

## Reading Breath: The Later Bookworks of Deborah Boardman

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You know the gesture someone makes when they wish to show you the size of something? Arms stuck out perpendicular to the body, fingers held together, hands held apart like bookends, the amount being shown measured by the space between the palms facing each other? This is the unintentional physical response I have to thinking of the entirety of an artist's output in terms of the mostly hand-painted, one-of-a-kind books she has made. I think my body does this bookending gesture because once, while as a student working on my MFA, I had a job in my school's collection of artists' books and regularly revisited the melancholic thought that a life's work making books may not amount to much, physically; the books one has created rarely fill the entire breadth of one shelf. Whole bibliographies of artists known widely in the field of artists' books, like Johanna Drucker, Susan E. King, or Joan Lyons, all of whom have been reasonably prolific making bookworks for forty plus years, would probably fit within the arm span of an average human.

But isn't this bookending body sign made with the arms and hands similar to the one little boys make to show the love of their mother: "I love you *this* much"—physically a small quantity and yet metaphorically meant to show how voluminous this love is. The linear feet in question don't measure a life's work in books any more than a little boy's arms stretched so wide they might separate from his thorax adequately measure love. As if the lifetime of thought; of developing the control over hand and eye movements; of expending the subtle perceptual effort to gain a feel for different brushes, different viscosities of paints,

and the pull and drag of different papers; as if the working out of what language to use; the time deciding whether or not there will even be any language; the amount of looking at these pages; as if the pages' exposure to the sun-and cloud-dappled window light of how many mornings and afternoons, of how many incandescently-lit late nights; how much conversation there has been about them; and how many fingerprints are invisibly folded into the fibers of their surfaces; as if all of this and more can be measured, quantifiably. Perhaps, then, it is an apt measurement, this shrug-like gesture of the body, aware of the fleetingness of its movements in relation to the permanence of the physical things embodying these unquantifiables.

These physical things, the books, lying there in an uneven pile on the desk in her studio where she must have often sat over the years, almost all of them bound in a near-matching, forty-percent gray or cloth of equally neutral beige (a few standouts dressed in patterns or bright orange), stack up around a foot high. One early piece in addition, a set of fourteen hand-made volumes, sits erect beside the stack, and a couple of paper pamphlets, so lightweight they are stirred by a strong sigh, rest on top of the pile. Many of those in the stack are as heavy and long as a small-to-medium-sized dog you resist hoisting from its resting place because of its stillness, its inertia. At this size and weight the books are planks of board, stiff and unwieldy to lift and keep stable from any one end. They are like small bodies with rigor mortis set in. You have to hold a book this big in both hands around its abdomen, almost cradling it to keep its back flat as you lay it for examination on top of a self-healing cutting mat in the only available table space. Its outsides blank of expression without title or nametags, there is guesswork as to which side the anterior is and you anticipate opening the wrong end first and having to re-enlist both delicateness and strength to turn the whole slab over. Tilting your head down to peer between the cover boards, a heap of deckled paper edges layer together like folds of wrinkled skin, the topmost of which must be attentively excised with a fingernail before pulling it back. To view a few of the

mammoth volumes will require laying out a large sheet of plastic on the floor and carefully hoisting the flat bodies down, cautious not to damage what may seem at first to be fragile but is in actuality more than resilient, the immensity almost an impediment to being opened and read.

Why do metaphors of the post-mortem body come so freely when first encountering Deborah Boardman's bookworks? Is it because of the artist's untimely passing from breast cancer that shades the view, a cloud of sadness between the sun and humble skylights of her attic studio? Isn't it sorrowful, then, to refer to her books in this way, to rummage in the stillness of her once lively studio? What remains in the studio after the passing of a hardworking artist like Boardman fatigues the soul due to the absence felt but also the sad musings and empathy for her widower and two sons who must make decisions about the fate of many objects. Her artists' books were a fraction of her output. What will happen to all of the paintings and drawings? Where will they go? Who will care for them? What of the dozens and dozens of sketchbooks and journals with thousands of pages written in a fine, Sanskrit-looking longhand that is illegible at a glance and would require deep research and intimacy with the author to decipher? Separating these works from the studio and finding a place for their ongoing existence can feel like the burdensome weight of deciding where to spread a cremated loved one's ashes. What of all the books? A book, like death, is easy enough to forget about. We can keep it on a shelf, like a cemetery, with all of the other books, like tombstones, some standing erect and cared for, others old and leaning from time and erosion, and all imprinted with the names of those who are, or will one day be deceased. We can face and contemplate the life and death of those named, or allow them to remain at rest until we desire, if we desire, to do so.

I am looking at books as death in part because Boardman asked us to picture death in her limited edition bookwork called *Picturing Death* (2000) as well as

“Picturing Death Journal”—blank notebooks laid out on a circular table for “freely written responses to four questions concerning your relationship to death and dying. The intention...to look at the hopes and fears which shape your experiences around death, in order to catalyze a process of gaining insight.” Boardman asks: “1. What do you imagine happens to you after you die? 2. How have you experienced the death of someone close to you, or how have you experienced your own death? 3. What meaning does the fact that you are going to die give to your life? 4. Picture your deepest hopes and fears for your death.”

If I’m honest, my own immediate, surface responses to all of Boardman’s questions have to do with books. In part because I’m an artist and interpreter of books-by-artists, but also because books are where I have gone in life to both experience and to hide from death. Impossible for me to have knowledge of (upon death) and yet ponderable in fantasy, I recoil from the personal psychic pain of my currently three-year-old son growing up without me and from being apart from my spouse and other loved ones. I also wish to spare them any pain, both spiritually and materially, caused by my passing. My spouse has said that when I die, she will build a pyre for loved ones to burn all the hundreds of published books I never sold. When she said it I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not, but it makes sense in both cathartic and practical terms as a way of dealing with the burden of full printers’ boxes beneath beds, in the basement, and unpacked on shelves filled with tiresomely repeated spines. The elegy of burned books, like my body and soul with them, will transform in energy, not spiritually, just matter made a different state. A representation of my soul may be intelligible in what I did put on paper that survives, though that may be my ego biasing a belief that some part of me gets communicated and expressed when I make and write about books. Maybe a fractured sense of who I was could be formed from browsing my library, though ego (again) wishes I had omitted some volumes, left more marginalia in others, and left notes about whether I had read a book or not, in full or in part, how many times, and at what period of life. Why do I wish to

remain comprehensible through books? Probably in the hopes my son will one day see the reflection of me that I look for in the mirror each day, and yet this desire also carries with it a lump of shame. After the untimely passing, from an errant blood clot, of poet C.D. Wright, her widower, Forrest Gander, wrote a poem to their son, the second-to-last line of which gives me emotive spasms of stricken recognition each time I read it: “I gave my life to strangers; I kept it from the ones I love.”

This line, like Boardman’s third question asking if the acknowledgement of death gives meaning to life, inspires me to get beyond my ego around leaving behind books; to instead make my inner world an open book for my son, spouse, and other loved ones to read; and to fear less what they might learn there, if indeed more than nothing is inside.

Already I want to backspace and erase the previous line so it never has the possibility of being read. Participation with Boardman’s “Picturing Death Journal” is an intimate and revealing act. I feel exposed writing about the inspiration to not entomb myself in bindings and to connect more directly to loved ones. Why did I use the words “inspiration” and “inspires”? I almost never use these words. They seem to have been commoditized in ads for running shoes and sentimentalized in block letters over stock ocean sunset imagery enough by now. What calms my anxieties about feeling overly exposed and makes the verb usage acceptable to me here is to recall the physiological definition of inspire: to breathe in. Inspiration: the contraction of the diaphragm and simultaneous engagement of the thoracic muscles to open up the chest wall as air draws into the lungs. What calms my feeling of being too wide-open is a more conscious, physical opening: breathing. I open up the chest and breathe in. Open up, breathe in.

In a statement contextualizing *Picturing Death*, Boardman recalls:

I came closest to the experience of another human's death when I worked on a community art project, *Mutual Borders*, 1993-1995, with the Community United Methodist Church, located in the Back of the Yards Neighborhood on Chicago's Southside. Early in the winter of 1994, community and church leader Jessie Stamps was diagnosed with cancer. She died the following March. When I last saw Jessie in the hospital, she was singing. The image I still carry of her is marked by her incredible focus—like a woman in labor, giving birth to her death. This is an experience of death that inspired me to create my book, *Picturing Death*, 1998.

Boardman notes her friend singing and uses a simile of childbirth labor—both associated with breath and breathing. *Picturing Death* has eleven poems paired across the spread with reproduced gouache paintings of multi-layered flower petal pattern motifs (some with figurative elements that are almost illustrative of the writings) in tonal variations of sienna, yellow ochre, ultramarine, and touches of olive green. In section X, "Death Means Disappear," the most prominently wide-open flower in the book is outlined in white and paired with a poem that reads:

If death means disappear  
My flesh cleaves to its bones  
My breath in the cage  
of my chest  
My blood entangles in  
its web of veins  
Pulsing, pulsing  
O my heart of hearts.

Life force—flesh, breath, and blood—are locked up in working parts of the body with particular emphasis on the "breath in the cage," an image of imprisonment. The OED etymologically traces the word "inclusion" back to the classical Latin *includsiōn*, (imprisonment, confinement) or to Old French *reclusion* (in the sense

of a monk's isolation). Beginning a little after *Picturing Death*, there is the sometimes-subtle inclusion of death on the page in Boardman's books. It is an inclusion in the old, reclusive, monastic sense of the word where the books become more purposefully isolated spaces for the study of breath and mindfulness and therefore life, as a result of acknowledging death.

Focus back in on Boardman's large books lying in an irregular stack on her studio table and see them, at first, as inert and expired with all of the air exhaled from them. Expiration is the relaxation of the muscles used to open up the chest wall to breathe. Expiring—the release of breath—is passive. Books are passive and dead objects when kept shut and unread. Boardman's books will collect dust and be arbitrarily laid to rest on this desk next to pairs of scissors, rolls of masking tape, a heap of compact computer discs, and an old, one-armed, paint-chipped action figure of Bela Lugosi's Wolf Man character, if they remain here and stay closed. Acknowledge that a book without a reader is expired—dead—and doing so is for the purpose of reflecting on why and how their maker and readers share in breathing them to life.

Open each of Deborah Boardman books and it is noticeable in later works, from 2006 on, that a shift occurred in their sense of space. In this period her painting opened up, becoming looser, certainly, but beyond that the feeling of space in the books is different. They are freed from a classical, printmakerly, portofolio-esque notion of graphic layout with handset printed texts on the left and more-or-less evenly bordered images on the right. There are new rhythms in structural development, the movement from the opening to the closing of a book, that include asymmetries, syncopation, and less metronomic pacing. Imagery of her studio practice: to-do lists and notecards, pictures of her dogs, frequently repeated wheel symbols, simple diagonal and other marking patterns in opulent, sometimes-sparkling transparent layers, and paintings of blank notebook paper all intermingle and flow through the pages. There is less obvious separation

between what is in the artist's mind, what is imagery, and what are the books' open areas of paper, and where these all exist in the books' spaces.

All books have spaces. Ulises Carrión begins "The New Art of Making Books," an important essay for understanding the book as an end and not a means (nor a vehicle or container) for the discovery of an artwork, authoritatively: "A book is a sequence of spaces." Carrión phrases his essay in near-aphoristic passages that are complete thoughts unto themselves but build upon one another (like when reading philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein); "Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment—a book is also a sequence of moments," continues Carrión.

Understanding what is meant by the word "sequence" in relation to Boardman's bookworks is critical. In his essay "Display as Discourse," Nathan Lyons, a master of photographic sequence in photo-bookworks, differentiates between series and sequence: "Series generally are thematically related or connected, while sequences are based upon disjunctive relationship. The Latin root of each term forms another distinction—series, 'to join'; sequence, 'to follow.'" Series and serial bookworks join subject matter through list-like associations or with what could be described as visual conjunction that reads like ands or pluses where oftentimes the turning of each page is like mentally repeating the phrase "and this, and this, and now this." Boardman's earlier books are series of paintings and poems, serially structured such that each has its own distinct theme joining all of its texts and imagery. Her later books like *Middle* (2006), *Animal Life* (2009), *Remedies* (2009), *Porous Space* (2009), *Book of Faults* (2010), *Lake and Studio* (2011), and *Magnetism* (2013) include sequence-based disjunctions and structures.

To confuse things, the later books often include series (of painted patterns or similar thematic subject matter) within sequences; as mentioned, in each of these books independently, and shared between them are repeated themes and motifs.

But the relationships between images, the turnings, and openings are disjunctive, meaning that they reveal contrasts. Though one sign may follow the next from spread to spread, it doesn't necessarily join or fix them together under one theme. Sequence-based structures aren't typically linear or continual though they aren't idiosyncratic either (true idiosyncrasy, however, is a form of sequence). Instead, they require the maker and reader to see and make connections between what isn't already connected because of common thematic characteristics. For example, consider *Lake and Studio*, which as the title suggests includes book spreads of A) imagery of Boardman's studio, B) painted patterns, and C) lake imagery, following one another disjunctively. The sequence structure of the first ten spreads is A, B, B, C, A, B, C, A, A. It does not reveal an immediately recognizable form. Rather, it requires bringing together in the mind the contrasting elements of different spaces, places, and time. We close a visually metaphoric gap when reading imagery of paintings hanging on the studio wall followed by swans floating on the lake. The figure that becomes present by connecting the two may be elusive, but seeing it clearly isn't the point, the purpose is the process of seeing that they are connected.

Purpose of process is important. Why does taking a deep breath reduce stress? By increasing oxygen in the brain and stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (which encompasses everything from constricting the pupils, to stimulating the saliva, to constricting bronchi, to reducing the heart rate, to stimulating the digestive system and gall bladder, to contracting the bladder, and relaxing the rectum), that focused, inspiring breath forms a process of connection. What is inspiration in a book? It is the breath in spaces between imagery, the moments of turning pages, the expiratory sigh at the end of a signature, these moments in reading when thought is stimulated and the ego contracts and you find yourself relating to another human being, living or dead, through the material book. It is a whole process for the purpose of seeing and

understanding that you are indeed alive and connected to others who are living or have lived.

When I arrived at Deborah Boardman's studio and looked down at the desk where the stack of her books lay, there was also a classic composition notebook conspicuously splayed open to a page containing five pencil-scrawled variations of her attempts to make a graphical representation in block letters of the phrase "NO NEED FOR JUSTIFICATION." I took this as a message from Deborah, whom I never personally met in life, that there was no sense in reading her books to find reasons they exist. What I read instead felt like the experience of meditation. I haven't meditated for long, but long enough to understand what Pankaj Mishra writes about meditation in his cultural history of the Buddha, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. He writes, "With regular practice of meditation, you become aware of, and learn to ignore, the random impulses and sensations which previously would have resulted in some sort of reaction, physically or mentally, but which now arise and fade without leaving a trace."

To read Boardman's final book, *Magnetism* (2013), is to have the experience of the awareness of impulses and thoughts that "arise and fade without leaving a trace." *Magnetism* is mostly a series of different patterns in different palettes sequenced with a few text pages. It starts and concludes with silver end pages and painted pink grids that are like blown-up graph paper. The combination of the title and the metallic and graph papers puts you in mind at first of something technical, making plans. The first painted text is the words "Our/Mag/net/ism" stacked in four three-letter sections. "Our" signifies a relationship of some kind. Then there are several pages of patterns in subdued colors with such a mastery of layering tones in cross hatches, dots, and diagonal slashes that the book seems to radiate mottled, moving light. Turning these pages is like having your eyes closed and registering flashes, shapes, and movement, the patterns clarifying visual noise. Next is the word "you," and then after more patterns,

“Doubt assailed me.” The “you” and the “me” are the “our” of the relationship noted prior. Then another page spread of pattern is followed by “I breathe and you disappear.” Then on the next opening there is a pattern on the verso and the text “Nothing goes away” on the recto. Finally, and with another spread of pattern on the left, the text on the right: “Everything is connected.” Gone away are the images of the studio, the lake, her dogs, the to-do lists, and the notecards. Remaining are just pulses, light, sensation, phrases, and fragments of thought that come and go. And with an inspiring breath the *you* of the relationship, perhaps Boardman in dialog with herself, the ego of separate identity, is also gone away but not completely. That she left her books allows *me* to meditate on how it is that through them we, like everything, are connected.