

Context Clues

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What do fly-fishing and etching have in common?

One sleepless night I decided to read the magazine *Cabinet* from cover to cover, rather than skimming for articles that I had a predetermined interest in. I found myself immersed in an article by Joe Grigley about an upstate New York sport-shop owner who makes an ugly little fly called the Haystack. But along with the nitty-gritty of deer hair and possum fur, it was also about fly ties as visual culture and representational theory. Grigley's piece immediately followed an article called *Thing/No. 2*, about an image of an unidentifiable creature, found in a print shop in Uruguay. Three writers submitted various detailed descriptions, as if from an imagined taxonomy.¹

The articles made perfect sense with one another. The sequential arrangement compounded the visual correlation between the fly and the "thing." But my decision to read in an open and flexible glide allowed my curiosity about what would come next shape the thoughts that collaged the articles together. Each turn of the page revealed something different, with only the loosest of connections. While the articles shared the same context, a magazine called *Cabinet*, it was the reading that connected everything- reading as if I didn't know how. I suspended my usual expectations, and each page became something new to discover.

The unpredictability of artists' books encourages the same kind of reading. We enter a space of wonder. To experience wonder we can't read to confirm what we already know; we need to be vulnerable to challenge and discovery. Ross Martin's *Edifice Wrecks*² is like a specimen case, a collection of words and images about books themselves. It challenges our expectation of order: that a collection is arranged according to taxonomies; that pages follow sequentially; that captions describe illustrations in a logical way. A clue that this book is not following all the rules comes early, with an admonition to "Be Your Own WordBoss... Life is too Short to Write the Old Way." Edits and juxtapositions invite us to read in a new way, to make sense of Martin's random order. At the beginning, the text serves as disjunctive captions for the collages. Over the course of the book the text gives way to images, and the reading becomes even more open-ended.

Just as there are different types of writing, there are different kinds of reading- for research, for entertainment, for vicarious experience, etc. Each demands a different reading method, ranging from speed-reading to the slow decipherment of a phrase.

¹ *Cabinet*, Issue 15/The Average 2004
Immaterial Incorporated
181 Wyckoff Street, Brooklyn NY 11217
email info@cabinetmagazine.org
www.cabinetmagazine.org

² Ross Martin, *Edifice Wrecks*
Portland, Maine: R. Martin. 1996

Holbrook Jackson writes in The Reading of Books, “Most general reading is little more than skimming; much is forgotten as the eye glances over the page, noting phrases, ideas, incidents, ...with no intention of remembering them.”³

The content of artists’ books can range from obscure to obvious one-liners. Because of their hybrid nature, we can read them as books, and/or look at them as visual art. Too often, they get the same glance-over that a painting might get, a visual skim that is like a brief pause in a museum. The book may have a colophon, but it’s not like the didactic on the gallery wall, telling us what the work is about, the art historical context, or biographical bits about the artist.

While reader reception theory, deconstruction, and other literary theories are useful valences through which we could unpack an artist’s book, they are not common tools for the non-academic reader. As an educator and a practitioner, I teach reading as much as I teach making. Rather than beginning critiques with color, form, or composition, we start out by naming the subject, or what the work is about, and then the content, or what the work means. The interpretations are supported both by clues within the work, and our own experience. There is a reciprocal relationship: We read for experience, and we bring our experience to reading. Understanding is gained by being active, committed readers.

Important artists invite our curiosity, but they also stump easy comprehension. In order to comprehend text, children must know the meanings of roughly 3000 words they learn each year. When confronted with an unfamiliar word, they will either skip over it and continue to read, or they will stop reading altogether. Young readers have a toolbox of contextual clues to help them create meaning: picture association, repeating, sounding the word out, breaking it down into smaller pieces. Generally context clues are defined as other words or phrases within a sentence or paragraph that help with the understanding of a new word.

Even though reading may come easily to us now, we can still use that toolbox of clues to read and interpret artists’ books. When we first learn to read, we use picture clues, associating an image with a sound and then the letters. The familiarity of the images encourages the reader to move from what is known to what is unknown. In Problem Pictures,⁴ Spencer Selby juxtaposed fragments of text with nondescript, textbook-like images, giving each layer a charge they wouldn’t have separately. A compilation of ten years of work previously published in magazines, Selby’s book collages found images and texts, manipulated graphically and mechanically with a copy machine.

Although Selby’s work was originally published as individual pieces, Problem Pictures presents them in pairs. The eye follows the printed line on one page to the crossed-out script on the facing page. The layering negates caption and illustration relationship because image and text are given equal visual weight. Even though readers wander through the layers, alternately giving importance to whatever comes forward at that moment, the flattening of the layers into a single visual plane requires a simultaneous reading technique.

The title, Problem Pictures, could mean that this visual technique is problematic for the reader, or that the subject matter of the individual pages depicts problems. In this folio,

³ Holbrook Jackson writes in The Reading of Books, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2001 p.22

⁴ Spencer Selby, ***Problem Pictures***
Berkeley, CA: Sink Press. 2003

with background music about the Unity of Brethren, cars drive off the roofs of buildings in slow motion. The arc of gravity is emphasized by the waterspout on the next page, crashing from top to bottom but also connecting the words “trouble” and “dogmas.”

But problem pictures could also mean something like word problems in math. In order to find a solution, the key elements have to be sorted from the supporting, and the relationships between them need to be identified. This approach is more about engaging in the problem-solving process than finding the right solution. It’s a bit like learning how to read all over again, with different rules and benchmarks.

Stones⁵ by Marie Clay, may look like an artist’s book, but actually it’s a diagnostic test used by teachers for the early detection of reading difficulties. In Alberto Manguel’s A History of Reading, he describes the moment when he unlocked the mystery of reading as a child.

(The marks) metamorphosed from black lines and white spaces into a solid, sonorous, meaningful reality... I could turn bare lines into living reality. ...It was like acquiring an entirely new sense, so that now certain things no longer consisted merely of what my eyes could see, my ears could hear, ...(etc.) but of what my whole body could decipher.⁶

(I am reminded of that magical moment in the Helen Keller story, when she finally understands Anne Sullivan’s finger spelling the word w-a-t-e-r into her hand while pumping water from the well. Letters, words, body, and experience all unite into a moment of recognition that is forever.)

In another passage, Manguel notes, “A writer can construct a text in any number of ways, choosing from the common stock of words those which seem to express the message best. But the reader receiving this text is not confined to any one interpretation. While the readings of a text are not infinite... they are not strictly dictated by the text itself.”⁷

Manguel calls it “constructing” a text, an appropriate term for visual and concrete poetry. In Two Element Stories⁸ by Richard Kostelanetz, with design by Aryeh Cohen-Wade, pairs of words bump into each other through graphic compositions. By deconstructing and reconstructing the words, we can read both the root words and variations. This is akin to a word structure context clue. Clusters of letters are recognized as prefixes, suffixes, or word endings. In *Two Element Stories*, simple words are overlapped, bisected, or reconfigured, and are made strange in the process. Perfectly serviceable words like “inefficient” and “insufficient” trip over themselves in a tangle of letters following the prefix. The arrangement proves their meaning by calling attention to their parts. While we can still see the words,

⁵ Marie Clay, **Stones: The Concept about Print Test**
Heinemann Education Books, Auckland, New Zealand 1979

⁶ Alberto Manguel’s A History of Reading, p.6

⁷ Alberto Manguel’s A History of Reading, p.183

⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, Design by Aryeh Cohen-Wade, **Two-Element Stories**
New York, NY: Richard Kostelanetz. 2003

they no longer look or sound the same. Instant recognition gives way to an awkward sounding out. Boogie Woogie or bo wo ogie ogie is a graphic dance, with the center diamond of Os like steps measured out on the floor (or one of those electronic dance games in amusement park video arcades).

Playing with root words, sounds, and word structures was the basis for the word games on the Gail See Staircase at Open Book in Minneapolis.⁹ The staircase was a collaborative project between myself and Garth Rockcastle, the architect who designed the building and now is the Dean of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland in College Park.

Form, function, the book, and architecture are synonymous in this piece. The viewer/reader enters into the space of a book while climbing the stair. The translucent pages reveal and conceal through the overlapping structure. Eighty-five six-foot pages splay open from the steel spine of the staircase, unfurling from a welded, stitched binding. The landing is a pause, the space between, and a place to read the text based on word games. The connection between architecture and books is both physical and verbal, as seen in these two examples of word groups.

subject
subtext
text
textual
textural
architectural

word
afterword
afterimage
image
imagination
magic

The hundreds of words hand written in graphite mark the pages like a sketchbook, a work in progress. A path forward in either direction, the staircase, like books, is a serial progression from one point to another through time, structure, sequence and space.

Sentences are syntactical progressions. A syntactic or word order clue occurs when the order of the words in the sentence indicates what the missing word must be- a noun, verb, or adjective. Faulty substitutions don't make sense or the results don't sound like a real sentence. This sparse book, Pausing for Breath¹⁰ by Czech-born artist and writer Pavel Buchler, accompanied a lecture on censorship. All that remains are the punctuation marks, acting as stand-ins for the missing text. The exclamation points emphasize the emotion,

⁹ Karen Wirth and Garth Rockcastle, Gail See Staircase at Open Book 2000
20'H x 20'W x 30'D in three story high light well
steel, concrete, 85 Lumasite panels, graphite
1011 Washington Avenue South, Minneapolis

¹⁰ Pavel Buchler, A Lecture on Censorship and Consensus
Glasgow School of Art, October 18, 1996

commas are metaphors of pregnant pauses, imagination fills in the action implied by the empty space. Nouns, verbs, adjectives are all implied, and are as purple as our visual thinking will allow.

But was the original text obscene, or was there even a text to begin with? It is just as possible that this book is about self-censorship, a self-imposed discipline that a writer working in a communist-controlled country might resort to in order to be published. Or it could be what's left after official censors edit out anti-government thoughts. With no words, we are left to ruminate not only on what was omitted, but also on the social and political motivations of censorship, and the range and power of its reach.

Another type of context clue is the definition or explanation clue wherein the meaning is explained immediately following the new word or phrase. David Bunn's Subliminal Messages¹¹ is another example of a false taxonomy, making a new order out of the discarded card catalogue from the LA Central Library. Rather than using the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal systems for ordering books, Bunn uses the stains on the cards. Residue is bagged, tagged, and inventoried according to random categories gleaned from the cards themselves. The titles of each chapter, culled from a catalogue card, define the way we interpret all the cards that follow, making logical connections among widely disparate elements. What are at first just dirty stains or careless marks become abstract clues that tell a different narrative. The marks are visually minimized when seen in context, yet conceptually important when captioned by the card's text.

In the title chapter, *Subliminal Messages*, the incidental marks become psychological Rorschach tests. We look for hidden messages because the title has already told us they are there. In *Secret Societies*, what could be a jelly stain might instead be read as an alchemical experiment, an ink stain might be the mark of signing a soul away with a bloody thumbprint, a red pencil mark is the residual evidence of a vampire's presence. In this work, the card catalogue does not refer to books on shelves, but to a series of imaginary activities separate from a cataloguing system.

When readers do not understand an author's vocabulary, they cannot fully understand the text. Inference context clues can imply meaning through relationships, before or after the new word. Scott McCarney's Index¹² provides direct and oblique clues; when we understand one we can infer the meaning of the other.

Like the previous works, McCarney plays off our expectations of book systems and order in Index to the Encyclopedia, further subtitled: "IN WHICH the different SCIENCES and ARTS are digested into a distinct Treatise or System; AND The various TECHNICAL TERMS, etc. are uncovered as they occur in the order of the Alphabet." McCarney refers to Diderot's 18th century Encyclopedia in the afterword. An encyclopedia is an attempt to gather all current knowledge in one place. An index however, is a shorthand guide to facilitate reference. McCarney short circuits the index even further by editing most of it out. The idiosyncratic headers on each page give the reader not so much an encyclopedic view of the world at large, but of Scott McCarney's world. The work began with him hand chiseling one-inch squares through the index of his childhood 30-volume encyclopedia.

¹¹ David Bunn, **Subliminal Messages**
Köln, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König. 2003

¹² Scott McCarney, **Index**
Rochester, NY: Smart Books. 1994

Images of hands, the sign of a maker, are interspersed throughout the stacked squares of texts and images culled from the other 29 volumes. A scanned image of his hand provides the underlying pattern of lights and darks. The squares pixilate the pages, reducing the information even further into bits of noncontiguous data.

We can infer much from those bits no matter how abstracted. We can surmise that he has spent time in Japan or wishes he could, and that he is probably a democrat. Insolvency and insomnia are concerns. But so are illusions and illustrations of books, and punctuation and punishment are equals. McCarney specifically calls out himself as subject through the index lines, Life of Scott- Scott City. Two illuminated letters are prominent on the same page, M – E, lest we missed the reference. Eventually we understand that index to the encyclopedia is an autobiography told through neutral, anonymous details. Using the index as an impersonal filter for constructed personal identity, we simultaneously sort through McCarney's experience of reading the encyclopedia and our reading of him.

The reader is the subject of Kristine Krivitsky's Model for Positioning.¹³ While context can be narrowly defined as the words surrounding a particular word, it can also include broader areas such as the reader's background, knowledge, location, or purpose for reading. Krivitsky examines these areas through a series of questions that compare the intellectual position of the reader with physical positions. Although the work densely compresses many different subjects, we develop an expectation of what the book is about based on the title or other specific information. Think of it as a semantic or meaning clue.

In the preface Krivitsky states: "(The book) systematically highlights the selected features of positioning: the places you occupy; your physical posture; your way of looking at things; and your strategic advantage in lieu of these things." We become self-conscious of the reading process through direct questions: "Where do you make sense of things? Where do you stand? How do you stand?" By addressing the reader directly, we become the subjects as much as any other information in the book; indeed information is used as a platform to analyze the reader.

The book spins through topics like dwellings as symbols for social rank and distance in an information age. Cultural expectations, social class, and self-identity all impact how we read and what we read into it. Although presented in a clinical, textbook-like fashion, the effect is conceptually dizzying. Do these topics lead us astray, or do they call attention to the subliminal processes active during reading? Krivitsky forces us to acknowledge the competing interests that occupy our physical and mental states while we are ostensibly paying attention to reading. Umberto Eco writes in The Open Work, "Every work of art, from a petroglyph to *The Scarlet Letter*, is open to a variety of readings... because it wants to be an inexhaustible source of experiences which, focusing on it from different points of view, keep bringing new aspects out of it."¹⁴

Sometimes a work can suggest a shift in viewpoint by playing with our perceptions in the same way. A contrast or antonym clue clarifies an issue by presenting its opposite. In Interior¹⁵ by Tsang Kin-wah, an intricate floral pattern inspired by William Morris spreads across the pages like flocked wallpaper in a small room. For a moment we are lulled by the

¹³ Kristine Krivitsky, **Model for Positioning**
Chicago, IL: Krivitsky. 1995

¹⁴ Umberto Eco writes in The Open Work, p.24

¹⁵ Tsang Kin-wah, ***Tsang Kin-wah : Interior***
Hong Kong, China: Tsang Kin-wah. 2003

innocuous, decorative design, but we discern very quickly that all is not what it seems. When we look closer, the visual sign gives way to the linguistic when specific words that comprise the pattern become apparent. Innocence disappears as foul language jumps forward. Passive image swells into active, emotional expression. The swirling design is no longer a quiet Victorian background, but noisy profanity, fornication, blasphemy. Intention and interpretation push at each other as the artist's pretence of civility berates us into uncomfortable confrontation.

Interior is a reduction of Kin-wah's room-sized installation to book form. Form does impact meaning. Surrounded by the visual noise, the installation viewer occupies the same room as the action, while the hand-held version is less confrontational. It is literally and figuratively a pattern book of human nature.

Synonyms are the context clues used to understand Emily Puthoff's exploration of human nature in Flesh and Bone.¹⁶ Only 2 1/2 inches high, it invites a physical relationship with the reader. The intimacy of the hand-held book adds significantly to its meaning. The paper is like skin, and when we turn the pages we touch the surface hair, nipples, a mole.

But in order to fully engage the book, we have to go past the surface. The fore-edge folded pages are perforated at the spine. We are forced to tear open the pages, a rough incision that penetrates the body of the book. The raw under layer of the epidermis is peeled back and exposed. Inscribed into the tissue is this poem:

Take these eyes
This mumble bone
This tangle trap
And stumble meat
This flesh
This home
This skin boxed whore
Just leave the soul and nothing more

If we tear through all the perforations, they would disconnect completely from the stab binding, leaving a spine, dislocated fleshy pages, and the idea of a book. Body, text, image, artist and reader are a seamless whole in this expressive, compact book.

We have been looking at each artist's book in reference to a specific type of context clue, but proficient readers automatically use all kinds of contexts to "think ahead" and a variety of strategies to understand the meaning of the work. Words, graphics, structure, sequence and material all layer significant information that the reader sorts. Although processing the clues may happen simultaneously, constructing meaning may not happen that instantly. Umberto Eco calls it "an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on (the reader's) unique capacity for sensitive reception to the piece."¹⁷

The Boat Buch¹⁸ by Uta Schneider and Ulrike Stolz, draws upon the reader's visual skills, critical thinking, and ability to conceptually layer seemingly disjunctive information. Boats and books are synonymous in this work: both are vessels, a means of transportation,

¹⁶ Emily Puthoff, *Flesh and Bone*
Atlanta, GA: Nexus Press. 1998

¹⁷ Umberto Eco writes in *The Open Work*, page 3

¹⁸ Uta Schneider, Ulrike Stolz, *The Boat Buch*
Atlanta, Georgia: Nexus Press and Unica T. 2002

and carriers of goods. The bilingual German/English book comprises 7 large press sheets, folded like maps and housed in a waterproof pouch. They seem to be navigational charts, yet the journey is contained within the pages, not a territory outside itself.

Facts and stories detail the relationship between boats and books. The story is not laid out linearly. Like flotsam and jetsam washed up to shore, we are told “The story is already there. It doesn’t have to be invented. It is lying on the beach waiting to be picked up.” As readers we assemble the collection as we read, stacking up our finds in memory while we project to what comes ahead. One section relates the founding mission of the great library of Alexandria- to collect all the books of the world. To achieve that, every boat that anchored in Alexandria had to hand over all books on board. In another passage, we learn that the great library burned down when the fires that had been set on the ships in the harbor spread to the city.

When we read a map, we don’t read from left to right like a book. We scan for particular pieces of information, ignoring some areas and focusing on others. In Boat Buch the way the information is scattered over the surface of the maps invites that same kind of selective reading. There are scraps of correspondence between the artist- coming across them is like finding a note in a bottle floating in the water. On another page German and English words are laid out in a pattern that is not so much a grid but a star chart. This particular guide for navigation directs us through word constellations- verso/recto, palimpsest/memory, silent/listen.

The other sides of the pages are ordered according to the days of the week. The passage of time is recorded while we watch the passage of the boat. Each day stands in for all days, the ship’s log of data and observations. Time also refers to the book, a medium with internal timing, additive information, and sequential events.

Each page is like a treasure map, with keys and secret codes. But we are not reading to find treasure- the treasure is the reading itself.

Through these few examples, we can see that meaning may be suggested, but our ability to decipher is heightened by our willingness to stay open and flexible while reading. Umberto Eco writes, “The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a work, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting... all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities.” A work that suggests encourages our imagination and interpretation.¹⁹

In conclusion, here are some strategies for using context clues, a guide for reading as if you don’t know how:

- If you don’t know what it means, skip over it, go on to a stopping point and figure it out.
- Activate your prior knowledge
- Read out loud or sound it out
- Substitute- try something else in its place and see if it works
- Go over it a few times with a different view each time
- Visualize
- Infer

¹⁹ Umberto Eco writes in The Open Work, page 8

- Guess
- Test your guess
- Ask yourself if it 1. Looks right 2. Sounds right 3. Makes sense²⁰

With fresh eyes, a sense of play, and open curiosity, reading is a way of discovering the author's intentions, but also what you find important, what intrigues you, and what you want to explore. There's always something new just around the corner, on that next page, another invitation to explore through reading.

²⁰ Need