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## Singular Multiples: Artists' Books from the Copy Machine

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The introduction of new technologies in the art world has been greeted by our societal misgivings since the beginning of the Industrial Age: the fear of a de-emphasis of the human, questions of individuality, thought and creativity. These doubts concerning loss of control and mass production are quickly dashed by the highly individual bookworks produced with copy machines by the eight artists in the *Copier Books at MCBA* exhibition. The copy machine allows for endless variations on how a particular page can be printed. As in any medium, the artist must develop a working relationship with the copier as a tool. Control comes with familiarity, which in turn encourages the artist to let go, to be open to surprise and incorporate it. Limitations can be pushed for an effect, and effects can be exaggerated. As with any tool, it is the combination of its inherent possibilities with the skill and vision of the person using it that produces art rather than just a product. It is in both selection and execution that these artists produce idiosyncratic, personal work. These books stretch beyond our narrow assumptions about technology to reveal a broad range of human emotions, concerns and stories.

The limitations of the black and white copier are used to an aesthetic advantage by Betsy Davids. When an image is copied, then the copy is repeatedly copied, the image loses its definition as it breaks down. This degenerative process is integrated with the concept of Davids' *Dreaming Aloud, Book One*. A photo of a sleeping woman, striated into the short, curvy lines that are indicative of the process, softly punctuates the frame of the text block on each page. The recurring picture tosses and turns along the margins, a patterned visualization of falling into sleep and dreams. The dream sequences are retold as non-fictionalized vignettes. Comparing the inner life to clouds reflected on a lake in the north woods, Davids writes that they are "perfectly clear, perfect illusions, and on their own terms perfectly real. I'd like my dream writing to be like that." The clarity of her writing is appropriately complemented by the shadowy dreamer.

Just as black and white copier images can evoke dreams, they can also be manipulated to suggest memory. In *Persistence of Memory*, Carol Stetser self-referentially uses the "camera" of the copier to wryly comment on photographs replacing memory. As the snapshots are pulled across the scanning glass, the details, like memory, are blurred and distorted. The photo becomes a single iconic image that blurs all other remembered details. Our connections to cultural images is the subject of *Hierograms*, a flip book of high contrast black and white pages dense with ancient and contemporary symbols and bits of text. As the pages are flipped, the symbols of belief of one system juxtapose against another- religious, scientific, artistic. New meaning is made with the turn of a page. The "blurring" and "flipping" of images in both of these books act as a metaphor for our understanding of the world as an arbitrary construct. We are invited to participate in the process of that construction.

Marilyn Rosenberg investigates language and image as “visual fiction.” In Herring and Menhaden a complex sea of textual and visual forms must be negotiated by the two fish of the title. Black and white computer abstractions seem to shimmer like a watery surface through which floats the hum of the text: “reflect/wake/resound/deflect.” The words become a sound wave of visual patterns. In all of her work, Rosenberg strengthens the interplay of imagery by integrating the form of the book itself- pages that interfold and envelope a fragmented text, a fan that encircles a cycle of images. With each new format there is a change of orientation of text/image to the page and reader/viewer to the book. In Thinkamajig, a collaboration with artist-visual poet David Cole, the shufflebook format accentuates the multiple orientations of the imagery and possible definitions of the newly-coined text. Inventive language arcs through forms in an abstract space. The foreground becomes background, words become shapes, shapes become sounds in a visual cacophony of soft yet brilliant color. The color guides the eye through a playful but considered exploration of the space of the page.

The books of Clare Chanler Forster also display the lush colors, textural complexities and subtle tone variations which are possible with the color copy machine. The shaped pages of flowers, ribbons, and gauze seem like mementos saved in a book, pressed so deeply that they become the pages. Forster arranges her materials directly on the scanning glass of the machine. She counteracts the short focus range of the copier with her construction of the books themselves- each successive page peeks out from the one before it, a dense layering of objects, images and pages. The relationship of the slickness of the machine-made to the craft of the hand-made adds another layer. Each glossy color page is backed with handmade paper, resulting in simultaneous tactile pleasures. The rubber-stamped texts are carefully hand placed. This sense of handwork alongside the mechanical adds to the layers of complexity, each commenting on the other. Book for Charlotte addresses this layering in image and verse; “Child of my child, now I know you. We will look together with your new eyes and mine.” The pink gauzes and tissues have the delicacy of a newborn’s eyelids, opening to the world, discovering it as it unfolds.

The themes of self-discovery and personal growth are developed in the work of Sarah Jackson. In Finding Herself (Illuminated Manuscript), the minimally colored abstract portrait metamorphoses through the pages of the book. By moving the “master print” while it is being copied, the portrait stretches; we witness the growth of self as a combination of inward and outward changes. This act of becoming is further enhanced by a simple and elegant handwritten text and the sequential addition of color. In both Flowering Memories (Alternative Cycles) and Solar Harvest (Alternative Cycles), Jackson perfects the movement of the master print to achieve painterly effects. The technique animates the garden imagery into a dance across the page. Pulsing with energy of colors, forms and text, the garden is a visible metaphor for life: “within the glow/life meets/and creates/itself.” The three abstracted plant images of each book have subtle alterations of the visual elements. Careful, meditative observation is an essential element of discovery in both the growth of the garden and the personal growth in Jackson’s writings.

The books of Pamela Zwehl-Burke call attention to the ordinary to elevate that which is usually overlooked- beginning with the basic black and white copy machine itself. Objects and words are isolated and compared to one another in Thinking in Things. A

simple yet complex book that mimics a child's alphabet book, objects are the vehicle for discerning the links between the mind and body sensations. Black and white copies of iconic but also personal items- the safety pin, a fortune cookie- are alphabetically identified not by their names, but by a mental process such as "Judge" or "Query." A second handwritten text acts as a poetic mediation between image/text and body/thought. Zwehl-Burke similarly uses the copier to catalogue everyday experience. In Book of Ours, a pictorial litany of small common objects is paired with a chant-like word list. The seemingly private collection is shared through the making of the book. Playing off the preciousness of jeweled presentation bindings, the cover is a grainy black and white assemblage of aluminum foil, pasta letters and sequins.

Bernard K. Fischer collages found snapshots and souvenirs into family scrapbook albums. When these unique books are made into editions with the color copier, the anonymity of the pictured families is heightened. As multiples, they are no longer unique individuals. They cannot tell their own stories; they are told through bits of generic American culture- ad slogans, magazine pictures newspaper articles. The collaged elements overflow the edges of the pages as the stories are fleshed out, as if the covers cannot contain the details of these people's lives. Photographs appears to be a straightforward copy of a found album from many years back. However, tucked among the photos are personality-type cards that read like fortunes: "Beware of the proposals made by a gray-haired man." Is that him in the next photo? Did she take the advice? We begin to personalize these strangers by piecing together a story, reinvesting them with an invented history. The illusion is intensified by the warm sepia tones that color these visual tales with a false nostalgia.

By repeating the same image page after page, Louise Neaderland succeeds at altering the specific meaning of a photograph and story into one containing larger implications. In Empress Bullet: An Allegory a news story and photo recount the event of a riderless horse who wins the race, but not knowing the race is over continues to charge around the track until she impales herself on a railing. The low-resolution screen pattern of the newspaper is exaggerated by multiple copying. Cropped from its background, the image stretches across the accordion. The repetition of the static photo begins to look like a filmstrip projection of the relentless run around the track. The truncated headline provides the visible sound of the pounding hooves. Increasingly removed from its original context, the picture loses the safe distance of the news story. As an allegory, it brings up issues of guidance, leadership, and direction. This conversion of a simple image into one with complex interpretations is at work in more personal images as well. Scenic Tunnels repeats a photograph of a wheelchair-bound woman sitting in a nursing home hallway. The black and white values change from the overexposed brightness of fluorescent lighting to the darkness of the woman's vision. We are drawn into the space of the page, into the thoughts of the pictured woman. We follow her gaze down the hall to the glass exit doors which act as a frame for imagination, memory and futurity.

The diverse work of these artists belies the notion that with the push of a button of an instant copy machine, instant art is produced. There is evidence of the thoughtful research, careful construction and ongoing critique that takes place when intriguing, thought-provoking art is produced. Rather than being subsumed by the machine, the bookworks provide alternative perspectives on both our technology and contemporary existence.