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## In the Space of Blurred Boundaries

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Definitions and distinctions between books and book objects continue to be a subject of discussion in the field of book arts. In times of change, history (by way of nostalgia) is a way of hooking onto what seems to be slipping away. Definitions serve to hold it in place, either against or in relationship to the new. Faced with the new aesthetics and technologies of electronic media, the book is increasingly defined by its material qualities. The book is fetishized as a physical object not only in sculptural book objects, but also in the language used to describe printed books and to establish analogies for the computer.

The following is a set of identifiers, if not a definition: time and sequence, image and text, material and form, subject and content, history and function. The meaning of the object is not determined solely by these intrinsic identifiers, but also in relation to context. The identifiers themselves have been expanded because the computer has expanded the context. Time is reduced to fractal moments and sequence has become simultaneous layers. The identity of books and computers, although not quite morphed into one, do intertwine. The printed book can be seen as a nexus between the book object that relies on the frisson of reading to make meaning, and the computer that depends on the frisson of the tactile book for familiarity.

Reactions to contemporary book art include arguments that the book object is a fetishized artifact in relationship to the book, or the book is a nostalgic icon in relationship to the computer, or the computer will replace the book entirely in the progression that supersedes the past. This debate assumes a Cartesian model of ascendancy from the base form of the physical book, or body, to the supremacy of information technologies, analogous to the mind. So we fret over the imminent death of the book by computer while Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com is named Time magazine's person of the year.

What about cross-relationships and influences? What happens in the space of blurred boundaries? How is "someplace in between" its own place? An obvious conceptual overlap is that both books and the computer, like film and video, are time-based mediums. Reader access is not the same, but the act of reading and visual deciphering is consciously designed into the work. Lines of text crawl over accordion folded book pages just as character generated words crawl across a video montage. Technology and aesthetics overlap as artist/publishers take advantage of eased production practices with the computer. Transparent layers of multiple images and texts are common to both the PhotoShop computer program and the offset printing process.

Paul Duguid proposes in his essay *Material Matters*, that books, like the pencil and the simple door hinge, survive technological advances because they “communicate polysemiously ... The closed cover, turned page, broken spine, serial form, immutable text, ...offer their own deep-rooted and resilient combination of technology and social process.”<sup>i</sup> The physical materiality of the book is as essential as the conceptual material it houses. The book embodies ideas, and serves well as a physical grounding for contemporary texts. Strategies in fiction writing that include disconnected bits of information, anti-narrative fragments, and endings without closure might themselves be seen as directly influenced by computer sensibilities.

The book as a physical/sensual object that grounds disembodied stories is a recurring theme in the complex films of artist/film director Peter Greenaway. *Prospero's Books*, 1991, is a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. His 1996 film, *The Pillow-Book*, is based on a thousand year old text by a Japanese court lady-in-waiting, Sei Shonagon. Greenaway pushes the boundaries of traditional film through computer compositing and multiple-screen editing of image, text, graphics and sound- a viscous stew of moving, fading, dissolving transparencies. In both of these films, the book represents not only the body, but time as antiquity, history, and memory interacting with the technological layers on the screen. Alongside these ephemeral themes, Greenaway lays the contrasting textures, surfaces and forms of the body.

Creation stories, ripe with words of skin and sex, provide a framework. The biblical telling, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was made flesh,” takes on a slightly different cast in *The Pillow-Book*. The story begins: *When God made the first clay model of a human being, He painted in the eyes...and the lips...and the sex. And then He painted in each person's name lest the person should ever forget it. If God approved of His creation, He breathed the painted clay-model into life by signing His own name.*<sup>ii</sup> The calligrapher father paints the birthday greeting on his four year old daughter's face and lips- God creating being from clay, the father marking his own creation with black and red ink made from soot and clay. As an adult, the daughter tries to recreate this scene with her lovers. In another sequence, text from the ancient book is painted on the woman's back, a supple brush is drawn down her spine while transparent overlays of ideograms scroll down the screen like curled white ribbons.

Greenaway had planned an earlier script version of the ancient story that he called *26 Facts About Flesh and Ink*, structured on the letters of the alphabet. The sense of listing and enumerating remains in *The Pillow-Book*. Greenaway pays similar attention to word/flesh in *Prospero's Books*. A quill scratches liquid blackness on crisp white paper to the hyped sound of paper crackling like corn flakes and wind whooshing over loose sheets. The next scene layers transparent calligraphic swirls that echo a nude swimmer's body circling underwater with the muffled sounds of Gregorian chant and a woman's cry.

No longer the body of the text, the body *is* the text and the text is the body.

This fetishization of the book then, takes place in book arts, film and even in electronic output. A recent newspaper headline proclaimed *Dusty Old Books Could Be the Next Great Multimedia Product.*<sup>iii</sup> First edition rare books are reproduced on CD-Roms by a

company called Octavo. The article describes Octavo's technological process as laborious. "Each book (is) laid in a custom-built cradle, painstakingly lit to capture all details of the binding, paper texture, ink spread and impressions left by the printing apparatus." The reverential language here is akin to descriptions of book production in monastic scriptoria. Although the article mentions master authors such as Shakespeare and Copernicus, the subject actually is the work of the master printers. The language is the same letterpress printers use to describe the sensual aspects of their own work. The books are "photographed with a U.S. Space Agency camera with image resolution of 10,000 pixels per square inch, and then set in LIVE text, -so it is completely searchable." The results are described as lush, elegant, searchable, printable, and magnifiable. Patrick Ames, CEO, is quoted, "You can play with it, print it out, spill coffee on it, print it out again. With a real rare book, you have to be extremely careful. You can't really read it." Here is a complete transversal where the electronic version has become the real, the body; the book has lost its meaning because it is not usable- "you can't really read it." This is a perfect illustration of Baudrillard's theory of collapsing layers of simulacra. The tone used throughout the article is like that of science fiction stories where an ancient object is found but no one has a memory of it or what it was for. The book is worshipped for its non-usability; an altered recreation replaces the actual for daily use. The article describes foxing stains and bookworm trails, a visual representation that beckons and teases but can't actually be touched.

Meaning is contextualized by the tactile qualities of the physical book, which are emphasized to give credence to the electronic version. Reading entails polysemious communication that includes not just the words on the page, but the delivery system. As we move from a single image or text on a page to multiple images, and to the simultaneous screen layers of the computer, the act of reading is altered. Just as we learn to read words through a process of recognition and translation, so to we learn to read both the material forms of the book and the abstractions of the computer. Too often the book object relies on a simple pun between materials and title- too quick a read, a glance will do. But there is a potential richness there for both artists and readers that can be developed through a more rigorous approach to the language and materials of sculpture as well as words. When reading image and text of the printed book, there are an infinite number of possible relationships, but they don't have to be approached all at once. The reader controls the timing and duration of the access. With electronic "publications" the reader must quickly choose among multiple layers. At some point the complexity cancels itself out- the reader can see and process only so much information at a time, and the screen visually appears as a single, collaged yet kinetic image.

In a reference to Wallace Steven's poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, architect Robert Harbison writes that the "major tensions, the disparity which propels it, the gap across which its energy jumps, is that between the particular and the general, between individual sensory objects and the theoretical ideas that they may embody or represent."<sup>iv</sup> The complex interplay of visual, textual, and material information inspires passion in readers, makers and designers of books. The question of future of the book cannot be concerned directly with singular definitions but with the tension and energy in the space between the specific and the general, the sensory object and theory, the body and the text. It is in that space in between where there is the greatest possibility of discovery and projections of the future.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Duguid, *Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book*. Included in *The Future of the Book*, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996. p.64

<sup>1</sup> Peter Greenaway, *The Pillow-Book*, Dis Vour Publishers, Paris 1996. p.31

<sup>1</sup> Michael Joseph Gross, New York Times Service to the International Herald Tribune, January 7, 1999. p.8

<sup>1</sup> Robert Harbison, *Thirteen Ways: Theoretical Investigations of Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1997. p. viii

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<sup>i</sup> Paul Duguid, *Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book*. Included in *The Future of the Book*, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996. p.64

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<sup>iv</sup> Robert Harbison, *Thirteen Ways: Theoretical Investigations of Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1997. p. viii