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The Fetishism of the Book Object

The unique book, also called “book object,” is a genre of artwork that refers to the forms, relations, and configurations of the book. The history of this practice, and its several meanings, is informed by the histories of manuscripts and printed books, but the technological evolution of the codex form is of less importance in knowing the book object than is the reading these objects simultaneously solicit and refute.

Multiplicity is the very nature of the book. It is the theater of language, where writing is dressed up to perform. And also like theater, the textual performances of a book are enacted over and over again. Regardless of its linguistic graces, the utility of the book is a function of its numbers, circulating among legions of readers. For all its graphic or structural variety, the conventional book operates because its language is public and can be shared. It is precisely the “uniqueness” of the book object that redefines it in terms of art. This singularity, however, does not return the text of such a book to the status of manuscript. To be seen, singly, is the destiny of the book object; hence its language is superficial, an attribute among other attributes, lubricating the gaze of the viewer who, reading its words, responds instead to the codifications of its form.

When Stéphane Mallarmé described the folded and uncut signatures of books as “virginal,”ⁱ awaiting the penetration of the “paper knife,” he identified an erotics of reading that some contemporary critics have characterized in more obviously sexual terms. For example, Susan Grubar has noted:

“A ‘passage’ of a text is a way of knowing a ‘corpus’ or ‘body’ of material that should lead us on, tease us—but not too obviously. ‘Knowing’ a book is not unlike sexual knowing . . . Not only do we experience gratification orally as we

‘devour’ books voraciously, we also respond subliminally to the ‘rhythms’ of the plot, looking forward to a ‘climax.’”ⁱⁱ

Similarly, Roland Barthes offers a profile of the text as “a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure [that] can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites.”ⁱⁱⁱ Central to Barthes’ reference is his identification of fetishism, the eroticized symbol making activity, with the conceptual engagement of reader and text. But the book object can also operate as a fetish, playing a part that stands in for a whole.

The topography of an open book is explicit in its erotic associations: sumptuous twin paper curves that meet in a recessed seam. Page turning is a series of gentle, sweeping gestures, like the brush of fingers on a naked back. Indeed, the behavior of readers has more in common with the play of intimacy than with the public decorum of art viewing or music listening. Most of us read lying down or seated and most of us read at least partially unclothed. We dress up to out and look at art; undressed, in bed, we read. We seek greater comfort while reading than the furnishings of museums or concert halls will ever grant us. When we read—the conventional distance between eye and page is around fourteen inches—we often become the lectern that receives the book: chest, arms, lap, or thighs. This proximity is the territory of embrace, of possession; not to be entered without permission.

There are two primary ways to make a book object; constructing some singular variant of the book form, or altering a single copy of a found volume. The former method is allied to such domestic narrative projects as the scrapbook or photographic album, in which a collage of souvenirs evokes memories of past experience. Susan Stewart points to the discontinuity between the material survivals of such books and their referents:

“Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself.”^{iv}

This distance also characterizes the relationship of the fetishist to the object of desire, in which possession simultaneously makes the object’s status as substitution into an experience of loss and of a surplus of signification. The

singularity of the unique book exaggerates the significance of the methods and materials of its making, even as it privatizes the experience of its possessor. As Stewart reminds us, “The further the object is removed from its use value, the more abstract it becomes and the more multivocal is its referentiality.”^v But unlike the fetish, whose value is independent of its intrinsic qualities or context of origin, the artist’s intentions for the book object—the conditions of its display and classification—can serve to mediate the scenarios of fetishism.

The series of hardbound notebooks comprising Dieter Roth’s *Sammlung flachen Abfalls* (*Collection of Flat Waste*), 1982, are filled with clear plastic sleeves containing every piece of flat material detritus the artist encountered over the period of a week. The thirty-one volume set parodies the fetishist collection through its inclusion of such vulgarities as soiled toilet paper and sodden cigarette butts. One could suppose that the collector who purchased the work might implicate these residues in transcendent reveries, but in fact the rigor of Roth’s classification system redeems the work’s materials for the purpose of the artist, that of engaging daily life in all its multitudinous qualities.

Anselm Kiefer’s book objects are more concerned with the intersection of historical and physical processes. The cracked and dusty grit encrusting the covers and portions of the interior of *Märkischer Sand V* (*March Sand V*), 1977, literally crumbles as its pages of photographs covered with sand are turned, a phenomenal effect quite in line with the meaning of its pictorial narrative. The book’s title joins allusions to a German Army marching song and the name of a scenic park southeast of Berlin, but the images of croplands and gently rolling hills are actually taken from the agricultural regions surrounding Hornbach, near Buchen.

At the beginning of *Märkischer Sand V*’s sequence of twenty-five double page spreads, the photographs of wheatfields and scattered buildings convey a sense of generic plenitude. These images, alternating between details of stalks of grain and views of distant hills, are at first only lightly streaked with particles of sand in glue. These smears become more extensive as each page is turned until, in the book’s final spreads, the photographs are completely buried under layers of sand and stone. Time passes here very eloquently and physically

because with each turning page the reader awakens the work through the sloughing off of its substance.

A number of artists have altered found books, transforming their conventional form into tableaux (by painting, piercing, or studding the covers so as to “fix” the book in the open or closed position), containers (by excising or imbricating the text block), or topographies (by pasting over and/or tinting pages so as to overlay the text with a visual metanarrative). This kind of work uses the found book as an armature from which to operate, changing our relationship to the object from reader to viewer while simultaneously shifting our orientation from the visual to the tactile. Dependent on our recognition of its previous identity, the altered book is fundamentally allegorical, its (text) body a “ruin” that is supplemented by an overabundance of material effects.

The altered book can also be traced to that crucial modernist paradigm, the “readymade.” In fact, Marcel Duchamp’s *Unhappy Readymade*, 1919, was a geometry textbook hung out on a Paris balcony until it was destroyed by the wind and rain. Duchamp described this work in an interview with Pierre Cabanne:

“. . . the wind had to go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and wear out the pages . . . It amused me to bring the idea of happy and unhappy into readymades, and then the rain, the wind, the pages flying, it was an amusing idea . . .”^{vi}

Duchamp’s book, unhappy with its dissolution, is merely one copy among copies. It has been singled out only by the context of its destruction. But *Unhappy Readymade* is different from Duchamp’s other chosen objects in that the book selected for this readymade had an author. The “documentation” of this readymade consists of a single fuzzy photograph and a small oil painting, executed by Suzanne Duchamp, Marcel’s sister. From this record it is impossible to identify the specific edition chosen for the work. The book’s employment as a generic exemplar was intended to overwhelm the specific text of the unknown geometrician contained within its covers, but it succeeds in that endeavor only through a lack of disclosure that operates quite

differently from the given anonymity of whoever made the bicycle wheel, snow shovel, or urinal.

In the case of Marcel Broodthaers' *Pense Bête*, 1964, the artist interred the unsold copies of his last book of poems in a base of crudely modeled plaster. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has called this the "very first work" of Broodthaers' *oeuvre*, "which terminated his failure as a poet and began his career as an artist."^{vii} Dieter Schwarz subsequently differentiated Broodthaers' gesture from the operation of the readymade:

"In contradistinction to the readymade, which is selected by its 'author,' being thereby instated as an aesthetic object, the poems of *Pense Bête* remain part of literary discourse, for the author's 'statement' is obviously, by its means of presentation (book and typography), inscribed within an existing cultural tradition."^{viii}

Yet, Broodthaers is twice the author here, and the primacy that Buchloh assigns to the art gesture simply reflects his understanding of its concrete effect. Both Buchloh and Schwarz cite a later interview in which Broodthaers expressed surprise that his gesture of interdiction didn't arouse the curiosity of his viewers:

"Here you cannot read the book without destroying its plastic qualities. I believed that this concrete gesture would have confronted the viewer with this interdiction. But very much to my surprise the viewer reacted in a totally different manner than I had expected . . . Nobody was curious to read the text, not knowing whether they were looking at interred prose, or poetry, sad or pleasant. Nobody was affected by the interdiction."^{ix}

Broodthaers was undoubtedly speaking ironically, since his gesture of immersion removed that text from the interpretive scheme by which his books themselves were understood as a collection of fragments.

Clive Phillpot has decried the atavistic tendencies of book objects, noting that they "celebrate only bookishness, but deny the book's function," and concluding that "the fetishization of the form of the book may also be an antiliterate gesture, an escape into the image of this demanding medium."^x

This criticism seems particularly applicable to the excisions, erasures, immolations, and other text obliterating methods of altering found books, but these transformations of text to work take place in the shadow of the subject book's publication. The elegiac sensibility that infuses so many alterations of conventional books gains some portion of its resonance from the inherent futility of such singular transformations considered against the ubiquity of the edition. The book is always partial; hence always susceptible to the alienating labor of the fetish. Only the text is total.

ⁱ Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Mary Ann Caws, (New York: New Directions) 1982: 83.

ⁱⁱ Susan Grubar, "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 246.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, "from The Pleasures of the Text," in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill and Wang) 1982: 410.

^{iv} Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press) 1984: 145.

^v *Ibid.*, 164.

^{vi} Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, (New York: Viking) 1971: 61. Cited in *Marcel Duchamp* (exh. cat.), edited by Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, (New York: Museum of Modern Art) 1973: 288-289.

^{vii} Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant Garde," *Artforum*, Vol. XVIII, no. 9 (May 1980): 55.

^{viii} Dieter Schwarz, "Look! Books in Plaster!" *October* #42 (Fall 1987): 60.

^{ix} Irmeline Lebeer, "Dix mille francs de recompense," in *Marcel Broodthaers: Catalogue/Catalogus*, (Brussels, Belgium: Palais des Beaux Arts) 1974:66. Translated by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in "Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant Garde": 55.

^x Clive Phillpot, "The success and failure of artists' books: an internal memorandum," unpublished notes for an address at the Artists' Books Conference, Boston University, 1985.