

Bookworks: Examining the Codex

Books are becoming objects to consider rather than read. What is it about books that artists and viewers alike seem to find so provocative? Since the 1960's, an increasing number of artists have created what Betty Bright calls "sculptural bookwork" (unique artistic book-like objects or collections thereof).¹The brief history of sculptural bookworks (referred to as "bookwork" hereafter) has not had sufficient time to develop as a critical field within the fine arts. Of the many terms used when writing about book arts, bookwork is an elusive one. We are still listing aspects of bookworks in order to understand how they relate, simultaneously, to usable, readable books and sculpture. They exist in the threshold between these two worlds. Bookworks are so fascinating because they deny onlookers and critics stable ground on which to identify and compartmentalize the subject matter. This dual nature causes confusion, and Umberto Eco points out that humans will tend to make lists and categorize every aspect of a subject "...when we cannot provide a definition by essence for something and so, to be able to talk about it, to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties..."² We cannot move past the question of what exactly is a book and does bookwork fit into that definition. A more direct and compelling query asks what is the cultural role of books and how is that affected through artistic manipulation. Our interest in books and their manifestations, especially recontextualized in bookwork, is not casual. Bookwork is certainly a popular mode of sculpture and the subject of numerous museum and gallery exhibits. It seems that no one can explain why. Society has unchallenged, lofty expectations of books that are disputed when the familiar codex form is modified. Bookwork seeks to challenge these expectations in order to

¹ Betty Bright, *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960 – 1980*, (New York City: Granary Books, 2005), 5.

² Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*, (London: MacLehose Press, 2009), 15.

repurpose and examine the form and role of the codex.

Codices (singularly, codex) have long represented what we, as a culture, imagine when the word “book” is used. I will use “book” freely in reference to the cultural idea of its shape and function, but it is important to differentiate between a book and a codex. A codex is, very specifically, an object with pages bound along an edge into protective covers. Books, on the other hand, can encompass a vast array of shapes and uses. Scrolls, ancient tablets, folded pamphlets and magazines are books. The long history of books reaches much farther back than codices, and the objects involved encompass any “treatise written on any material (skin, parchment, papyrus, paper, cotton, silk, palm leaves, bark, tablets of wood, ivory, slate, metal, etc.), put together in any portable form...”³ It is with this definition that bookworks and altered books find a great creative spring. With limitless material choices and few prerequisites, bookworks undoubtedly can be regarded as books, whether it is apparent or not.

The ongoing debate among critics and book artists continues as individuals seek to argue whether the word “book” can be used so freely in reference to sculptural objects that obviously do not and cannot function as books. A dialogue addressing the differences between artists' books, deluxe books, book arts, book objects, etc. prevents more progressive critical thinking. Two books that compile previous knowledge within the book arts are instructive to understanding different kinds books that are created. Yet, both still don't paint a clear picture as to why bookwork is made or why it is so popular. Betty Bright's *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960 – 1980 (2005)* seeks to make clear guidelines in discerning between the various types of books art and their development. *Bookwork: Medium To Object To Concept To Art (2011)*, by Garrett Stewart, is a wealth of definitions and theoretical musings about the place of

³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Book,” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/21412?result=1&rskey=u5QYGA&> (accessed October 30, 2012).

bookwork in gallery settings. Yet, its incredibly dense nature makes it cryptic and formidable. According to Jim Trissel, there is a “regular editorial effort to segregate kinds of books into category...”⁴ One motive behind this discussion lies in a lack of an agreed upon definition of what a book is, can and should be. Bookwork does adhere loosely to our cultural definitions of “book,” yet associations are near enough to our personal perceptions of what a book is that they elicit reactions. Understanding how books operate is integral to reading into bookworks but not necessary to defining or grasping or apprehending the work themselves.

Examining the basic functions that codices fulfill and the senses they engage provides insight into why artists manipulate books and why they might be powerful vehicles for eliciting reactions from viewers. First and foremost, books open. In Western cultures, covers and pages turn from right to left in order for text to be read left to right. Cover materials generally have a heftier feel and weight than the paper within. In addition to noting these tactile qualities, readers take mental note of the quality of the paper and binding materials and assign the form as a whole a value. Similarly, the book designer’s care (or lack thereof) in choosing type and ornaments and laying out the text and illustrations on each page are also cues to the book’s value (wide margins and generously sized text have different connotations than narrow margins and densely packed small type). Books can also make sounds; readers can slam hardcover books shut and make a thin whispery sound by turning a page. Ink in freshly printed books and musty old papers both stimulate the sense of smell. Time also plays an important role in books. Temporal aspects such as the rhythm of text, sequenced pages, and page turning all refer to a fourth dimensionality inherent in books. Readers have the ability to move forward and backwards through time simply by flipping through a narrative. While this seems to apply to novels, the author's role can also be imagined in a temporal sense and new editions exemplify how any writing moves and develops

⁴ Jim Trissel, “The Rise of the Book in the Wake of Rain,” *In Journal of Artists' Books*, no. 5 (April 1996): 26.

through time. As the most understated appeal to the senses in regards to codices, time plays a large role in memory and, therefore, emotion. Memory is transportative, and all the senses interact with time.

An important factor to remember is the deep cultural and emotional connection society and individuals have to books. Broadly, they act as a comfortable companion to human development and documentation. They can be benign devices that store knowledge. Many individuals' earliest memories rotate around particular books, and a landmark development in life is learning to read. Involved in the process of learning is the pressure to do so; one's perceived intelligence and capability often hinge on the aptitude one displays for understanding the written word. Reading and its symbol, the codex, are not just about skill. From a nation's cultural advancement to self-esteem, great emotional weight is wrapped up in books. For this reason, books as symbol, medium and subject matter provide a unique blend of elements for artistic expression. Even with a decline in general use, books still retain their role as symbols of potential information, entertainment, comfort, distraction, or any number of associated tasks and/or emotions.⁵ Buzz Spector points out that the book form has increasingly become a fetish – an object to be revered for its reference and reverence to notions other than books themselves. Spector sees that altered books, which use preexisting texts as medium and subject matter at once, embody this notion as artists pierce, paint, maim, singe, cut, and affect the text in innumerable ways. When viewers observe a successful altered book, it becomes “fundamentally allegorical, its (text) body a “ruin” that is supplemented by an overabundance of material effects.”⁶ Spector directs us to Susan Stewart's poignant observation that “the further the object is

⁵ “To Read or not to Read: A Question of National Consequence, Executive Summary,” http://www.nea.gov/research/ToRead_ExecSum.pdf

⁶ Buzz Spector, “The Fetishism of the Book Object,” In *The Book Maker's Desire* (Pasadena, California: Umbrella Editions, 1995) 15-21.

removed from its use value, the more abstract it becomes and the more multivocal is its referentiality.”⁷ As book objects become further removed from the original objects of their inspiration, more potential exists for a broader range of perspectives.

It is not required for bookwork to open or convey information through printed words on pages. Bookwork does not need to be bound. They cannot or do not need to be held. The missing traits of tactility, smell, the sound of turning pages, and notions of time and intimacy exist only in viewers' minds. What is important is that a clear allusion to books is made in order to stimulate personal memories and emotions. To succeed as effective sculptural objects, bookwork must engage the mental imagery and preconceived ideas one has of books or, more specifically, codices. Garrett Stewart describes these sculptural books' functions as “conceptual labor.”⁸ Books describe our place in history. Personally and culturally, books help us identify with our surroundings.

An interesting aspect of bookwork is that it denies access to some or all of these familiar sensations of reading a codex. While Matthew Brown describes how “the tactile and the verbal coordinate with the visual, the sculptural, and the temporal to make the book expressive as a medium,” the inaccessibility of the first two characteristics creates the environment in which bookworks exist and function as art objects to consider.⁹ This, in turn, signifies a deeper conversation about the book object, unread and unreadable, as a cultural entity. I would like to appropriate Brown's categories for examining formal aspects of bookworks rather than interpreting them. Little difference exists between unread books on shelves and bookworks in galleries. The works cannot be or are not read in a traditional sense. While there is potential to

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium To Object To Concept To Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xiii

⁹ Matthew Brown, "Book Arts and the Desire for Theory," In *Journal of Artists' Books*, no. 22 (Oct 2007): 6-9.

pick up and read a shelved book, the book as art object denies the viewer access. Tactility and content in the both cases are irrelevant. Instead, the shelved book and bookwork use sight, three-dimensionality, and time to trigger memory and cultural connections. Herein lies the unique strength and quality inherent to bookwork. Artists are able to exaggerate and expand upon any of the five traits given by Brown to great effect. Using these as a formal basis for looking at bookworks, we can start examining how any piece interacts with its audience. Within these parameters, we can begin to recognize key similarities and differences between various sculptures in this realm. Understanding the nature of bookworks will help us to gain insight into the role and popularity of these sculptures. Here, Brown's methods can be used to chronologically analyze examples of successful and popular bookworks and illustrate how they function as bookworks.

Near the beginning of bookwork's history, John Latham set a dramatic example for future artists. Since 1964, Latham has created numerous renditions of *Skoob Tower* (Fig. 1,2). These were largely comprised of reference books set in pairs at right angles to each other and stacked to heights of approximately 10 feet. These stacks were elevated on concrete and/or metal supports. Functioning as demonstration, performance and "reverse sculpture,"¹⁰ *Skoob Tower* evoked intense emotional reactions, both positive and negative after he lit them on fire. Latham's towers deconstructed themselves as they burned. With only their covers visible, the content within was unavailable. Unapproachable when lit, Latham creates a purely visual and mental experience. *Through* reactions to *Skoob Tower* one can observe instances of the connections between humans and books, as both "function within a larger setting or totality: the realm of literature and

¹⁰ John A Walker, "John Latham and the Book: The Convergence of Art and Physics," In *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 129, No. 1016 (Nov. 1987): 719

knowledge; the world and Nature.”¹¹ Temporal qualities exemplify this notion in various modes here. The texts were published at a certain time, and the information therein, is relevant to a specific moment in time. If Latham used encyclopedias, for example, selected human knowledge up to the point of final editing would be represented. These works extend into human history. The transformational process of burning displays evidence of changes through time. As photographs are our contemporary references to these performances, our understanding of them is related directly to the frozen captured moment.

Anselm Kiefer’s (b. 1945) *Volkszählung* (Census) of 1991 (*fig. 3, 4*) continues Latham’s expression of historical time, but in a different manner. Kiefer also uses multiple books in an installation. Large rectangular bookcases define an interior space that is accessible though a space in the middle of one of the cases. A glass and steel polyhedron referencing Albrecht Durer’s *Melencolia I* sits in the middle. There are three shelves to a bookcase that are lined with oversized books made of lead, hailing to a past time when lead type was the industrial means for printing. Books also lay on the floor below the bottom shelf. Each book is massive; the lead provides increased visual weight. There are no words; the books are meant to be left unopened. Every tome appears to be worn and eroded by time. These books can be placed in a forgotten past or future scenario. Either way, the contents are lost. *Volkszählung* aligns well with Brown’s five principles. The tactile and verbal elements are missing. Lead pages and impossibly heavy forms deny the tactile experience of books. Language through text is gone altogether. These absent qualities come to attention precisely because of their lack. On the other hand, Kiefer takes great advantage of visual, sculptural, and temporal qualities inherent in bookwork.¹² The books, both by themselves and as a whole, create a visual texture very similar to what one would see in

¹¹ John A Walker, “John Latham and the Book: The Convergence of Art and Physics,” In *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 129, No. 1016 (Nov. 1987): 718

¹² Matthew Brown, "Book Arts and the Desire for Theory," *Journal of Artists' Books*, no. 22 (Oct 2007): 6-9.

a disintegrating library, preserved in one moment. Past and future time seems to belong to this work rather than anytime in the present. As relics from another era, this work stimulates the imagination in ways that move viewers to a greater experience.

Contemporary sculptor Brian Dettmer's (b. 1974) work epitomizes altered books. His work takes preexisting texts and, with surgical precision, cuts away sections of pages to reveal words and images. These stack and layer on one another in relief, unveiling sections of the entire book. In *Tower of Babble* (2011, *fig. 5*), Dettmer stacks numerous paperbacks with their covers removed in an even spiral. Unaltered except for incisions, Dettmer preserves the general shape of each codex. Spine to spine, two books comprise one section. With sections of text removed, certain words and sentences juxtapose with visible layers above and below. *Tower of Babble* destroys syntax, denying continuous logical reading. The nature of this work as a gallery piece prevents any tangible possibilities. Each cut is deliberate. Even while the texts inside are unnamed and inaccessible, viewers can be left astonished, offended, or bewildered due to respect of books in general. Here the visual and sculptural elements work to transform each book in time. Memories here must be used to associate books as medium to their sculptural transformation. The nature of these memories can provoke various emotional reactions, which, in turn, repurpose the books.

Within the parameters that Brown put forth we can form stable ground on which to gauge various artworks that exist under the helm of "bookwork." Using Brown's elements oversimplifies many aspects of those works, yet with them we can compare and contrast each piece. The given examples of bookwork differ in context, content, scale and form, yet they carry with them a common property. Latham, Kiefer, and Dettmer employ missing but implied properties of tactility and readability in conjunction with the visual and sculptural. These

elements work together to create a temporal element with books as a catalyst. Using Brown's elements as common tools, a new critical dialogue can begin, and the field of bookwork can extend its theories beyond definitions. We can begin to tackle a more revealing facet of bookworks: the psychological connection viewers have to books and how artists play on this subject matter. A study of this sort goes deep to the heart of why artists are driven to bookwork. Using books as a reference, subject matter, and material is not a subtle undertaking. Bookwork encapsulates a much wider array of studies than art theory. Stable, working theoretical parameters are needed to progress into other disciplines. Bookwork appeals to, engages, and challenges our understanding of knowledge. How ideas are transmitted in the present and across generations, how we have constructed our identity as humans is bound in codex form.



*Fig. 1 - John Latham, *Skoob Tower Ceremony*, 1998 at MOCA Los Angeles*
<http://www.flattimeho.org.uk/project/45/>



*Fig. 2 - John Latham, *Skoob Towers*, 1966, London (Gustav Metzger shown)*
<http://www.flattimeho.org.uk/project/45/>



Fig. 3 - Anselm Kiefer, Volkszählung, 1991

<http://ponyhofffreshpaint.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/anselm-kiefer-volkszc3a4hlung.jpg>



Fig. 4 - Anselm Kiefer, Volkszählung (interior), 1991

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_YiaG96xsPe4/R26wfriRZjI/AAAAAAAAAMc/XamXMI6Ls9A/s400/kiefer.installation.jpg



Fig. 5 - Brian Dettmer, Tower of Babble, 2011
<http://cdn.mhpbooks.com/uploads/2012/06/Tower-of-Babble-572x858.jpg>

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