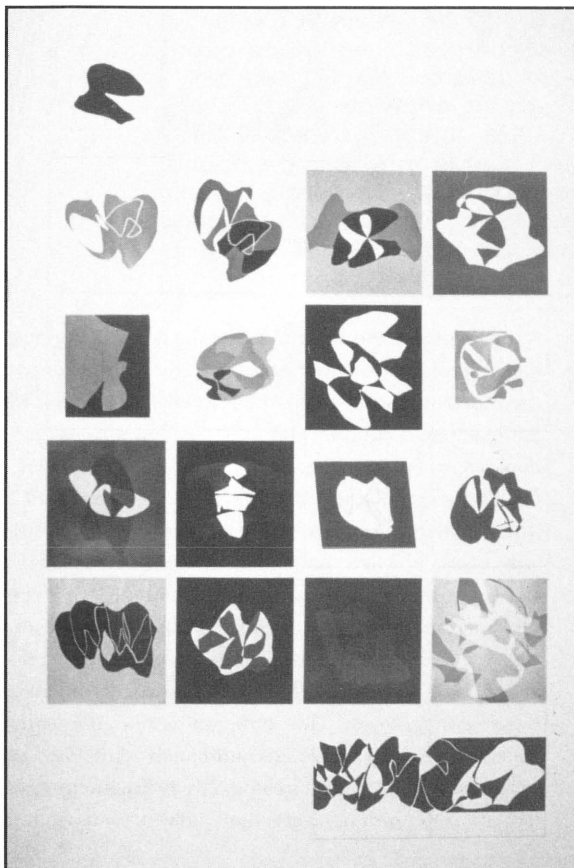


Figure 7

message: it is drowned by the letters or arabesques, once again the body in movement—but a line of sense pursued. Who then is pulling the strings? Who wins: the body or the spirit? Irreducible enigma, cross-sections to infinity—*re*-flexion in both senses of the word. The subject anchors itself in its formal design. Does it respond to the tragic death of Kleist shortly after he wrote this text?

*Sixteen and One Variations* by Albert Ayme, with “A Song for Albert” by Michel Butor and “Portrait of A.A.” by Jean-Yves Bosseur.

A painter, a writer, a musician—not a vague amalgamation or mixing of genres, but on the contrary, three works created on the basis of an identical, very precise structure: a theme and its variations. First, those of the painter: take a form and draw from it alone sixteen variations plus one, the grand finale where it resurfaces, inverted (*see figure 7*). Then, those of the writer and the musician: take either a stanza and its transformations, a poem subject to permutations in sixteen variants, or the generative seed of a series of thirteen sounds from which flow the sixteen sequences—and in each case the double finale, revealing intact the original matrix.

The book is meant to be, by the dynamic of its montage, like an arena of poetic percussion, where creative methods cross thoroughly in play. These pictorial, poetic, musical variations—so many diverse resonances which intersect each other—give each other new impetus, raise the stakes on each other. The variations of the painter are given to be read in a single block—aren't they orchestrated along the lines of a musical fugue? Those of the poet borrow colors from the painter, then instruments from music, to reunite the echo of their timbres. And in the music itself, suddenly fragments of the poems sing. Indeed, the book opens this reinvented space, where to read is to listen; the sonorous reading runs throughout the book with its notes and silences. The staves of the poem in beautiful, thick, blue-green-turquoise letters. And each of the “three agents,” by integrated and replicated notes, outlines his specific purpose—excavating the unity, making the differences explode into view. Variations, poem, score, texts, conceptual notes—scanned in typographical pianos and crescendos intermixed like so many visual phases of listening to the works, and certainly like a masterful and very new demonstration of reading.

*Masks of Writing, The Theatre of Writing* by Claude Maillard, accompanied by photos of the Masks of Writing.

Three words cross each other and are projected on the masks. This book, like a field of listening, is the place of their theatricality. Here the page design is the stage design, and texts and their faces collide.

“The Rhythm of Time, the Time of Rhythm” is the voice of fatality, who tracks down the contradictory forces of creative desire, pure energy, and dances in propitious terrain. The voice is a continuum; it links up, free, it moves, laser-printed in dotted lines; it scans its drives.

It is intersected by “The 7 Scenes of the Theatre of Writing,” where the subject (at) tempts his history. But who speaks in this dolorous place? The hero is “la personne,” in neuter, and the narrative is impossible, shot through with omissions, flights, where the blanks of the unsaid speak just as loudly and signify.

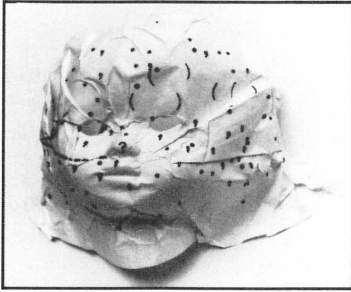


Figure 8

A theatrical stroke: these two texts superimpose themselves, telescope into each other; from this “The Satellites” will shoot out with incantatory fragments, scansion of sparse themes, reprises—it is the chorus. Indeed, under poetic pressure, with sense exploded and redistributed, lines and words fuse; they become irrational effervescences. The paper becomes so white, the letters tend toward blueness. A space suddenly opens far away, decoded; the great parentheses yawn.

These poetic fragments enlarged, projected, molded, make the “Masks of Writing”; they are theatrical figures and faces of speech. Antique mask, orifice of the word, the phrase (revealed and hidden like the oracle to be deciphered, impersonal and tragic) will incarnate all its roles, one by one: the young ephebe or the small animal, infant, pubescent adolescent, witch, mater dolorosa, homo sapiens of the alphabet, good sister in her mobcap, pharaoh, or cruel goddess behind the veil. Eleusis in the leaf! In the soft or cruel plicatures of the paper, the masks are guardians of the enigma—and the *sphinx* finally interrogates you again (*see figure 8*).

Translated and edited by Susan Rogers

## THE LIBRARIAN AND THE ARTIST'S BOOK: NOTES ON THE SUBVERSIVE ART OF CATALOGING

**As an avant-garde medium, the artist's book challenges the expectations of the reader/viewer and violates the conventional distinctions between literature and the visual arts. Those expectations and conventions are institutionalized in the popular notion of the library as a repository for books and of the librarian's role as custodian of that repository. This article rejects this conventionalized approach and posits in its stead the library as a sort of performance space in which the confrontation between artist and audience may occur. In this model, the librarian becomes an avant-garde performer who uses the library's conventional cataloging systems to establish a set of expectations that are challenged by the work in hand. As a kind of "straight man," the librarian becomes an essential actor in the realization of the work.**

Timothy Shipe is curator of the International Dada Archive and coordinator of the Humanities Division at the University of Iowa Libraries. His publications include articles on Max Frisch, the dada movement and artist's books. He is currently completing work on bibliographies of Marcel Duchamp and Berlin Dada.

*Visible Language*, 25:2/3

Timothy Shipe, pp. 327-333

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Sometime around 1970 a civil servant in California committed a subversive act. The unknown culprit was not employed by the Defense Department, or the CIA, or any of the agencies generally associated with intrigue domestic or foreign. He or she was a cataloger in a public library, and the act in question consisted of assigning the subject term "Real Estate Business" to Edward Ruscha's *Real Estate Opportunities* and sending this artist's book to be shelved with works about the real estate market. A copy of the catalog card was reproduced in the *National Union Catalog*, and through this medium, the error spread like a virus to library catalogs throughout the country.

Now for many years art librarians have had good fun with this classic instance of miscataloging, but surely I am overstating the case when I call this subversive? To explain myself, I must ask you to look at *Real Estate Opportunities* from two distinct but related points of view: that of a librarian and that of a library patron.

What does the cataloging librarian do when confronted with a book that must be placed on the shelves within a logical subject order and made accessible to the public through appropriate indexing terms in the catalog? First of all, he or she describes the work at hand, providing information on the authorship, publication history, physical characteristics and content of the work. Some of these details are established as access points, so that a patron can search for the work in the catalog by author, title, collaborators, and so on. Second, the cataloger makes the sometimes simple, often problematic determination of what the work is about, in order to assign subject terms from a controlled vocabulary (the Library of Congress Subject Headings.) At this point, the classic functions of the library catalog should be served: to enable the patron to determine whether the library has a particular known title, what works the library has by any given author and what works are available on a given topic. The final step in cataloging, assigning a classification number, is intended to place books in a logical browsing order on the shelves by grouping works on related topics close to one another.

Now picture the poor librarian who finds *Real Estate Opportunities* in the day's pile of books to be cataloged. It is safe to assume that a cataloging supervisor, who presumably has never heard of Edward Ruscha, has



glanced at the title and sent the book to the appropriate subject cataloging specialist in business and economics. This cataloger leafs through the book, finds that the work consists entirely of photographs of lots for sale in Southern California, wonders why this thing was published in the first place, shrugs, assigns the obvious subject heading, "Real Estate Business," and sends Ruscha's book off to sit on the shelves among factual accounts of urban land use and the real estate market. An understandable mistake.

But I want to suggest a different interpretation of this event, approaching it from the viewpoint of a library patron. Consider the following pair of truisms, one concerning the avant-garde, the other concerning library cataloging. We all know that an essential characteristic of avant-garde art is that it challenges, disappoints or subverts the expectations of the audience. Of course, one of the chief difficulties faced by the avant-garde is that it attracts a very limited audience, and that this limited audience, composed of devotees of the avant-garde, comes with the very clear expectation and hope that its expectations will be challenged or thwarted.

The truism about cataloging is that the aim of the cataloger is to match the right book to the right reader. Now I want you to imagine a library user, someone who is thinking about getting involved in real estate investment and is looking for some sort of introductory overview of this subject. He or she comes to the library's catalog, enters the search term "real estate business," browses the citations on the monitor (or flips through the cards in the drawer) and finds a promising title: *Real Estate Opportunities*. The user writes down the call number and retrieves the book. A book and a reader have been matched, and I would like to suggest that the cataloger has achieved what many avant-garde artists only dream of. The expectations of this particular reader are about to be disappointed, thwarted and challenged. The cataloger has become the ally of the artist in reaching an appropriate audience. In this respect, then, the cataloger of *Real Estate Opportunities*, whoever he or she was, committed a subversive act that was entirely in keeping with the intentions of the avant-garde.

In the intervening years, subject catalogers at the Library of Congress have come to recognize the phenomenon of

the artist's book and have created for it both a subject heading and an appropriate place within the classification scheme for books on art. So if *Real Estate Opportunities* were cataloged today, we would find it shelved not among general works on real estate, but among works by Edward Ruscha and other creators of artists' books. The question becomes one of context: which context serves *Real Estate Opportunities* better? From the viewpoint of the art historian, the latter arrangement is clearly more convenient. But if the aim of the pioneers of this medium was to create a democratic art form, freed from the economic dictates of the museum and gallery establishment, affordable, available alongside the tabloids at supermarket checkout counters, then perhaps their dream is better realized in the happy or distressing accident of a novice real estate investor chancing upon Ruscha's book on the shelves.

In a sense, the very act of placing an artist's book in a library rather than in a museum creates a radically different context, one that may be more appropriate to the subversive intentions of the avant-garde. In the context of a museum, an artist's book can only be displayed statically, either closed to show the cover or opened to a single pair of facing pages. It is seen in the context of other art objects, and more likely than not it is separated from the viewer by protective glass. It has become entirely subservient to the institution that the medium had originally hoped to subvert.

Place the same book in a library and it becomes a gadfly in an institution that is designed for less problematic kinds of artifacts, but an institution that is also deeply democratic in its traditions. Any book (indeed, any medium of information or expression) has its potential place in the library, and the librarian feels impelled to find that place so that the book may be used as intended: glanced at, skimmed or read from cover to cover. The artist's book poses a challenge to the reader, and the cataloging librarian may well be the perfect personification of that reader. As a hybrid form, the artist's book both is and is not a book. In particular, those works which play and experiment with the conventions of the book form are, in a sense, daring the reader to take them as books. And who is better prepared to take up that challenge than the librarian? Armed only with a set of rules and standards

which were designed for the traditional book format, the librarian finds himself or herself faced with the task of describing, for example, three collections of texts printed on various pieces of bodily attire—a task approached in an almost wholly straight-faced manner by a cataloger at the National Library of Canada:

Hairy Legs / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto : Transformer Press, 1982.  
[9] leaves ; 75 x 28 cm.

Text printed on 9 leg-shaped leaves in a 'leg-work' stocking, held together by garters.

High heels / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto : Transformer Press, 1983.  
1 box ; 11 x 18 x 33 cm.

Shoe box containing a pair of paper mâché shoes. Text is printed on 8 insoles in each shoe.

Leaky stories : a monthly periodical / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto : Transformer Press, 1985.

1 box ; 8 x 12 x 22 cm.

'12 maxishields: fifty percent more absorbing reading.' Text  
'rubber-stamped ... on maxishields non-adhesive pads ...'

The cataloger must understand and describe this work as being in some sense a book. In taking up this challenge, the cataloger becomes the artist's co-conspirator and the work's ideal reader.

Subject cataloging, too, provides an opportunity for collusion with the artist, a collusion that occurred unwittingly in the case of the cataloger of *Real Estate Opportunities*. Now that we have appropriate subject terms and classification numbers for artists' books, can the matter be left at that? "Artists' books" is a term for the genre of the work; but what about the subject matter of the book? Should Ruscha's *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* receive the additional heading "Automobiles—Service Stations—Southwestern States—Pictorial works"? I realize that we could get into serious questions about artists' intentions: does Ruscha intend his book to be in any sense "about" service stations? Should a cataloger, or for that matter a critic, be concerned exclusively or at all with the artist's intentions? Unlike the literary critic or art historian, the librarian cannot afford to be overly concerned with the problematic natures of intentionality and referentiality. After all, a librarian is supposed to be concerned with the user; and it is clear that a user who is seeking photographic depictions of service stations in the Southwest will be very happy to find Ruscha's work, even if

he or she has never heard of artists' books. And if the book happens to be housed on open stacks, and the user notices other books by Ruscha shelved next to it and happens to wonder why *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* is found among the art books, he or she might start posing some questions that are very much in the spirit of the artist's "intentions."

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of collusion, be it witting or unwitting, with a maker of avant-garde books occurred a few years ago when the Library of Congress established the name of Dadaist Johannes Baader for its Name Authority File, and in doing so extended one of the archetypal actions of Berlin Dada into the 1990s.

In 1919, newspapers across Germany reported the "death of the Oberdada" Baader; obituaries recapitulating Baader's life and his activities within the Dada movement appeared in major Berlin dailies and in small provincial papers in all corners of the republic. But it was soon revealed that Baader's death was a hoax; Baader had manipulated the media to the ends of his own program of self-mythologizing. Baader even devised a new system for measuring time, with the day of his "death" and "rebirth" in 1919 serving as point zero. Long after Baader's actual death in 1955, this event is remembered among historians of the avant-garde as a classic Berlin Dada gesture.

In 1988, the Library of Congress cataloged a reprint of Baader's writings. Whenever our de facto national library catalogs an author's works for the first time, the librarians conduct painstaking research in order to establish an appropriate heading, which then resides in the Library of Congress Name Authority File; libraries throughout the United States rely on this file in order to use a form of the author's name that is correct and consistent. Thus, as of early 1990, libraries across the nation, following their most authoritative source, were attributing the works of the Oberdada to "Baader, Johannes, 1875–1919." It was only after considerable soul-searching, and with the distinct sense of becoming a traitor to Dada, that I finally decided to report the error to the Library of Congress. The "correct" form, "Baader, Johannes, 1875–1955," is now established, and Baader's mythic death survives in the file only as a cross reference from the "old cataloging form." But for a period of about twelve months in 1989 and 1990, Baader's hoax was perpetuated in electronic cataloging

networks spanning the globe.

The librarian, then, in his or her confrontation with the avant-garde book, may well be drawn into a form of complicity with the artist, becoming an effective practitioner of the avant-garde. We may picture the library as a kind of performance space in which the librarian acts as the "performer" of the avant-garde book. I can imagine the development of avant-garde cataloging as an art form in its own right, whose aim would be to manipulate and subvert the established conventions of descriptive and subject cataloging as they have been institutionalized in national libraries and library associations around the world. But I rather prefer to think that, for the librarian, the most effective form of complicity with the aims of the avant-garde is to play the role of "straight man," taking the avant-garde book at face value, treating it, insofar as possible, like any other book in the library, force-fitting it, if need be, into the established conventions of bibliographic description and indexing. In this way, the avant-garde book is placed in the context in which it may best achieve its aim of undercutting the expectations of its audience.

## ENDNOTE

Some of the material in this article was presented in a different form at the planning conference, "Art Networks and Information Systems," co-sponsored by the Franklin Furnace Archive in New York and Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts at the University of Iowa, and held in Coralville, Iowa, in April 1989. The earlier paper was published in the conference proceedings, and later in *Art Documentation* 10:1 (Spring 1991).



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