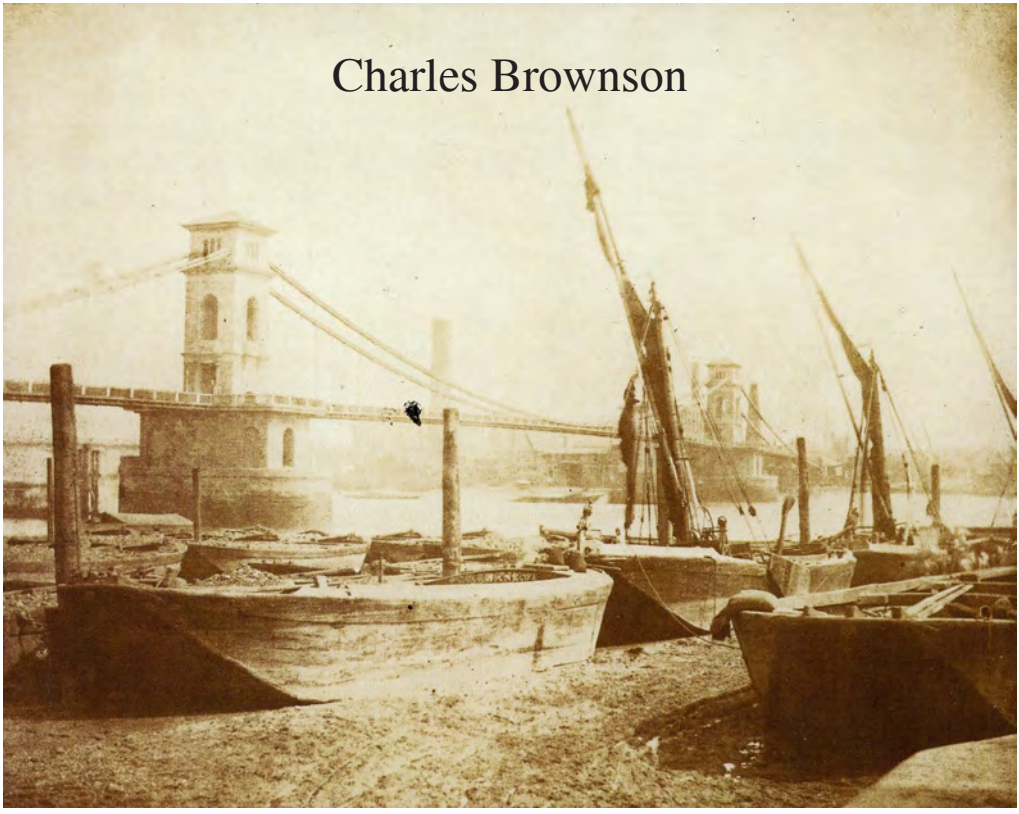
Now the Artists Book Now



Tempe Arizona
Ocotillo Arts
2011

After Moveable Type

The Fine Printing Tradition and the Digital Book

Probably all fine press or even bookish people know Walter Benjamin's idea about the direct experience of art as he wrote in *Art In an Age Of Mechanical Reproduction.*

Benjamin wanted to explain what it was about live art which evaporated when the picture was reproduced photographically. It's hard to remember how threatening photography still was at this time. Despite its hardly being an incunable craft by then and despite forty years of argument over soft focus, various fake-art processes like gum-bichromate, despite the prestige of Steiglitz and who else — despite all that, to artists photography remained new and suspect. Man Ray was able to make a living with his camera in Paris in 1921 (when he could not with his painting) because among artists his skills were rare. The Annie Leibowitz of his time, called to Proust's deathbed, approved by Gertrude Stein and André Breton, Kiki's consort, responsible for the official record of Picasso's work, this was still second-class stuff even to Man Ray himself. Not the real thing.

The quality which Benjamin sought he called *aura.* For us materialists this is a notion uncomfortably close to that of soul, an animating principle which escapes with our last breath and floats up into Giotto-land where, as Beckett remarked, we'll all sit around talking about the good old days when we wished we were dead.

Soulful aura and the hard, rational mechanical camera are antagonists, then?

But actually it's not hard to see what he meant. Take for example Caravaggio's painting in the Chiesa del Santa Maria on the Piazza del Popolo in Rome.

If you have seen this you know it hangs in a very dark side chapel at the less-magnificent end of the church and can be seen (from behind a railing) only by putting some money in a meter which will allow some dim lights to come on for a few minutes. You're too far away to see much in the gloom. This is the authentic experience. To see the picture in a book is nothing like that. Aside from the fact that the picture in the book is intelligible in its details and readable in its impact, where is the musty smell, the cold damp even in July after the tramp across the glaring, raucous plaza, the hidden coy-

ness, the crassness of the metered permission? Those things are the picture's *aura.*

Of course all sorts of other things are different about the photograph. One gets no decent sense of the size of the thing, for instance. Its the Sistine Chapel up close in sixteen square inches and no cramp in the neck and no pickpockets.

The authentic experience of art is a scarce commodity. Your ordinary hot-dog vendor on the street can go into the Museum Of Modern Art — the door is right behind him — and see some Picassos. But he can't see the *Guernica*. That's in Spain. By the time he got back from the Prado he would have lost his spot, his hot dog cart, and his livelihood.

But in the MOMA bookstore he can buy a book about Picasso with a photograph of the *Guernica* in it and get something that works for readers like the talking guidebook headphones do for museum goers. Is that good enough?

The hot dog vendor's inauthentic experience was much sneered at by Baudrillard and Eco and post-modernists, and the hot-dog vendor himself came in for some cavilling for being grateful for what experience he could get. But they have a point. *Mechanical reproduction converts art into a commodity* — a thing way too much like a hot dog. You know what's in a hot dog. It's not food. Don't eat it.

Now what has this got to do with handmade books?

Books Have An Aura Problem

Is a fine press book handmade? There certainly is a lot of hand labor that goes into one. And both the press book and the art object are craft products, but there the relationship stops. Printing, *all* printing, belongs to the machine aesthetic.

What about the Way of the craftsman, then? Do we not revere the craftsman as a champion to send against the machine? The fine printer is a craftsman, surely?

The trouble with craftsmanship is with the craft idea of

control, that meisterlich desire which always tries to reduce the risk. Artist and printer both want to control risk, but the artist has no machine to help. Books are made by machines.

What does a handmade book look like? Not like a machine-made book, if it is to possess aura, the aura of art. There is no machine-made art. The photographer must dominate the camera, the lithographer the stone, just as the painter his brush, if we are to have art.

There is, it's true, a mystical dimension to craftsmanship which resembles, serves the place of aura in some ways. It is introduced through the desire for mastery of the process and brings in its train certain inconvenient ideas of perfection: of materials, of methods, of tools. Ultimately, since these things are of the world, they are not perfect, not pure. Craftsmanship has within it a desire for transcendence, a taste for Zennish notions of *qi*, the spirit of a thing. To *capture the qi* is the requirement for craft mastery, and qi is not a thing to be reasoned into submission. All craftsmanship which is not Technik is Zen. It's no accident that the Japanese are the world's craftsmen.

Zen has an attractive cenception of work (craft) as everyday spirituality rather than distant salvation. (A good thing, since I have to work.) It is associated with the wholly admirable virtue of *well-madeness.* But it is not aura. The aspiration of the craft object to well-madeness belongs to the machine aesthetic. We have machines because they produce (reproduce) — *mechanically* — objects more well-made and closer to perfection than we could do by hand.

Aura is not a sentiment of fulfillment or satisfaction. It has nothing to do with beauty. It is an exacting standard for which the essential requirement is a local and personal experience which is untransferrable and unrepeatable, invoked by a unique and therefore rare object of desire.

Books are made by machines and are only adventitiously, accidentally rare. Whereas book artists, it is said, make one

thing at a time, by hand, beautiful in its imperfect incomplete irreproducible unique artistic self.

Machine-made books have editions. That's the point of using a machine.

Machine-made books have *production values*, as the design people say.

Machine aesthetics belong to the workmanship of certainty.[1] Machine aesthetics are uniformity, reproducibility, and incremental improvement toward the goal of absolute control. Handmade aesthetics belong to the workmanship of risk. Handmades aesthetics are uniqueness, diversity, continuous change.

Machine processes have objects (goals) and produce objects (artifacts). Hand processes process, and leave behind versions.

Is the book artist able to sustain this distinction?

No.

A preferred strategy for covering up the book's aura problem is to invoke connoisseurship. Aura has an air of snobbery about it, of exclusion of the unworthy. Book artists prefer to work with canonical texts for the reason that they are fixed, finished. They are *worth it*. They will repay the effort expended on them. (Whereas designers, who are mere tradespeople, work on all manner of trivial stuff such as department store ads.) This preference for low-risk tactics exposes the machine aesthetic at work, substituting a specious rarity by fiat for the real thing. A handmade book ought to look that way, don't you think? Which implies a handmade text, I think, not something off the shelf.

Besides, the book is a manufactured object, one of many identical objects intended for the masses and so a vector of social change. The printing press was an agent of social change

1 David Pye, *The Nature and Art Of Workmanship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

in the same way the personal computer is. William Morris, a bona fide book artist, aspired to be an agent of change, a Johnny Appleseed of beautiful things, among which were numbered beautiful books. His populist politics of making many beautiful books so that everyone might have one sought an inclusive rather than exclusive connoisseurship, but it came down to the same thing anyway. To make many books he needed a book-machine (a printing press then, a computer now). A book artist with the politics of William Morris will have, honestly or not, a machine aesthetic. And an atelier. Or an office. And certain attitudes toward love, religion, knowledge, parenthood, rabbit breeding, anomalies, and other things that come with the package. If you want to make art you had better be prepared for the consequences.

Which are?

Controlling the consequences by changing the process is part of the machine aesthetic. Accepting the consequences for the sake of the process is part of the handmade aesthetic. You don't *make* a handmade book any more than you *make* love, practice religion, or get knowledge. If you accept uncertainty and work with no concern except for the process, love comes to you unbidden. Perhaps. Perhaps not. You are called perhaps. Perhaps you know what you are doing, but probably not.

If I knew what a handmade book ought to look like, it wouldn't be handmade, would it? But that isn't the same thing as knowing what a handmade book does look like.

Hunting For Aura: Artists Books

People squabble about what is an artists book.[2] Let's say it's a book-shaped object made by an artist. This is not quite the same as the *livre d'artiste,* with which it is often confused. Here is a *livre d'artiste* by Ernst Kirchner, published in Munich by Kurt Wolff Verlag in 1924.[3]

2 Johanna Drucker, *The Century Of Artists Books*. New York: Museum Of Modern Art, 1994.

3 Robert Flynn Johnson, *Artists' Books In the Modern Era 1870-2000: The Reva and David Logan Collection Of Illustrated Books*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2001 p104-5

What is the interest here? Is it anything more than a precious object created for a commodity market? In what sense is it an artist's book other than it's a book-shaped object containing some pictures? How does it differ from a copy of *Les Mystères de Paris* illustrated by Gavarni, or a Dickens novel by Phiz, or Sidney Paget's iconic Sherlock Holmes? [And *why*, he asks archly, sniffing class bias, is a Kirchner print more precious than a Paget?]

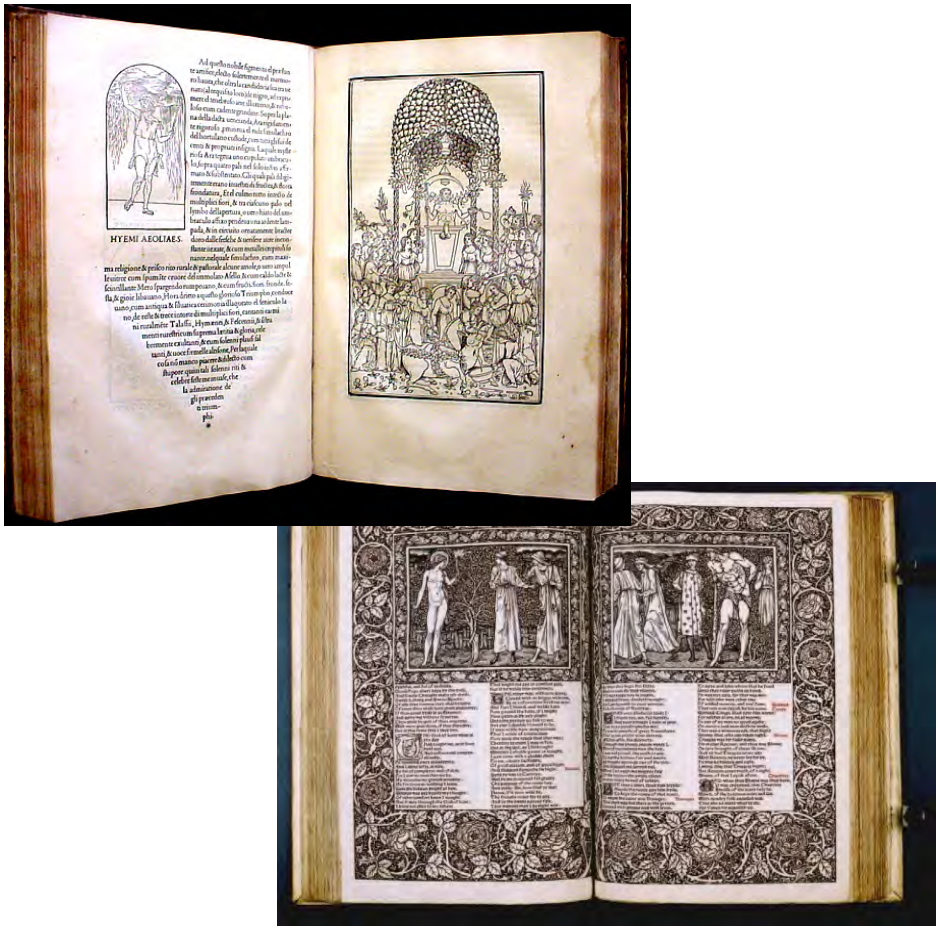
Verlag Wolff and its minion Kirchner have hijacked Georg Heym's poems as an excuse to make some money off the carriage trade. Poetry is not worth enough by itself to do this, note — but at least the poetry has an indpendent life. It doesn't need Kirchner to give it meaning or rationale. With the graphic it's another thing — no Heym, no book, and Kirchner is relegated to a printmaker. Kirchner is a one-legged man begging in the street for money to buy a crutch.

« »

The feeling that there is something magic, mystical, about printing with moveable type goes back a long ways — look at the thickness of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press As an Agent Of Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

The Gutenberg Bible might quality as an artists book now — and it really isn't a book at all, but rather a sheaf of prints sometimes found together as a complete series but typically collected by the each as an exemplar. The *Nuremburg Chronicle* or Francisco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Polipholi* of 1499 are squarely within the fine press aesthetic, no different in aspiration and machine logic from Morris's *Kelmscott Chaucer*. Morris's bravura works to restrict access to the precious art by the same method as the gas-meter which has to be fed to see the Caravaggio. Nobody *reads* a Kelmscott Chaucer. You have to be vetted even to see one

and the only person who can actually touch it is the monk who has it under guard. If that's aura then it works against the thing's being a book — writing intended by the logic of printing to be infinitly reproduceable so as to be read if not owned by as many people as possible.



400 years of fine printing
Aldus Manutius 1499 and William Morris 1896
the *Hypnerotomachia Polipholi*
and the Kemlscott *Chaucer*

The fine printer Michael Russem wrote in the *Caxtonian* (15.2 February 2007) in his article "The Failure Of Fine Printing" that he had printed a story by Murakami. Russem considered it his masterpiece. Collectors loved everything about the book except the Murakami, a writer and a story which Russem says he "felt particularly strong about." It was Murakami's work which had inspired the book. Did people feel the text was not good? No. They simply didn't care. As one collector admitted, *"I don't buy your books to read."* So then, *are they books?* No, Russem admits. The art of fine printing is to make the art invisible — and apparently the typography makes the story invisible also. Russem's quintessential book is the ordinary friendly paperback, also with invisible (that is, beneath notice) typography, in which we will some day see the inherent beauty just as we now do with an old letter or grocery list written in a fine hand with a quill pen.

It is in the spirit of Zen to find beauty in everything. To one whose eyes are open, everything has Buddha-nature.

Whereas to the collector of precious objects, if everything has aura then nothing does.

Hunting For Aura: More Artists Books

A little closer to what something with aura which is a real book really made by an artist is this book by Picasso (Paris: Galerie Louise Leiris, 1954. Johnson p143) At least this is the product of one hand and mind. Pablo even wrote out his own poetry by the same method that he drew the pictures. But there is still no essential unity — the book and the pictures stand ccoly apart like a recently divorced couple at a party.

Or I might say that here the text has hijacked the pictures. Johnson is of the opinion that the poetry is unusually personal, while the lithographs are twenty-nine beautiful images "curiously beside the point when compared to the frankness of his poems." Picasso's book is handmade in a metaphorical sense, far moreso than the Kirchner or the Morris, but even if he pulled the prints himself it's still editioned and so outside the handmade logic. Handmade objects are unique. An edition of one.

What is missing is the mark of the maker, that impress of the artist's thumb in the wet plaster that makes it incontrovertibly *from his hand.* (Her hand.) That mark can be reproduced, of course, along with every other feature: a facsimile. (I'll refrain from some Ecoian sneering.) We agree that a facsimile which does not announce itself to be a copy is a fake. There is also the mark of the faker, which can sometimes make the copy worth as much as the original. This makes intellectual problems (read Gaddis's *The Recognitions*) but doesn't change the fact — a reproduction is not the same thing. Its aura is diminished — though *qua* fake it retains some. A little bit. *Reproduction* is not a handmade idea. To reproduce something lets the aura hiss out of it and it goes flat.

What about prints, then? Heroic measures have been needed to rescue graphics and photography for art. All that fussing with numbered editions, plates destroyed — Warhol used to mark every copy with a number below 10 to give it cachet, but even he couldn't go so far as to pretend they were all copy one of one. And the market tells all — a print will always go cheaper than the one off.

A book is even more unlike art than a print. Inherently, authentically of the machine aesthetic, its fascination is exactly that it is *not* unique. Books are designed, not made, by artists (Bruce Rogers included). Something in one copy such as the *Book of Kells* is not a book, it's really a big drawing folded up. *That's* got aura.

There is a chunk of deep space from here to Aldebaran between art and the book.

Hunting For Aura: Handmades For Real

What is a handmade book, then? What *could* it be, this oxymoronic conundrum? What is the handmade ethos which imbues it?

Here is the first book by one of the Roycrofters and the man responsible for rediscovering the technology of handmade paper, Dard Hunter. He aspired to make a book *entirely* by hand, for which he began by cutting the punches to cast the type he had designed. He made the paper, built the press, printed and bound the book, and here it is.

When I first saw this book I was shocked. It's got technical faults in every aspect of the work. The paper is knotty and cloudy, the type has infelicities of design… and yet it is what it is: a beautiful handmade book. One could say that

the faults make every copy unique, which is true but ducking the issue. If aura is the mark of the maker then this thing is marked in every molecule. Haven't I been saying that aura is not a property of the machine? Is it because the book is, technologically speaking, so spectacularly out of date (not so much over the top as under the bottom) that we can't regard it — we, in our time can't regard it — as machine-made. If some people undertake to conduct a battle on horseback without stirrups wearing bronze armor is that a war? No. It's a re-enactment. Technik has another property not shared with the handmade: obsolescence. What used to be doing things with machines becomes, when the tools are out of date, doing things by hand.

And the "errors" are not without a role. They are part of what is the tactile, sensory experience of the book which perfect copies, no matter how fine, can not have. It's a tea ceremony aesthetic and again, it's no accident that the Japanese Zen masters of tea were the one who taught us to see beauty in a lumpy bowl.

The handmade book will be imperfect. That's why people use machines, because they don't draw squiggly lines unless you manufacture them to do that, and every line will be perfectly squiggly thereafter.

Together Again

Here are the minimum conditions for a handmade book.

There will be a visual component. I have associated this primarily with the sensory, in large part tactile, qualities of the book rather than the visual content per se. You may think you can draw like Käthe Kollwitz; I know I can't. If only artists of that genius can make books we aren't going to have many books even if they all go head over glove for the medium of artists books.

The visual component at the minimum is not a set of standalone artworks but rather that aspect of the book which carries the mark of the maker — that which carries the aura and contributes to the uniqueness of the object and is also the source of a substantial part of the aesthetic pleasure of the physical book. This is what marks it as handmade.

The textual component has been somewhat overlooked to this point, other than the dictum that it's not a book unless it requires — and submits — to be read. This means that, if the text is substantial it has to pay the reader back for the effort expended in reading it, regardless of the visual medium in which it may be embedded. Well, if you can't draw like Käthe Kollwitz, I would bet you can't write like Herman Melville either. A problem.

The conventional solution for this problem is to divide it up and subordinate the problematic part. The one with the writing talent makes a scissors and paste thing with the visual, while the one with the drawing talent hijacks *Moby Dick* to stand in for the text.

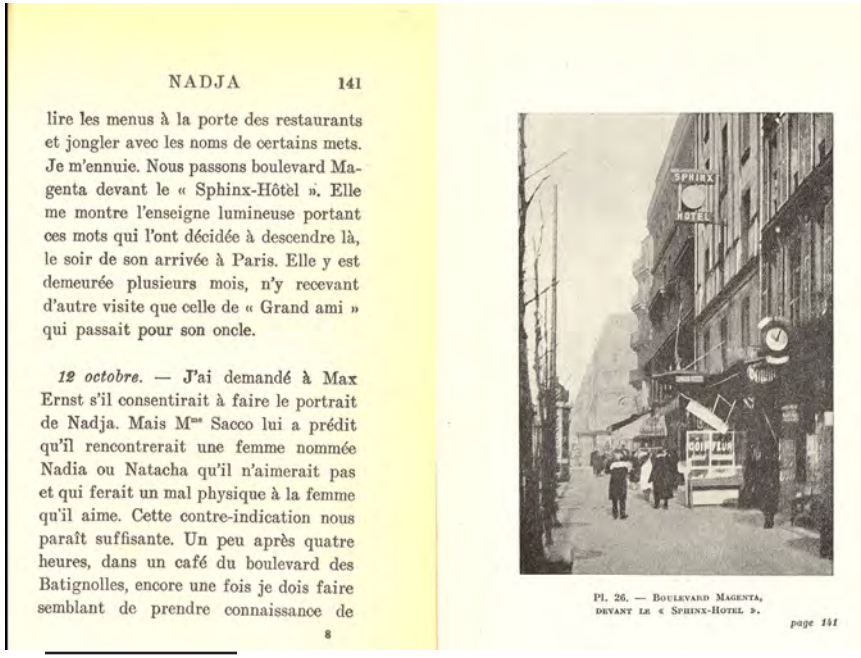
Won't do. If the textual and visual components are going to be really interlocked, inseparably bound without doing mortal damage to either (or both), then the one must be created *for* and *with* the other. The scissors object qualifies — all those bits of paper and stickum have been brought together on purpose for the purpose. The stolen *Moby Dick* does not qualify; it is no more than a diamond dropped in the mud.

In theory, a writer and an artist could collaborate, hein? Possibly, but probably you will get not the interdependence of the two people but the dependence of one. Paget and Doyle, Kirchner and Heym. But just because human cooperation is vanishingly rare doesn't mean it can't be done. There is the example of *Najda.*

Working with André Breton might not be thought cooperation — he was a high-handed man of few doubts who did

not brook contradiction. And it is true that the photographer (Jacques-André Boiffard) was told by Breton what pictures he wanted.[4] But there is no evidence that he foresaw the result. The book's first publication in 1928 was not a piece of fine printing. The photographs were put in where it was convenient for the binder, and so the relationship between the photograph and the text is obscured — it is not at once clear that there *is no relationship*. The photographs do not illustrate anything in the conventional sense. They are simply *there*. Resembling snapshots, they seem to have no aspiration but to describe a place in its quotidian banality.

When the photographs are re-ordered so as to appear opposite the text to which they refer this quality becomes more marked. "We passed down the boulevard Magenta in front of the Sphinx Hotel" Breton writes. And here is the Hotel, vraiment.



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lire les menus à la porte des restaurants et jongler avec les noms de certains mets. Je m'ennuie. Nous passons boulevard Magenta devant le « Sphinx-Hôtel ». Elle me montre l'enseigne lumineuse portant ces mots qui l'ont décidée à descendre là, le soir de son arrivée à Paris. Elle y est demeurée plusieurs mois, n'y recevant d'autre visite que celle de « Grand ami » qui passait pour son oncle.

12 octobre. — J'ai demandé à Max Ernst s'il consentirait à faire le portrait de Nadja. Mais Mme Sacco lui a prédit qu'il rencontrerait une femme nommée Nadia ou Natacha qu'il n'aimerait pas et qui ferait un mal physique à la femme qu'il aime. Cette contre-indication nous paraît suffisante. Un peu après quatre heures, dans un café du boulevard des Batignolles, encore une fois je dois faire semblant de prendre connaissance de

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Pl. 26. — Boulevard Magenta, devant le « Sphinx-Hotel ».

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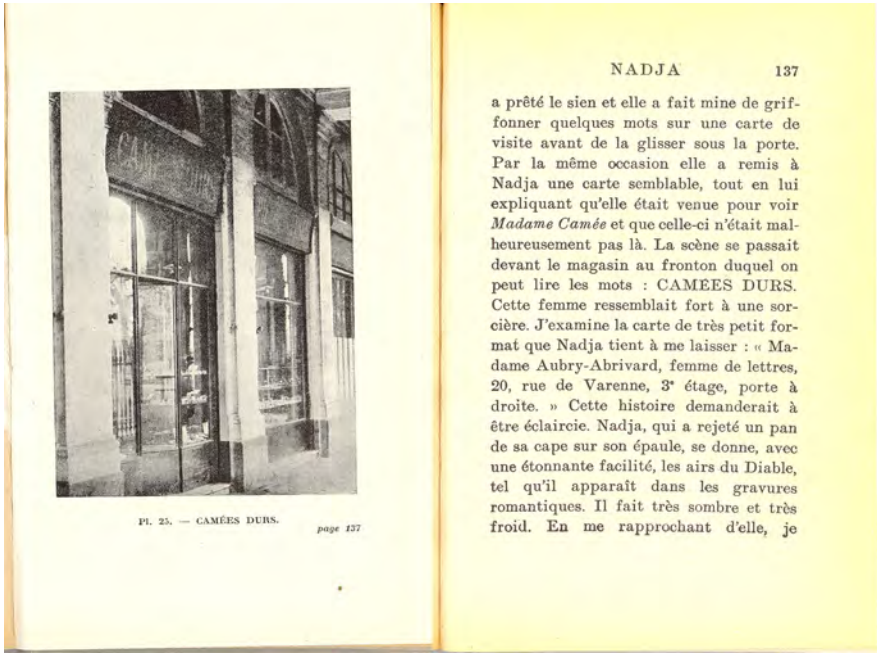
4 Gérard Durozoi, *History Of the Surrealist Movement*. tr Alison Anderson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 164-65

Why choose this rather than the building next door? Well, Najda has been rattling on about it — perhaps her neglectful "uncle" lives there — and Breton is bored, and it seems to be something to do. That's it. We go on to hear of a portrait Breton has been trying to wheedle out of Max Ernst, never to return. Text and picture are perfectly matched. They illuminate each other splendidly, reinforcing a point about irrelevance which might otherwise be discounted … no, that's wrong. Without this conjunction of text and picture the point *does not exist.* It is created by the conjunction itself. The world is full of flat-footed and arbitrary things which we choose not to notice. They are insignificant. *Meaningless*. How can we be persuaded to pay attention?



PL. 25. — CAMÉES DURS. *page 137*

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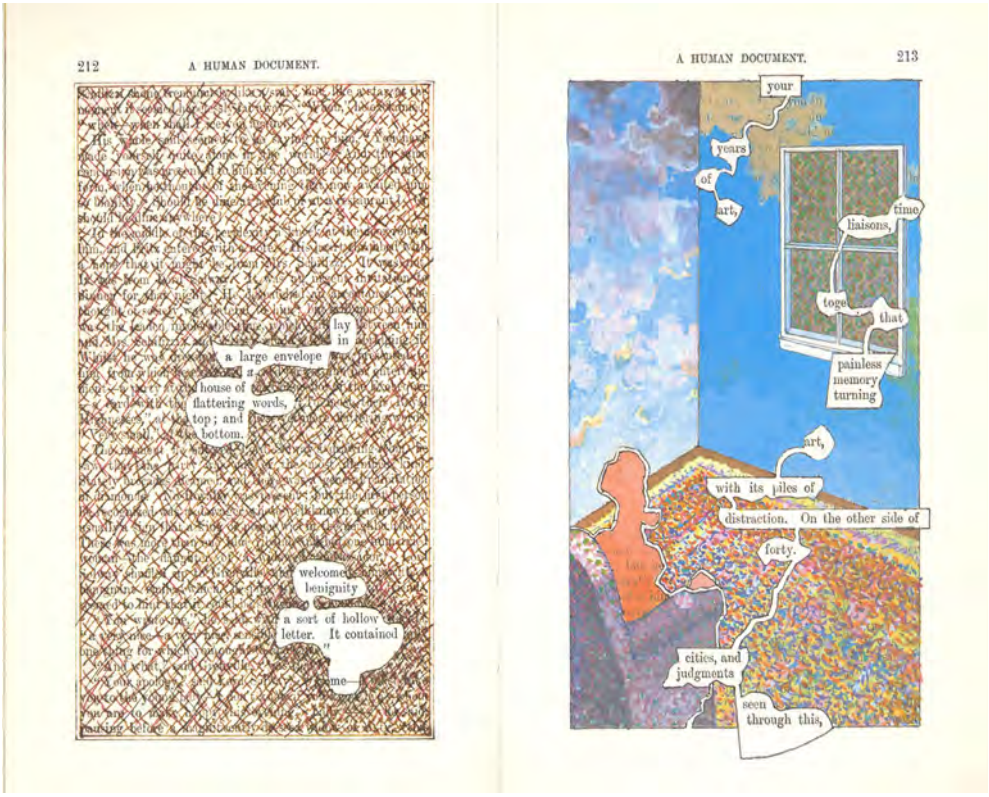
a prêté le sien et elle a fait mine de griffonner quelques mots sur une carte de visite avant de la glisser sous la porte. Par la même occasion elle a remis à Nadja une carte semblable, tout en lui expliquant qu'elle était venue pour voir *Madame Camée* et que celle-ci n'était malheureusement pas là. La scène se passait devant le magasin au fronton duquel on peut lire les mots : CAMÉES DURS. Cette femme ressemblait fort à une sorcière. J'examine la carte de très petit format que Nadja tient à me laisser : « Madame Aubry-Abrivard, femme de lettres, 20, rue de Varenne, 3e étage, porte à droite. » Cette histoire demanderait à être éclaircie. Nadja, qui a rejeté un pan de sa cape sur son épaule, se donne, avec une étonnante facilité, les airs du Diable, tel qu'il apparaît dans les gravures romantiques. Il fait très sombre et très froid. En me rapprochant d'elle, je

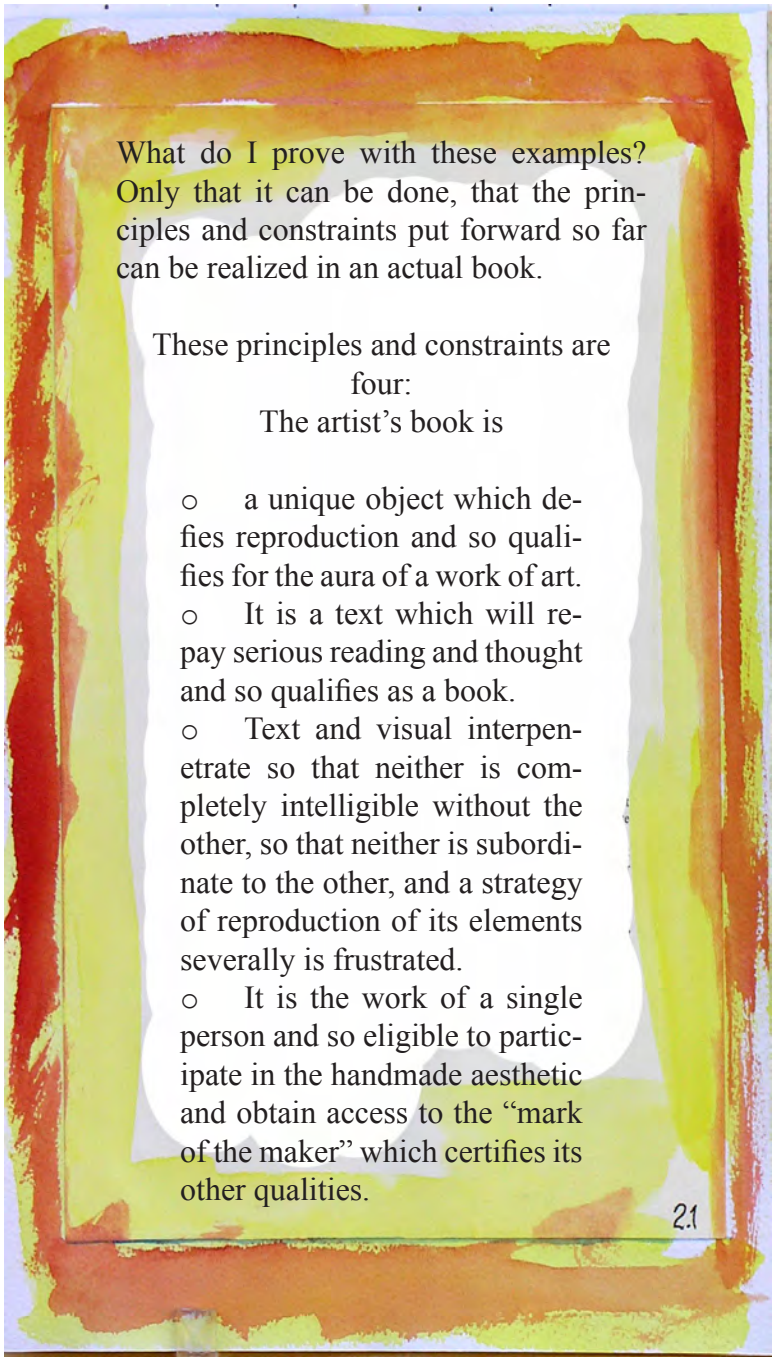
Camées durs" on page 137 is another example. Image and text work together to create meaning which does not exist in either of them alone.

Another strategy by which the artist might acquire a text sufficiently *of the artist* (without writing it himself, which I have said he is unlikely to be able to do) — a text equal to, able to stand with the visual art — would be to appropriate it so thoroughly as to wrest it from the author and make it the artist's own. We are familiar with this visual appropriation since at least Andy Warhol. Textual appropriation is much less common because whole texts are so difficult to alter or culturally redirect that radically. Text sits on a big bottom. So long as its origins are recognizable, despite how raped and battered, it is going to sit there and refuse to do your bidding. Take away one thing more and it vanishes, dissipating the forces which you were trying to harness in the first place.

For a simple example let me cite my use of *The Prisoner Of Zenda* in "The Struggle Of the Text" section of my artists book *The Yuma Project.* Anthony Hope's novel was redacted to a single newsprint-sized page and reprinted in a series of ten, each subsequent one in the series progressively obscured and finally erased by encroaching scribbles. Here are three images from the sequence of ten.

A more ambitious, complex, example is Tom Phillips's *A Humeument* [New York: Thames and Hidson, 1982] — an entire pedestrian Victorian novel transformed into something new which is both visually and textually fascinating on every page and as a whole.





What do I prove with these examples? Only that it can be done, that the principles and constraints put forward so far can be realized in an actual book.

These principles and constraints are four:
The artist's book is

- a unique object which defies reproduction and so qualifies for the aura of a work of art.
- It is a text which will repay serious reading and thought and so qualifies as a book.
- Text and visual interpenetrate so that neither is completely intelligible without the other, so that neither is subordinate to the other, and a strategy of reproduction of its elements severally is frustrated.
- It is the work of a single person and so eligible to participate in the handmade aesthetic and obtain access to the "mark of the maker" which certifies its other qualities.

2.1

Now the Next Next Thing: Digital Artists Books

We have now a way of proceeding, a Practice which seems likely to produce the auratic artists handmade book we were seeking after at the beginning. How likely it is that any actual human will be able to utilize this Way to actually make something of it is another matter. A Way which is too arduous for anyone to follow is not much use.

So where we are at now is: we have in our hands (a figure of speech) a hypothetical artists book, the unique and only possible product of an unstable, fleeting union between machine processes and handmade aesthetics. There will never be another one.

But the very fact that there is, and can be, only one copy damages the claims of the textual side to equal partnership, because to be a *book*, and not just a precious object, it must be read. This entails that it be readable, not locked up in an art collection somewhere. The more people read it the more bookish it becomes. One copy, even if it were not protected by a jealous collector in white gloves, will not facilitate this. It's a variant of the problem faced by a religion of the book in an illiterate culture, partly solved by frequent public reading or by encouraging memorization.

This handmade Way of the artists book is proving to be as difficult a relationship between art and text as the ordinary sort of marriage between two people.

Here is a page from my artists book *22 Remarks About the Old Ones* (Ocotillo Arts, 2006).

There are three images on a large (17x22) sheet intended to be folded up as a quarto book. The text is printed on translucent paper and laid on top of the images. When folded up the text is in page order but it can't be read because to do so would require cutting the page, ruining the top image. And the images can't be seen unimpeded without turning back the text sheets (which are attached only along one edge). The book requires a process of twisting and turning, peering and prying and it can never be seen all at once because to look at one element obscures another. This is reflected in the text, which is about secrets, hidden things.

Here we have an object which is readable and combines the visual and textual in the required way. It is reproduceable, but with difficulty, and the way in which it is constructed demands handling the real, physical object and so we will have to put up with facsimiles of impaired aura. Digital reproduction is out of the question: there is no way to digitally simulate the physical experience of reading this book.

This draws a line. Is there any possibility of a digital artists book otherwise? A facsimile of a conventionally constructed book, perhaps: another of my books has flaps, sometimes flaps on flaps, under which more text is found, or which when opened alter the visual aspect of the page. It would be easy, on a digital copy of this page, to construct

an “auto-flap” which opens when the mouse passes over it and closes again when the mouse moves on. This would be, I think, similar enough to the original reading experience to qualify as a digital facsimile.

There is such a thing as digital art so called — we needn’t dispute that — but it belongs to the machine ethos much moreso than an etching or a photograph. Anything digital, whether visual or textual, is intrinsically, essentially reproducible. That is its raison d’etre: the need for copies was what set Benjamin off in the first place, and the word processor (a suitably industrial term) is valuable precisely because it faithfully reproduces whatever you feed it. A word-processed document is not a palimpsest, it’s the actual nump, as Pogo would say.

One print copy, particularly a hand-printed one, is valuable because of the work involved in making it, even amortized over the whole edition, whereas one digital copy is worthless. There is no such thing as a rare digital text. The worth of digital objects inheres in their use, not in themselves.

A digital artists book, if there were such a thing, would thus not be a question of the significance (a term of cultural approbation) of its art or its text — both of these are knock-offs, at best demotic reproductions of a hieratic original. The status of the thing as a book is not in doubt, however unsatisfactory and uncuddly an object it may be. As for art, that remains to be seen. There is a sort of cultural uncertainty principle at work here, a Schrödinger’s cat which cannot be known to be art until it is taken out of the box and put to artistic purposes. So long as it’s still in the box (unused) its status as art is indeterminate. It is not within the control of the artist to say whether his book is or is not art — in effect it is neither, until it is taken up by someone else. Thus, one can’t make digital art. One makes a digital object which other people turn into art.

So the hypothetical digital artists book fails to meet at least one of the four conditions: it necessarily lacks the mark of the maker.

And of course, among the things at stake in a digital artists book cannot be its sensual existence — it has none — nor any of the other auratic issues already exposed. A digital object can never be rare, only obscure. Digital aura would appear to be impossible.

A plan for a digital artists book

Nevertheless, there may be a role for the digital to play. We have agreed, I think, that a digital facsimile is not out of the question if the original is constructed so as to facilitate this. Benjamin and sneering post-modernists aside, for the sake of the hot-dog vendor problem which we all have, we agreed long ago to accept or at least tolerate the facsimile as a substitute for the Real Thing.

The major limitation of the digital is that it lacks tactility. Behind (prior to) the digital artists book there is a handmade physical book which exists in only one copy. This is reproduced (editioned) as a photograph (a set of page photographs). Anyone who possesses the means to print a set of page images can, if desired, create a tactile version as elaborate as resources permit. This secondary or derivative copy can also be (can be made to be) unique, that is: rare. And thus possibly auratic. The intervention of machine processes has destroyed the original mark of the maker but now we have a new-made thing and a new maker. And the machine intervention has made mass distribution possible, thus preserving the book attributes.

A demonstration of this can be found in photography. Black-and-white master prints are rare: when the master dies there will be no more of them. The status of copies made according to the master's instructions, and perhaps under

the master's tutelage, is variable but not inconsiderable. The more we think of a photograph as a machine artifact the less is participates (of course) in the mark of the maker. This is why black and white photographs are increasingly valuable, because there is now a natural limit to the reach of the master's hand. As color photography is replaced by new digital technology the same thing will happen, in time, to color prints.

The contemporary (digital) artist photographer is forced to create rarity by the same means as his graphic predecessors in lithograph, etching, woodcut, and other more esoteric reproduction processes — size (difficult to copy), expense (rotogravure and now a succession of technologies for making wall-sized museum copies[5]), editioning (destroying the source of the copy), or assimilation into an assemblage which by multiplying the instances ups the ante on reproduction.

Rarity is problematic in amother way. The textual/visual handmade artists book is always in a state of incompletion. This state is not available non-digitally. When a physical object is created it is done, complete regardless of the attitude of its creator toward its completeness. It can be ***re***-made (re-done), but the original is not the sum of its subsequent versions: each version is original unto itself. When we say an original is unfinished we don't mean that it is incomplete, and it may even satisfy us as art as it is, in its "unfinished" state. In fact, an original is always already both complete and finished. When we say it is *incomplete* we mean the artist missed a tick, and failed to do something he (she) intended to do and which she (he) deemed essential. It's a critical judgment. (The artists is only a specially-privi-

5 Giclée (French for inkjet) is rapidly losing its ability to create rarity. A moderate-size printer (tabloid size) is now within the budget of anyone who can afford a laptop and a digital camera. The operating cost is, at the time I write, about $5 a page, making it comparable in 1900 dollars to a Brownie Box.

leged critic.) Perhaps it wasn't his fault (he died) or was too busy. Whatever, from this point 'incompleteness' becomes a permanent property of the (necessarily completed) work, whereas 'unfinished' is not a property of the art at all, but of the artist's intent. We others can only guess at intent, a thing which has no force in the phenomenal world. So long as the artist is alive, everything he puts his hand to is unfinished, open to change. The unique original is inherently rare at the moment of creation, no matter how many brothers and sisters there are in the family.

The digital copy is not a brother, it's a clone. It can be made rare in theory, but in reality, as e-mail users know, digital objects are tenaciously persistent. Unintentional copies are ubiquitous. Digital objects are inherently a machine product which exist in an infinity of multiples. Digital objects are the perfect negation of rarity. And if *every* avatar is just a version, you can never possess the quintessence of it. The real, complete and replete art-object is imaginary: it doesn't exist (yet). Balzac's imaginary masterpiece — Frenhofer's never-to-be painting — is the fablulous, the ur or the ideal original.[6]

Isn't this backwards? It is the physical object which is replete. The imagined ideal (Aristotle's fourth and final cause) is forever imaginary, impotent. Perhaps we should say that phenomenal art leaves us the illusion that somewhere there is the Real Thing, perhaps lost in the basement of the Prado. Digital art permits no such illusion.

If art is not *for* anything, does not serve any purpose, is servant to no master, there can be no intent other than the artist's completely inefficacious own. The mark is authentically of the maker.

The digital object springs into being only when it is put to use, and being put to use, ceases to be art.

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6 Dore Ashton, *A Fable Of Modern Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

The Contemporary Artists Book: Four Traditions

The artists book[1] as we presently understand this medium is perhaps only half a century old, or more conservatively, a practice dating from the early 1970s.[2] Thus it may be presumptuous to refer to the various allegiancies or styles in the field as *traditions*, which would more accurately be designated practices (to use the sociological word) or, as in the zen-inflected arts, *Ways*. The concept of a tradition, however, includes a certain ideological dimension, a loyalty, which is pronounced among its practitioners, so I choose to speak of four traditions as being the most easily understood term.

There are more than four ways of making an artists book, of course. Altered books, as they are called (and so classified in libraries, which distinguish them from artists books), I do not mention, and there are others. I am not making an exhaustive classification, but rather identifying the most common or prominent sorts.

By virtue of its recent birth we might take the artists book to be heavily inflected by art movements from Pop to Postmodern, and so it is. But these are also *books*, made by craftsmen whose practices are as old as the codex

1 As I write it, the term artists book (without the apostrophe) is intended to convey something other than the possessive: a book by, of, belonging to, a (particular) artist, but rather an artform such as painting or sculpture. My intention is also to make a clear distinction between the artists book and the older livre d'artiste, a commercial product of the book trade, essentially an expensively illustrated conventional book. The maker of artists books is practicing the skills gathered under the term book arts, but the book arts collectively or individually do not constitute an artists book.

2 Johanna Drucker entitles her history The Century of Artists Books (NY:Granary Books, 1995). But she examines a much broader range of book forms; paging through the illustrations shows that what in 2009 we are likely to encounter in a gallery showing "artists books" is a much narrower set of types.

at least, and are directly allied with the printed book and everything which that object has accumulated since the time of Gutenberg. Moreover, Pop and Postmodern (and what came between) were (are) strongly reactive in their relationship to Modernism, and it is the ideas of the previous generation to which we turn for the script (or a mirror image of it) by which we might understand the present-day artists book.

Of course, this has always been so. At any time the ordinary person's taste will be for art of the previous generation, while the opinion leaders and the artists themselves are working with a set of ideas formed out of previous theories and practices. I say formed *out of*, but not necessarily in *reaction to*. That is the peculiar relationship of Modernism to its predecessors. Likewise the medium of the artists book is conflicted, to use a psychological metaphor, as is painting, for example, with its long representationalist tradition now vitiated by photography and film.

The culprit is the arts relationship to craft, which until Modernism was not in doubt.

The *modernity* of modern art, by which I mean art since the end of Impressionism, might be identified as the search for autonomy.[3] This century or so of practice includes Modern art, of course – always a puzzling moniker, as how could the art of one's time be other than modern? – but also a great many other trends, schools, and theories of what Art is and how it Ought To Be Done. Hence my neglect in capitalizing the term. Nevertheless, many of the characteristic concerns of the art of our time find their origin, if not their resolution, in an aspiration which, about 1900, began to as-

3 Much of what I have to say here at the beginning follows Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), to whom I am indebted for a means of dealing with the knotty and divisive question of craft and craftsmanship in the book arts. I am not proposing a reductive Theory of Everything, nor even Everything to do with artists books, as inviting a particular focus which may help to sort out some contentious issues in the field which have often been argued unhelpfully by ideological means.

sume an importance which had until then not been the core of artistic practice, which is *how to construct an autonomous field* in which to do art.

As one inventories the arts, one finds in each, earlier or later but inevitably, a concern with those qualities which make it an art, qualities both necessary and sufficient to say intelligibly what painting ***is***, what *is* ceramics, sculpture, photography, literature. The earliest and paradigmatic case is that of painting, whose documentary *raison d'être* was threatened by photography and required to be purged of the notion of "picture-making" – representations of scenes from the world outside painting intended to serve purposes (such as religious worship) not strictly artistic. The hygienic or purifying procedure for grounding (or justifying) an art *as art* appears over and over. The answers obtained – the results of the procedure – have of course never been quite satisfactory, and indeed it is not the answer but the quest itself which was distinctive in Modernity and much of modern art since.

It is an irony that photography itself has not *yet* achieved unquestioned status as an art. When it was nearly a century old, Man Ray continued to think of his photographic work as the day job. It doesn't help that, like watercolors, photographs are not so frequently hung in museums for preservational reasons, or that the photography department is often in the basement or some out-of-the way location. But in the mind of the ordinary consumer (which one can verify by listening is galleries catering to tourists) a photograph is valuable because it comes (supposedly) direct from life, without interference by an *artist.* The zone system practiced by Ansel Adams was a means of adapting the technically inferior camera to what the human eye perceives, it is thought, and Adams' hours of darkroom work are forgotten. This documentary concept of photography is as example of what I meant by lagging taste in art.

Suzanne Langer made a heroic effort to generalize this problematic[4] as a hewing of each artistic practice to its virtual program. Thus, sculpture can be described as "virtual touch", the novel as virtual time, and so on. In order to make sense of the Abstract Impressionists, Clement Greenberg tried to reduce Jackson Pollock to the purely visual experience (indeed, to reduce all of art to the visual) which was no sooner proposed than contested. Now, fifty years on, we think it odd to overlook the sensual component of a Pollock painting, its tactile intimacy, its earthy relationship to gravity.[5]

If all this is so, then we ought to find somewhere in the book arts a concern to understand what is *bookishness*, what it means to be, peculiarly, the *book* arts (the program of Modernism) and at the same time a certain schizophrenia stemming from the Modernist separation of artistic content from the means of its creation: the craft of it.

The fraught and contested nature and use of craft (the crafts, craftsmanship) plays a central role here. This has been a definitional quagmire, and for good reason. It is craft, the frame which sets off a practice as artistic and thus insures its autonomy, which at the same time undermines that autonomy though the inescapable entanglement of craft with everyday phenomenal world.[6] It has been an important pro-

4 *Feeling and Form* (1953), *Problems of Art* (1957), *Mind* (1967-1982). Langer was a student of Ernst Cassirer, who rethought his Kantiansim in two ways important to Langer. First, his incorporation of historical development into the notion of the a priori, a development similar to Heidegger's concept of genealogy,and with a strong presence in portmodern thinking. Second, through his efforts to grasp the nature of scientific knowledge, his inclusion of science within the field of symbolizing activity governed by diverse cultural forces. 5 A Pollock painting is physically heavy, truly, but what I mean is gravity as the means by which the paint got onto the canvas. 6 There is, thus, a continual pressure to deny or suppress the craft of one's art. The familiar, and quintessentially Modern, injunction to writers to seek a transparent realism, to avoid writing which is mannered (that is, which

gram of Postmodernism to recapture those qualities which Modernism stripped away in its search for autonomy, particularly the inescapable constructedness of all human activity – the groundedness of that activity, including art – in political, social, ideological, and local conditions, all contingent and without which we cannot fully understand a piece of art.[7]

By the term *craft* I intend the control of materials and methods, of the *stuff* of art. The craft of a musician, as distinct from her musicianship (by which we mean, circularly, all that which is not *craftlich),* consists of physical skills and the materiality of her instrument. As for autonomy, in trying to make this clear Adamson points to the case of craft jewelry, which is made to be worn and must be understood with reference to the body for which it is made, and that of fashion which is the same, but with a crucial difference: *haut couture* makes no sense when it is not worn (why the most ambitious designers show their work on live models rather than on mannequins or a rack) whereas jewelers have discovered how to reconceptualize jewelry as sculpture.[8] Likewise, potters sought to escape their craft roots, to stop making pots and start making art, with the result that handmade functioal ceramics can now be bought mostly in street

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call attention to itself) is a denial of this sort. The tenets of Henry James, Ford, Forster, Booth, and other now hoary admonishments to this day inform the taste of editors, reviewers and ordinary readers and pervade the MFA creative writing programs whose graduates are naturally first concerned with what appeals to those selfsame editors, reviewers, and readers. What does Oprah Winfrey care most about the books she recommends, of not what it's about? Does anyone think of Joyce's *Ulysses* as first and foremost the gripping tale of Leopold Bloom's journey through Dublin?

7 The writings of Pierre Bordeaux might be recommened here. Of course I don't mean that *full* understanding of anything at all is possible, only that in the rush to get down to (ilusory) essences our experience of art has been impoverished.

8 A discovery which sculpture itself had to do at the begiing of the last century, through the work of Brancusi. Adamson discusses Brancusi's struggle p14-21, just prior to his remarks on jewelry and clothing which I have made use of here.

fairs.[9] *Craft fairs*, as they are commonly called.

It is this tension between the would-be autonomous art and its supplemental (a noun, meaning the increment of materials and skills which brought the art into existence) which I argue lies at the heart of the contemporary artists book. And this tension arises because the book artist is engaged in making something by hand which is typically made by machine. Indeed, the book as we understand it came into existence *because* of the desire to replace a hand process (manuscript copying) with a mechanical one (moveable type).

We have here two distinct and contradictory aesthics: that of the machine and that of the hand.

The Four Traditions

Let us see what we can do to use the relationship of the book artist to his craft to sort out present work. I identify four traditions. Except for fine printing, these do not have names, so I have invented some to start with.

The fine printing tradition

The tradition of fine printing acknowledges and celebrates those ways in which bookmaking is firstly a craft. The artist in this tradition accepts the craft standards of a machine process (uniformity, reproducibility, perfection) as defined at that time and applies aesthetic judgments concerning pleasing type faces, proportions, and other design features within that set of standards.

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9 Following the art fair circuit is a grueling and not very profitable way to practice what was once a nobler activity. More than anything, the difference in venue of distribution exposes the lower social standing of the craft potter.

Being conservative, artists in the fine printing tradition will not stray far from the ordinary conception of bookishness: it is an object with pages which can be turned and on which there are words and pictures meant to be read. This includes pop-up books, accordion folds, and other variations on the codex which is the ur-form of the book as we understand it.

The 3D tradition

The mantra of this artist is "it's a book if an artist says it is." This move is intended to avoid all the constraints imposed by the fine printing tradition, and indeed, the whole definitional argument over what an artists (or artist's) book is. It is a radical, preemptive move toward autonomy. The "artist" is self-designated as such, and any attempt to limit his field of production is thus arbitrary.

This negative relationship to craft means that the bond between craft processes and craft materials is not recognized. A "book" in the 3D tradition can be made of anything (ceramics, say) and assume any form (say, a tube). If one asks in what sense is this ceramic tube a book and this other one is, say, a pipe for caustic chemicals, the answer will (or might as well) be that there is no difference: the challenge is exactly that posed by Duchamp's toilet. The object *becomes* a book when it is set aside as such: that is, framed. A frame is not the art, but it is of the art: without the frame there is no art. This *supplement* is the craft component, exactly those issues of materials and techniques which the book artist in the 3D tradition wished not to be bound by.

The constructed book

Between these two positions (the fine printing craft and the autonomous art) lie two intermediary ones having similar allegiances but not so uncompromising formulations. One of these, allied with the 3D, accepts most of the aspirations of that tradition but is unwilling to give up the traditional book form. The book is *constructed* in the sense that it is built from nothing using only whatever materials the artist may think are relevant (and thus may not include a number of things such as typography which we are accustomed to seeing in a book).

This tradition I would say is the dominant mode of our time and its products are the exemplars of what we now mean by an *artists book.* The typical standards of quality, such as one finds in juried competitions and critical remarks, for example unity of purpose and execution, have obvious meaning only when applied to this tradition, a marker of its hegemony.

With reference to fine printing it is quite a puzzle to know what "unity of purpose" might mean, since the purpose of the book is to set forth its text, the unity of which is not within the printer's field of choice. It might mean some congruity between the text and the means chosen or the design adopted but what that congruity may be is a distinctly less comprehensive standard than all aspects of the whole book, which must surely be what is meant. Likewise, unity of execution must mean something more than such elementary craft standards as the use of a single typeface throughout, (or a small harmonious set of faces), appropriate paper, error-free presswork, and so forth.

With reference to the 3D, works in this tradition are never complex enough for a lack of unity to intrude. There is no reason why a work in the autonomous books arts tradition could not be a complex object dimensionally or temporally

extended, a multi-faceted work of many and varied parts, but these books are allied to sculpture and the visual arts, forms not well-suited to analytical complexity or the exposition of difficult ideas. A unity of purpose, as distinct from an simply intelligible purpose, is natural to them.

By accepting the more-or-less traditional book form, the artist in the constructed tradition is accepting one inescapable property of the book which the 3D artist does not: sequentiality. Sequence is imposed (a printer's word) by the codex form simply by the necessity of turning the pages – pages which, being fastened together, exist only in a certain order. That order is part of the intent and material of the artist and it enforces itself in a way that, for example, the saccade of the eye across the visual structure of a painting is not enforced. This saccade is part of the legibility of the painting; the sequence of pages in a book may also be part of its intelligibility (its being readable, *lisable*) but the turning of the page is first of all a physical fact, enforced, without which the object cannot be comprehended.

The integrated book

This tradition is, I believe, the least common and most unfamiliar of the four. Its allegiance is to the fine printing tradition and its product is unproblematically a book, but it remains open as regards materials and methods, and standards of craft.

Since the ideal of this tradition is the complete integration of textual and visual components, both elements will be the work of a single artist, or a collaboration to produce original material intended for this work (and no other).

So far it will seem that the near cousin of the integrated book may be the graphic novel. This is I believe correct, except that the graphic novel (a highly flexible cognomen which can be stretched to cover anything from cartoons

to William Blake) has no concern with its material presentation, the craft issue which occupy the fine printer almost exclusively.

However, since the *medium* of the integrated book is not predetermined, it will be impossible to say what craft issues may be implicated, since craft is tightly bound to the medium and materials used. A book produced by letterpress, by photolithography, or handwritten will all present different problems and opportuinites – to which we must now add the digital book, it seems, though it is not at all clear what a digital book may be.

The integrated book also has allegiances on the other side to the constructed tradition. By virtue of the codex form it faces the same concerns of sequentiality already mentioned. The major difference between the two, perhaps the only significant difference, is the integrated book's inclusion of a *text*, and with it a dimension which is not visual or tactile. One speaks of the "craft of writing" but this is in the sense of a skill, not a mastery of physical materials which is the primary meaning of the word.[10]

Possessing a text as much under the control of the artist as the physical medium, the integrated book thus possesses one thing which the other three traditions do not, which is the means of taking on complex ideas and working directly with them in intellectual as well as a full range of sensory modes. It is thus possible, though hardly necessary, that the integrated book might be very much bigger than one in the constructed or 3D traditions, and aspire to a statement of the human condition every bit on a level with Austen, Proust, or Faulkner. More than anything else, this

10 Indeed, to speak of the craft of writing is to invoke the same ideological and discriminatory issues which are at the heart of the tension between art and craft with which I began. Such an invocation is a move toward establishing a position (a defensive position) on the importance and worthiness of popular fiction (typically; other forms of writing not having such a fraught relationship with the market).

was the breakthrough and the gift which Art Spiegelman's *Maus* offered: the opening of a once small and oppressed art to a whole world of possibility.

Some Remarks

I might begin with "fine printing" which in some respects it seems absurd to single out, there having been bibliophiles, and printers with the skill to satisfy them, in every generation since Gutenberg, unless one means a practice co-extensive with printing itself, which tells us nothing. Nevertheless, there have been several notable shifts in preferences for book design, which Updike well documents.[11] Each of these periods might, if one liked, be called a "tradition" – a word which is merely intended to indicate a common taste and a set of practices generally accepted by knowledgeable people as the best way of doing things, in the right hands the means of producing a superior product.

If one looks to the development of the "modern" typographic tradition (that is, what was accepted as contemporaneous in 1922, when Updike was writing) one might begin with Bodoni in the late 18th century. Here we find ourselves at a watershed when the force of the Renaissance was still felt, especially among conservative learned men, but the new sensibility of Romanticism had begun to make the old way of the book seem heavy and clumsy. What was wanted was a type-page less full (cluttered), with more generous margins and with the lines and letters less crowded together. Bodoni revived the serif introducted by Grandjean some years before and produced a more strongly modeled letter-form; that is, with a greater contrast between the thiuck and thin strokes, which the serif helped to make legible.

11 Daniel Berkeley Updike, *Printing Types* . This was first published in two volumes by Harvard in 1922; the latest edition is by Oak Knoll Press for the British Library, 2001 (2v in 1)

Bodoni was private printer to the Duke of Parma at a time (still a time) when the book carried enormous social importance and a scholar-printer of beautiful and important books could be granted an importance we would now find hard to credit. Bodoni's shop was a mandatory visit on the Grand Tour; he was on the payroll of the King of Spain and the Pope, the City of Parma struck a medal in his honor, he was commended by Napoleon and many others.[12] He was a book artist. With allowances for a hundred years of social evolution, one would not know Bodoni's *reale typographia* from Morris's Kelmscott Press or Rickett's Vale.

In the meantime, the entire book-production industry had been mechanized and all the fine distinctions and careful ways of the hand-printer of the past like Bodoni, who cut his own types, were swept away by machine-made pulp paper, artificially tanned leather, linotype-set type blocks and stereotype sheets, steam-powered iron presses, and so on. The stage was set for the idea of a "fine press" to assume the character which we now indicate by the term: a press where books are printed by hand using antiquated technology and the highest standard of craftsmanship to produce expensive, artificially rare objects for wealthy people who have the taste and money to seek them out.[13] This may seem a hostile definition, and so it is, by which I intend to draw attention to the chasm which sprang open about this time in all areas of culture, turning popular taste into mass kitsch and informed sophistication into elite snobbery. This is the position which

12 Updike, v2 165.

13 The truth of this is embodied in the mere existence of Bruce Rogers, a designer of commercial books who was lionized for doing what a printer of Benjamin Franklin's time did in the course of work. (*The Work of Bruce Rogers: A Catalogue.* Oxford, 1939) Franklin, incidntally, felt he was in a position to criticize some aspects of Bodoni's type designs, which criticism Bodoni was happy to receive from (as he thought) the President of the United States (Updike v2 168-9). No one ever mistook Bruce Rogers for the President.

the "fine press tradition" of which I speak now occupies, and identifies it as a modern, largely 20th-century phenomenon. We may capture some of the flavor of this new formulation in Charles Rickett's (significantly titled) *A Defence of the Revival of Printing* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1899).

> It has always seemed odd to me, that while the man of past ages provided the utmost conditions of beauty…no thought whatever should be spent upon the shaping of work inconceivably more stimulating and precious to us than those illuminated books upon which so much beauty had nevertheless been bestowed.
>
> Some of my earliest experiments with the shaping of books…were done for Messrs. Osgood, MacInvaine in 1890 and 1891. … At the time…they were unlike the ordinary books in the matter of title page, proportion of margin, and in the designs upon their boards.[14]

The "fine press movement"[15] was soon well-entrenched. Its

14 17-18. I find it incredible that Ricketts should suppose he was a great innovator in these matters, that he should suppose that such were not the aspirations of the painstaking efforts of Aldus or Bodoni, or indeed that of Gutenberg himself, who went to such trouble to imitate these very manuscripts, or that he should not know of the Englishman Walpole's reform of the title page and layout used at his Strawberry Hill Press. Ricketts is reacting, as I observed, to the *present state* (in 1899) of book production, to which he contrasts his own work just as Bruce Rogers, already noted, did.

15 A better term might be "fine *publisher* movement", used by Megan L Benton, *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction In America* (New Haven: Yale, 2000). The printers who defined the tradition had to make a living, and the result was a consumer-driven book no more than an anglophone version of the *livre d'artiste,* from which the non-commercial, mostly private, presses of the time borrowed their aesthetic standards.

practitioners were known and the list is widely agreed-upon. The books they produced are today the standard of excellence for fine printers and collectors alike.[16] The "essentials of a well-made book" were laid out by Updike himself in 1941.[17] They are: the preparation of the manuscript (error-free copy-editing), the choice of type ("certain ideas are best represented by certain forms"), the size of paper, makeup, imposition, choice of paper, presswork (makeready, underlay, inking, even color) and binding. This would seem hardly worth notice were it not for Updike's assumption, partly expressed, that such elements as the type design and size, the length of line imposed by that taken with the size of paper chosen, the use of ornaments, and so on, are bound to one another such that the optimum for each becomes the optimum of the whole. This is the "typographer's problem" (39) which has only one solution. One thinks of a Zen rock garden, for which the ability to identify and appreciate the solution is a measure of one's enlightenment.

And there is also this (Updike quotes Holbrook Jackson, but these foundational ideas are widely retailed):

> What makes printing good is…the accordance of the design with the wishes of the reader who wants to get down to the business of reading. Good printing is readable printing, and no print is readable that is not simple, direct, plain, and inclining to austerity. Printing is not a thin in itself like a picture…

16 Benton's is a distanced but not unfriendly history of the fine press bubble, roughly 1900-1940, is For a more embedded view of the goings-on in California, an important locus of this tradition, see James D Hart, *Fine Printing, the San Francisco Tradition* (Library of Congress, 1985), and Ward Ritchie, *Fine Printing, the Los Angeles Tradition* (Library of Congress, 1987).

17 *Some Aspects of Printing Old and New* (New Haven: William Edwin Rudge, 1941) 23, 39-40.

> but part of a tool called a book; a bridge between writer and reader. It should contain nothing to impede that traffic. Graciousness, friendliness, even dignity should be there, but always unobtrusively. Self-effacement is the etiquette of the good printer. (40)

A plainer statement of an aesthetic at total odds with that of the 3D tradition can not be imagined.

The 3D tradition

This tradition is marked by a certain pugnaciousness, as apparent in the dictum and mantra "It's a book if the artist says it is." That said, the 3D tradition has also been a productive locus of wit, its creations beautiful and even moving. Here are two works by Janet Goldner: "Triangle Circle Square" and (p 42) "Can We Heal?",[18] related in form and technique but different in scale and aspiration.

18 Janet Goldner's sculptural books may be seen on her website http://www. janetgoldner.com. The images of the works of Judy Wilkenfield and Louisa Boyd come from the Artists Books 3.0 website http://artists-books.ning.com Dan Mayer's work can be seen at http://artslide.fa.asu.edu/mfaslide/mayer/index_may.html

Judy Wilkenfield's "Book of Reliquaries" shows a different sensibility. Perhaps the pages of her construct are less easily turned but they are no less legible for that.

Compare these works with Dan Mayer's trompe l'oeil ceramic book (right) and Louisa Boyd's even more distant reference to the form of the book and to the book's iconic, mythic dimension (below).

Finally, another work by Dan Mayer, a discarded book page, still clearly recognizeable as such under its accretion of etching, laser transfers, gold leaf, and chine collé.

What does all this signify? Little or nothing, possibly. Do we ask such questions of a Brancusi sculpture or a Calder mobile? They are sensual reflections of the world of objects to which they belong and also remarks on that world, sometimes laconic, sometimes enigmatic, sometimes so pat and obvious as to make one cringe.

The 3D tradition has sharply reduced resources with which to work. How many ceramic or cloth books can there be? How many page-like objects, hinged or flattened in a terrine like a page of the Bible, trot out that freighted load to neither add nor subtract a gram of substance from it? Dan Mayer makes what he calls “rhetoric sticks” – ceramic tubes or rods with rune-like characters on them, sometimes packaged as a set in velvet in an elaborate box as if they were jewels. I find them hi-

larious. But the idea is self-limiting. One rhetoric stick will do for all of them. As *objects*, books are all pretty much alike. Books are differentiated by their contents. And this is exactly what the 3D tradition has rejected. In terms of our original analysis, the rejection or sublimation of craft in search of the abstract concept of book-ness has returned from the expedition with nothing in its hands *except* craft.

And yet. Why do we not object to the fine-printed book in the same way? Such books are all more or less alike, aside from their content which no one cares about.[19] Each well-made book is an object unto itself, appreciated for a well-madeness which loses nothing by the existence of other well-made books. The world can't have too many of these. What's wrong with a book-shaped tchotchke on every desktop and a rhetoric stick in every pocket?

And yet. The fine printers have sacrificed content to craft, the 3D artists have exchewed both content and craft in search of form; the constructive tradition accepts the form for the sake of craft and the integrated tradition accepts the craft in order to get on with explorations of content. None of these traditions us anything like a comprehensive statement of the artists book as a form and a medium, no more than Cezanne fixed the nature of painting forever, or Steiglitz defined photography. It's too much to ask. Someone pushes out the boundaries and this makes more space for everyone.

19 See the article by Michael Russem discussed earlier.

A book is what an artist says it is, and by so saying, makes a book.

The constructed book

Having now established the two poles of the set of artists book practice (or Way) which I have gathered under the rubric of "four traditions" it is relatively easy to identify the two intermediate positions of the constructed book and the integrated book.

The "constructed book" (so called) tradition is very wide and accepting of variation. It has in fact only two characteristics, both reactive of its neighboring traditions. On the side which is sympathetic to the 3D tradition, the retention of the codex structure dictates that the necessary, and so dominant, theme of the constructed book will be sequentiality. The book is divided into pages which have, willy-nilly, an order and a front-to-back precedence; one is obliged to turn the pages, and so is face with a before and after relationship which must be interpreted if the book is to be understood. Attempts to suvert this requirement, as for example creating an ambiguity as to which is the front and what is the back of the book, do not change this. The "reader" decides, temporarily or permanently, which cover to regard as the front, and the book's sequentialty is thereby established. Likewise, "books" of one page, anything intended to be read, literally or, as with a painting, metaphorically, is read in sequence. There are, perhaps, tiny one-page books which can be comprehended at a glance, but nevertheless not understood without reading.

The other necessary quality, reactive of the integrated book, is the constructed book's rejection of a coherent verbal narrative. The book may contain words, or letters, or seeming words and letters, but any story-like sequence is avoided.

This is not to say these books do not "tell" stories; only that the stories are not delivered as narratives.

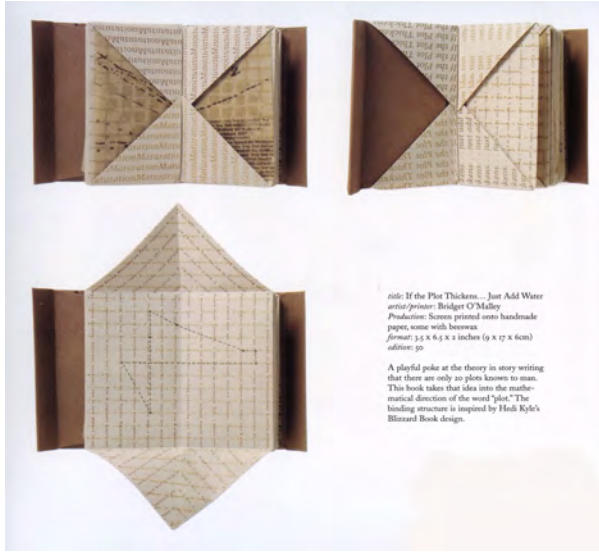
Within these self-imposed constraints, the tension set up between sequentiality and narrative, anything is possible. This probably accounts for the apparent fact that the constructed tradition is the dominant mode of the present and embodies what commonly informed people will think of as an "artists book."

For examples, and a contextualizing theory and history (a "geneology" in postmodern terms, borrowing from Heidegger) we turn to Drucker's *The Century of Artists Books* and for something of the social positioning of the practice to Stephen Bury, *Artists' Books: The Book as a Work of Art 1963-1995* (Scolar Press, 1995). There are a great many catalogs of such books. The Penland School, for instance, publishes a sumptuous compilation of noteworthy examples, and another is *Book Art Object* (Berkeley: Codex Foundation, 2009) notable for the substantial population of books lying on the border between constructed and find printing traditions, making it clearer what is at stake in each. The following examples come from this compilation.

One (p300) is *Die Rekening*, a handmade ledger in a 19th century style, containing a mixture of totmarks and other elements something at odds with the the elegent presentation, as if the ledger style itself were not already incongruous. Beside this (p301) is a travel book with a seven-foot foldout, while overleaf (p299) is a set of visual stories. *Die Rekening* is a purely visual object; *Pheasant On*

the Crescent (the photo stories) is narrative only when the images are taken in sequence and (although beautiful) unintelligible otherwise; *29 Degrees North* (the travel book) is hung on an external conceit and is thus freed of the exigencies of presentation. In their design values, meticulousness, and use of valuable materials all these books show their origins in and loyalty to the fine printing tradition. In fact, arguments that they are not *in* that tradition might strike one as specious or labored.

Farther along on the path of constructedness are such works as *Mnemosyne* (p133), the accordion-fold shown here on p47, and *If the Plot Thickens ... Just Add Water* resembling an unfolding envelope (p 133, shown below).



Then there are books seemingly produced on a superannuated Gestettner, very obviously not fine and perhaps not even printed, and, at the far boundary with 3D, this book (Drucker 399, shown opposite).

Frances Butler, **Occult Psychogenic Malfeasance**, 1980

The purposes of these works are more closely allied with the 3D tradition (I am not building a taxonomy – for that, see Drucker) and are often humorous or intent on some social commentary, and may be actually hostile to the fine (that is, etiolated and elitist) aesthetics of the well-made book and its *bien pensant* creators.

The constructed tradition is nearly as old as the fine printing renaissance. The latter, typically conservative and backward-looking, was driven by Arts and Crafts interest in classical and medieval ideas and techniques, whereas the former, the constructed book, is associated with the early 20th century avant-garde.[20] Drucker's examples come from Mallarmé amd Cendrars and the visual and verbal experiments of the Russians, Marinetti, and similar sources. This is the parentage which I identified as formative and significant in my first exposition of the traditions. And of course, always lurking at the root of so many aspects of the book arts, there is William Blake,[21]

20 Drucker, 45 et seq

21 *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 41. Ed Robert N Essick. San Marino: Huntington Library, 2008.


41
LONDON
I wander thro' each charterd street.
Near where the charterd Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weaknes, marks of woe.
In every cry of every Man.
In every Infants cry of fear.
In every voice: in every ban.
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear
How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls.
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls
But most thro' midnight streets I hear.
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

Qi

The Interpenetration Of Textual and Visual
In the Artists book

The Chinese ideograph which is the title of this section is usually transliterated as *chi*, or in modern spelling, *qi.* It refers roughly to the active principle of a living thing and is cognate with the yogic concept of breath (prana, vital flow) or the origial Latin meaning of spirit (spiritus, breathing). Originating with the human curiosity about life force, it was applied by zen masters to anything seeming to possess these qualities, notably art. Zen-inspired painting thus strove to capture the *chi* of its subject. By extension, one can then speak of the *chi* of the painting itself.

At the end of my earlier ruminations on the artists book, *After Moveable Type,* I wrestled unsucessfully with the question of how to make an artists book in the spirit of zen. My remarks here will be concerned with elaborating this question by means of two subsidiary concepts: complexity, and the interpenetration of the textual and the visual.[1]

1 This problem concerns primarily my own tradition but may have implications for other ways of making artists book, and I offer my remarks to the whole community of book artists in this spirit.

Systems theory, fields, and complexity

I don't care to write a tiresome academic article on these subjects. Such an analysis is easily found by consulting the work of Eco, structuralists and post-structuralists, and other postmodern writing as well as work in communications theory, linguistics, mathematics, anthropology, social theory, and other disciplines. Aside from a brief orientation I will satisfy myself with an outline of the issues and elaborate them later in the context of the artists book..

Cartesian and systems thinking

Cartesian co-ordinates were invented by the mathematician for which they are named for the purpose of unambiguously locating a point in two or three-dimensional space. Longitude and latitude are a familiar manifestation of Cartesian space. By extension, Cartesian thinking tries to locate objects in a system of classification. A dictionary is a good example of this. The Cartesian system is a closed one. This is not to say it is static or finite. Cartesian thinking can, for example, accommodate the problem of continuous change, when two points get closer and closer but never converge; this was mastered by calculus, by which we are able to say just where this imaginary convergence is to be found, which is at the junction of somewhere and infinity.

Unfortunately, some things do not have a precise location. Wittgenstein pointed out that words are like this. This is why dictionary definitions are circular, and why the classificatory urge will never be satisfied except in the simplest of cases.

Systems thinking does not concern itself with objects, entities, or anything of the sort but rather the relation-

ships between them, This relieves us of the significant burden of trying to define these entities before we can proceed. We recognize the approximate nature of such definitions and can satisfy ourselves by pointing at them. The recipient of the message will need to decode it, that is to say, interpret the approximate meanings in terms significant to himself. It is sometimes possible to negotiate these decodings with the sender of the message and approach (but unlike calculus, not determine) an agreed-upon message content. Such negotiation is an example of systems, as opposed to Cartesian, thinking.

The field

This is a tensioned cultural space resembling a chunk of the universe dynamically structured by interacting forces. A traversal of such a space by an object carrying forces of its own will be unpredictable. Here lies the work of chaos theory, where small differences create large effects. It is the realm of relationships and vectors replacing the earlier Cartesian one of objects and positions. It is the realm of continuous and unpredictable transformation.

Simple and complex, open and closed systems

A complex system is one which cannot be completely described in its own terms. Mathematics is such a system, as Gődel demonstrated with his incompleteness theorem. Or, as the zen remark goes, mind cannot understand the mind. Complex systems are said to be open. They ar dynamic, incompletely defined, fuzzy at the edges, always in flux. They are systems not of objects but of fields. One of the main tasks of our time, which is at the root of the culture wars which plague us, is to discover ways of working in conditions where everything is relative, when, as is said, it's semiotics all the way down.

Open and Closed Form

CLOSED	OPEN
Design	Avoidance of teleology (design) and a preference for rhizomic, genealogical, path-dependent structures. The primary difficulty here is that an attack on design seems to endanger the values of humanism and the Enlightenment. Explore what can be salvaged, and look at threats to open form from the storytelling notions of "plot" and "evil."
Closure	Avoidance of closure. Parse the concept of "unfinished," ask whether something can be made unfinished on purpose or only left that way, explore the simulated openness of very large or intricate writings, propose that the desire which people have to be done with things springs from a distaste for the messiness of life.
Totalizing	Seek local knowledge, avoid totalizing narratives. Encyclopedic aspirations are linked to the egotistic Romanticism which High Modernism was in reaction to, but which it accepted nevertheless. One difficulty here is that to attack individualism seems to deprivilege expertise.

Transcendental	Seek relativity. If all patterns are local (characterized as thick spots in the Tao), claims to objectivity are unwarranted. High Modernism followed two paths in the attempt to avoid the consequences of radical relativism. The heirs of James and Faulkner on the path of multiple truths ended by aestheticizing experience, while the minimalists (heirs of Hemingway and Beckett) simply abandoned ambitious speech for trivialities.

Certainty	Radical uncertainty, by introducing an arbitrariness which is fatal to patterning, undercuts drama and is thus fatal to storytelling. Is a locally patterned interconnected group of events anything but an arbitrary construction?

Features of complex (open) systems

(1) There are no invariant organizing principles, no fixed experience of oneself and the world. Hence there is a need to organize the unfamiliar and inevitably incomplete. Everything belongs everywhere, selection is always. This helps to explain the importance of affect (to be taken up soon) and the interplay between sameness as difference (Derrida).

(2) The origin and deployment of knowledge: we can have only local knowledge (Clifford Geertz). This requires the concept of the frame, which in social theory is a schema of interpretation which people rely on to understand and re-

spond to experiences. As used in media studies, sociology, and psychology, framing refers to the social construction of a phenomenon (Goffman). A frame defines the packaging of a rhetoric in such a way as to encourage or discourage certain interpretation. These factors insure that explanations are genealogical (Heidegger) and meaning is not independent but a property of family resemblance (Wittgenstein).

(3) Complexity. The mind cannot understand the mind (Godel), cach element of the system is ignorant of the system as a whole, individual elements are solipsistic and embedded, and complexity is not a property of objects (in existentialism, og being) but the product of the mind trying to onderstand itself (existential becoming).

(4) Recursion is non-linear self-organizing and must take into account the interaction between history, current state, and system environment.

(5) Affect (experience): Modes of patterning of experience give rise to the actual, unique, emergent experience at hand. Unformatted perceptions give rise to the feeling of wholeness, or the Tao. The distinction between action and expectation gives rise to the feeling of freedom from intent and purpose (existential freedom). (This schema is based on an article by William J Coburn.[2])

As letterpress practice I once printed a remark by a Chinese sage whose name I have forgotten: "If one does not count on the harvest while plowing, nor on the use of the ground while clearing it, then it furthers one to undertake something." We would also do well to remember Théophile Gautier's formulation of l'art pour l'art in the cross-dressing Mademoiselle de Maupin: art is not for anything. It merely is.

2 William J Coburn, "A World of Systems: The Role of Systematic Patterns of Experience in the Therapeutic Process" *Psuchoanalytic Inquiry* 21:656:677 (2002) The idea of open form comes from the poet Charles Olson.

Implications
for the artists book

In the tradition in which I work, intermediate between fine printing and the constructed book, the central problem is to integrate the textual and visual tracks in such a way as to give the tracks equal importance. Without equal standing, one track or the other is dispensable and is nothing but mere ornamentation; equality demands that each track is incomplete without the other. The recipient of the message cannot decode it. The discussion above, on systems, fields, and complexity suggests some strategies.

I

In a work using open form there is no comprehensive or invariant organizing principle. The consequences of this are several.. Without any fixed experience of oneself and the world, the mind's hunger for a means to understand the unfamiliar will cause it to construct a meaning from any sequence of experiences. In theory, one could couple any image and text. In reality, some couplings are too obscure to be useable to the book artist. The most successful couplings tap a pool of resonant pre-verbal constructs, evoking an unformed response which the mind will speedily organize for itself. What is resonant, unfortunately, is a personal matter (see the

second section on the origin of knowledge) and inaccessible to the artist. Fortunately, as meaning is a property of family resemblance rather than discrete experiences, often a gesture toward some commonly held cultural construct (meme) will be sufficient.

Derrida tells us that meanings are constructed at the nexus of two experiences; when these are not the same we are provoked to seek an explanation. This nexus he called *différance*. Complex experiences produce a complex différance which cannot be understood without deconstructing it into its component parts. Unfortunately, this process of deconstrruction is itself a complex différance which can reach multiple and conflicting conclusions. The book artist can thus rely on family resemblance to suggest to the reader personally meaningful deconstructions

The accompanying caution to the artist is not to attempt to select a preferred interpretation of the conjunction of text and image. This is hard to do. The artist will have a différance of her own which will govern the selection of images. It is in selecting the sequence of images so as to enlarge the possible constructions where the art in the book artist's practice[3] lies.

II

So then. The concept of open form leads inevitably to questions about meaning: how is it that we get knowledge, and having gotten it, what do we do with it? The most useful idea here is that of local knowledge.[4] The necessary attention paid to local knowledge arises from the construction of a society from within using (necessarily) the experiences of its members. In order to be understood, the society can only be interpreted within the frame of (local) experience. Such interpretations are genealogical (the metaphor used by

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic Of Practice,* tr Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 1990)..

4 As taken from Clifford Geertz's work discussed above.

Heidegger) because that is how the society arose, each successive construction derived from its ancestors and elaborated by its progeny. The final complication is Wittgenstein's legacy of *family resemblance*, that meaning is not a property of individual words – more broadly, experiences – but of the interrelations among a family of experiences framed to be similar. Working backward, we can see that the development of families is genealogical, that multiple genealogies are inevitable, and meaning can be understood only locally.

Here lies, for the artist who wishes to combine textual and visual tracks in the way described in the first section, the rationale for the injunction not to favor a particular interpretation of the elements juxtaposed: the result will be a frame which limits the interpretation of the work. The difficulty, as we see here, is that the artist is herself so limited.

The solution is procedural. It requires that images spring from the pre-analytical part of the mind. Here we see the first glimmers of a zen-inflected art. And here we see also a criticism of such aesthetic standards as 'unity of conception,' for *to conceive* is to work in the very analytical, front-brain mode that we are trying to avoid. This is not to say that the sequence of juxtapositions (for we are working here with a book composed of pages which must necessarily be experienced as a sequence) does not have a meaning, but extracting that meaning resembles more the understanding of a koan than an analytical (critical) process.

A formal aesthetics of a book constructed in this way is not possible, and the artist is justified in rejecting any specious criticisms obtained from it.

III

Complexity. One learns from zen practice that the mind cannot understand itself. In Western thought this statement is a

recent insight derived primarily from mathematicians such as Gődel who were striving to prove the consistency of mathematics. But it applies to all complex systems. Open form is a system of such complexity, for if it were self-consistent it would be closed. Local knowledge tells us that in a complex system iach element is ignorant of the whole system. From this point it is easy to conclude that knowledge is embedded – that is, determined by its context, and that context is solipsistic.

This chain of thought lends additional weight to the injuction against the artist's attempt to understand her own work. But it has an additional consequence, which is the necessity of the visual track, the non-analytical component of the whole work, to the full experience of the analytical text. Only the juxtaposition of these two can create the whole work. The presence of the visual track and its equal standing with the textual constrains a too-critical interpretation of the text: it encourages polysemous reading. The presence of the textual track in equal standing with the visual encourages the reader's search for a means to explain the felt urgency which is a product of the juxtaposition of the two but does not exist wholly in either.

This brings to the surface a practical problem: how is the interpenetration of text and visual to be achieved? *Mere* juxtaposition is weak because it suggests to the reader that the visual element is arbitrary, or a subordinate illustration. This is the situation created by the *livre d'artiste* and rejected in "After Moveabe Type." A physical interpenetration which is truly insubordinate will result in a partially illegible text — one which is not *lisible*. Roland Barthes's terminology opposes this property to *scriptible* (writerly). Readability[5] does not challege the reader because it makes the text transparent, whereas a 'writerly' text may explode literary codes and force the reader out of her zone of comfort. When visual

5 In *Le Plaisir du Texte* and later in *S/Z* (1975).

and textual have equal standing, this requires a balance or negotiation between the two, and the artist must understand that his book will not be bedside reading or encourage coffee-table perusal. Serious engagement will be required, and readers not prepared to engage themselves with the work cannot be placated.

How to actually achieve such a negotiation is a technical problem. Shaped text which conforms itself to the blank areas of the visual is one solution. Separating the text and the visual onto overlays is another. Combining the overlays so that one or the other recedes or comes forward in different areas of the page is a third. Repeating the page in a sequence which moves from the dominance of the visual to that of the textual, or vice versa, is yet another. More aggressive media solutions are also possible. The visual might be projected on the walls and ceiling while the written text winds through the projection and is at the same time audible.

I predict that there are no perfect (closed) solutions to this problem, and that the search will be both necessary and unsuccessful. But artists are prepared for that.

IV

Recursion. Complex systems are self-organizing, meaning in our case, as I have said, people will create meaning out of simple juxtaposition. The non-linear element in complex systems means that the consequences of this self-organizing behavior will not be proportional to anything like the "weight" of the organizational action. This is a familiar phenomenon in everyday life, when, for example, a small experience, perception, decision, has surprising consequences, sometimes overturning all of our previous ideas concerning something or other perhaps only tangentially connected to the trigger event.

I have remarked earlier on frames, a rhetorical frame which packages experience so as to encourage or discourage certain construction of it, and a physical frame which packages the rhetoric of a painting to make it accessible as an experience.

I conclude from this that events are not experienced directly, but constructed out of raw perceptions. Indeed, it is thought that, as the neural connections between our sensory organs and the brain have a bandwidth sufficient only to carry a tiny fraction of what we think we encounter, the fine grain of our experiences is actually supplied from memory.

Events will for us be formed, then, by an interaction among personal history, our own state at the time, and the state of the (local) system environment. Moreover, every event brings new information which will add to our history and modify our state, which may in turn have an effect on the system environment. When our already complex experience becomes recursive it is hardly surprising that the outcome of events is unpredictable.

This only marks what every artist knows already, that his best efforts to bring structure, color, line and so forth to bear on some central intent may or may not succeed and that success is not always due to analysis or adherence to rules but something much smaller, adventitious, even inadvertant.

I interpret this to mean that an undue effort to erase the mark of the maker, those little tremors of the hand which introduce imperfections and destroy the integrity of the work, is futile. There is a certain bravado in the magic imitation of machine perfection, and it is true that collectors will often reject ‘defective’ artifacts. We should remember the Japanese respect for the lumpy tea bowl. One does not capture qi by perfect execution. What I seek is a certain ‘rightness’ which is apprehended like the solution to a koan and which evaporates when given thought or voice: a rightness which has nothing to do with anyone’s views on how a thing

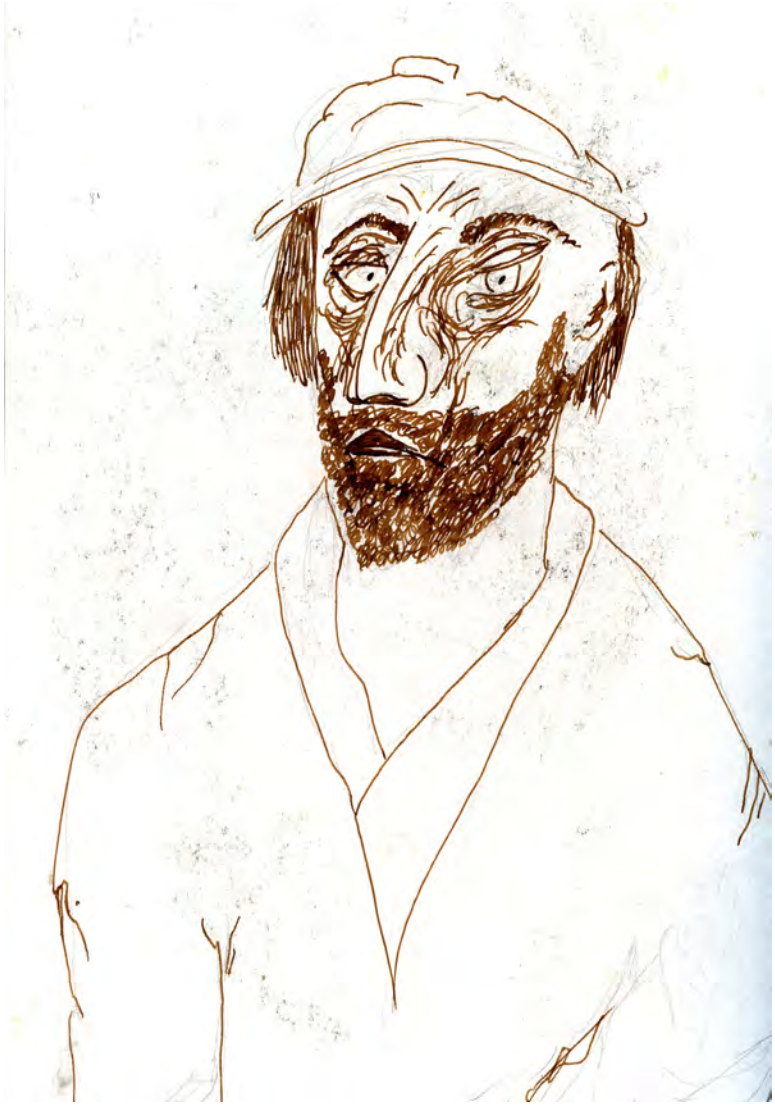
ought to be done.

This does not mean I am advocating indiscipline. We all know that the enormous difference between competent work and the best exists in very tiny refinements which only practice and many competent failures can produce. What should I do if I meet the Buddha? the student asks, and the master replies "Kill him!" The path to qi does not pass through the scriptures.

V

Affect. Unformatted experience is the origin of the feeling of wholeness which is the Tao. We act, and the result is never what we expect; this is the origin of existential freedom. A freedom which throws off the yoke of past and future, which are only excuses to escape the responsibility of our own choices. I repeat that art is not for anything. It simply *is*.

The origin of great art is in simple experiences. The path from simple experience to great art is unknown.



After Qi

Deutwert, Rumpel, and Hänsel confer

So, Rumpel said, begin again please. I don't understand.

Deutwert had been for some time trying to explain this concept of *qi* which he was after, which he thought if rightly applied would open his art to a new aesthetic. The trouble was that Rumpel was never satisfied with any explanation, in which there were as many holes as a cheese. Holes which go nowhere, you will notice, Hänsel would say, for Hänsel was contemptuous of any project of explanation. Hänsel was not an intellectual.

The three friends had been talking for some time, and the discussion was becoming contentious. It was a quiet evening in December. Unusually, it was cool enough for a fire. Deutwert leaned forward in his chair and poured out some more wine. The three of them sat a long time in silence, listening to the crackle of the fire, looking into their wine glasses, and reflecting on what had been said. Companionship, some good wine, and a soft chair will go a long way, Deutwert knew, to answer any argument.

Hot fire, Hänsel observed mildly. He rubbed his chin, which always was stubbled with black and gray hairs.

Yes, said Deutwert. I had some two-year old juuniper logs.

It's not worth laying in firewood, Rumpel agreed. There's so few opportunities.

Would you like to move back? Deutwert offered. I have laidout a small buffet.

The three took their wine to a small table by the corner window, illuminated by a fortuitous full moon. There they found two more bottles of wine, some hummus and pita, a

bowl of fruit, and other things to eat. Hänsel helped himself to a plate; Rumpel took only some grapes and olives, Deutwert nothing.

There was some light talk about recent events, a play Rumpel had seen – an aggressive little thing by a local playwright staged in a room behind the museum. There was a book which Hänsel was reading. Hänsel did not go to plays or museums. Neither did Deutwert, who preferred the public lectures and readings at the universities and local bookstores, but he listened with interest to what Rumpel had to say.

Deutwert put down his wine glass very slowly and carefully, then adjusted it a minute distance with one finger as if he had made a dubious chess move and wished to center the piece a bit on its square.

I wanted, he began in a voice quiet and a little sad, as when one's best efforts have not succeeded, to work out how this *qi* might be found. *Cherchez le qi,* as they say in detective stories. I wanted to work out this path and put the qi problem behind me.

.If you supposed, Hänsel said through a mouthful of food, that you would reach the end of the path you would be guilty of a quite hilarious mistake.Such an outcome is not in the spirit of the zen which gave rise to this notion of qi in the first place.

Well, Deutwert spoke now in a wine-soothed voice, perhaps I chose my words badly. Shall we say that what I want is, a task akin to solving a koan, is to know how to begin?

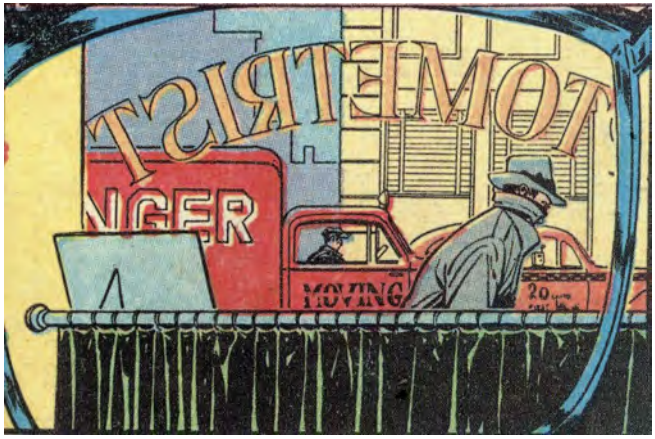
Put one foot, Hänsel said, in front of the other.

I had a small satori, Deutwert responded, and for a time I knew, *here* – he pointed to the base of his skull – what to do. As one knows somehow where the colors go or how the line should turn.

Have you any such awareness now? Rumpel asked with concern.

No, Deutwert admitted.

Hah. Bar talk.



Quite so, Hänsel. What I did not reckon with is that no such thing can be attempted with a plan. The very act of planning will defeat you.

Awkward, Hänsel mumbled, reaching for the bowl of hummus. It was flavored with basil, tomato, and a bit of ser-

rano from Deutwert's garden.

I think we ought to take a look, Rumpel interposed. He was finding the discussion rather abstract – or rather, ungrounded.

Deutwert's studio lay in another part of the house. He offered to later take Hänsel and Rumpel back to show them his latest work.

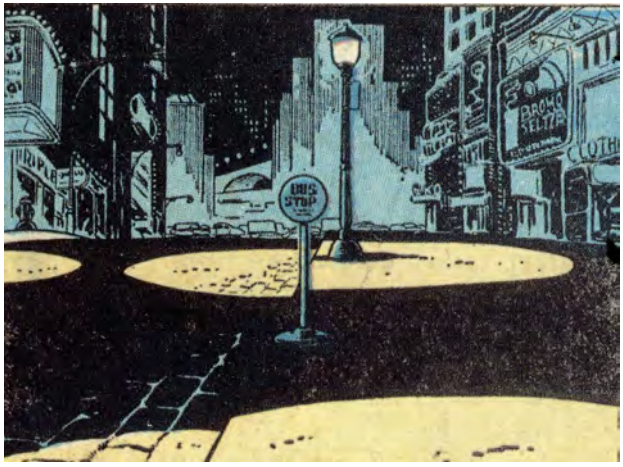
So, he said, opening the new bottle of wine. He set the cork aside for his collection. Over the years he had saved several thousand corks which he stored in burlap bags in the garage.

So let's begin. I said, as you remember, that the origin of qi is in this feeling of wholeness which lies in unformat-

ted experience. When the field forms, it vanishes. Or rather, becomes the lines of tension in the field. One's awareness of the tensed field must be something like a migrating bird's reading of the gravity map. Or so I've been told.

There was a rather good movie on that, Hänsel began, but was interrupted.

Such artists as de Kooning and Gorky, Rumpel said, who made work in an aesthetic genuinely unprecedented, guiding themselves in that way, surely?



That's all I have to say, Deutwent responded curtly. I have gotten no farther. But he reconsidered, going on more mildly. It was a question of dichotomies, he said. Of Modernism and the Postmodern reaction, for example. They are the same project, bound together like a leg and a leg. I needed to break that thrall. Modernism was obsessed with dichotomies of the Kierkegaardian either-or sort, and Postmodernism's answer was Keirkegaardian both-and dichotomies.

This was a game they all could play. Aura. No aura, Rmpel said. Qi, no qi, responded Hänsel. Essential, universal, elemental, found and not made. Earthy, particular, made

and not found. Craft, uncrafted, mere craft. Rigorous, sloppy. Meticulous, good enough. The ground, grounded on. True, maybe true, nothing false. False, maybe false, nothing true.

Crafted, by chance.

Art, artless.

Story, no story, offered Hänsel, the writer of the three.

Philosophy

Deutwent held up his hand, palm outward. It isn't a matter of choosing one or another of these, he said – of being right, avante garde, the esoteric knowledge of the insider. All of them are right. You can choose any or none. They are *irrelevant.*

I see! Hänsel said.

His delight with this insight was genuine.

What matters, he said, is the choosing, not the choice.

Just so. As you know, Hänsel, being a writer – Deutwert paused to consider his words.

The first step, he said carefully, is that one's art is the product of free continuous choice, ungoverened by history or plan. There is a narrative, but no story. It is fruitless to ask what is it about or how does it end. It isn't, doesn't, nothing. There simply *is* — something.

As in symbolic logic, Rumpel said complacently, the existential qualifier. And he drew with one finger in the air a backwards E.

Deutwert nodded. Just so. Coherent stories, incoherent or hopelessly tangled, plotless nonsense are always possible.

These possibilities are the fabric of reality, not the limp stories we tell ourselves to whisk all that away. And by whisking it away we destroy the tensioned field, the feeling of wholeness, and the qi.

Leaving us, Hänsel said, with this puling crap we have now. You can hardly expect that the creative writing programs would teach incoherence. It doesn't sell. And I myself, well – ahem. You were saying?

But Rumpel interrupted. In 1910 we had a new world beginning and a crisis of identity. A century later, has nothing changed? Surely the fears and anxieties of another time are not our fears and anxieties. The existential choice is to stop trying to rescue the old world and to recognize the conditions of the new one.

The Philosopher

The three of them had long been in accord on this way of thinking.

I would say, and Deutwert did say, that contemporary anxieties, among those who are inclined to be anxious – intellectuals, philosopers, the rare educated person, moralists, religious people – is relativism. Not the unconsidered sort as when people say "It's all relative" which they don't believe anyway, but the question of whether knowledge is possible, whether we can say what we mean, whether we can talk – Deutwert indicated the table with a sweep of his hand – whether

Nihilism, Rumpel said, being no philosopher. Solipsism, Hänsel added, feeling professionally threatened.

No, no, my friends. This is not solipsism nor nihilism. This thorough-going relativism which so alarms us posits that general or universal knowledge is not possible, despite the prestigious claims of the scientific realists.

How so?

The existence of *things,* of *stuff,* is not in question. It's whether we regard that as having any importance. We can construct a reality which does not privilege science, as we did in medieval times, as the Chinese have done at times, as the Muslims do now. Not ignore it, you undetstand or be unwilling, Amish-like, to accept the technological benefits of the science which contaminates others –

Hänsel interrupted: Like the sacrificial nun who is selected to go out into the polluting world to transact necessary business.

Exac- Deutwert said, -tly. Now: local knowledge is possible, but that is irremediably contaminated, as the anthropoligists told us sixty, seventy years ago. *Irremediably,* contra Shannon and that ilk, because there was no coherent message in the first place to extract from the noise. Yet knowledge of some sort is necessary to act. The position outlined is an invitation to accept this situation, to make the existential choice which will bring the world into being.

Deutwert paused, holding the others in his gaze. Then he said, with some intensity:

In the face of anger with ideologies, of the rejection of such shibboleths as the sanctity of life, the people ask: how then are we to live? It is no longer a crisis of identity but of conscience, and we are doing nothing. More wine?

It was getting late. Deuwert indicated that they should leave the table and adjourn to his studio. On their way through the darkened rooms Deutwert said that the next step ought to be to *do* something. To make something which captures both experience and that inexpressible sense of wholeness of the Tao. That tension is where the qi of a thing is to be found.

Ought to be possible, Hänsel. But isn't. Or rather, hasn't been.

No, Deutwert admitted, and a tone of regret and sadness returned to his voice.

Is this to be the Unknown Masterpiece? Rumpel said, impish but a little forced.

Deutwert pushed open the door of his studio and switched on a blare of lights.

The three of them wandered about the studio for a time, looking at the finished and unfinised work there.

Yes, said Rumpel sympathetically. I see what you mean. Discouraging.

It's to do with living, Deutwert averred, kicking at something on the floor and knocking it over. It's about humility, imperfection, limited understanding, local horizons. It's about giving up humanity for human beings. It's about substituting practice for ideology, a way for a purpose. *You* try it, damn you!

I am reminded of Blake, Rumpel said.

Blake was hardly humble or limited in his understanding, Deutwert said sarcastically.

Imagine a grand old Gutenberg, Rumpel the historian went on thoughtfully. Gloriously sensual, protean, glad even in the dark of its blackest ink. Endless. Driven by wit and surprise, not logic amd rigor.

Except when it isn't, said Hänsel.

The three of them stood in a huddled group in the studio doorway looking at the ruin of many attempts to capture the qi. Then Hänsel spoke quietly.

Perhaps you should try to recapture the memory of your first books, he said, of their pictures and stories, which you pored over and lived in until the cover was temporarily shut. A single book can't be endless, of course, except to the Borgesian imagination. But it can resist closure and the idea or perfectability. Those anre the doomed enteprises of the past and the handmadens of death.

I think you may have tried to write such a book, Hänsel, Deautwert said gently to his ordinarily rough and peremptory companion..

Yes, he admitted.

And did you succeed?

No.

Perhaps you have kept it to yourself because it wouldn't sell?

No! Hänsel said angrily. And that was that.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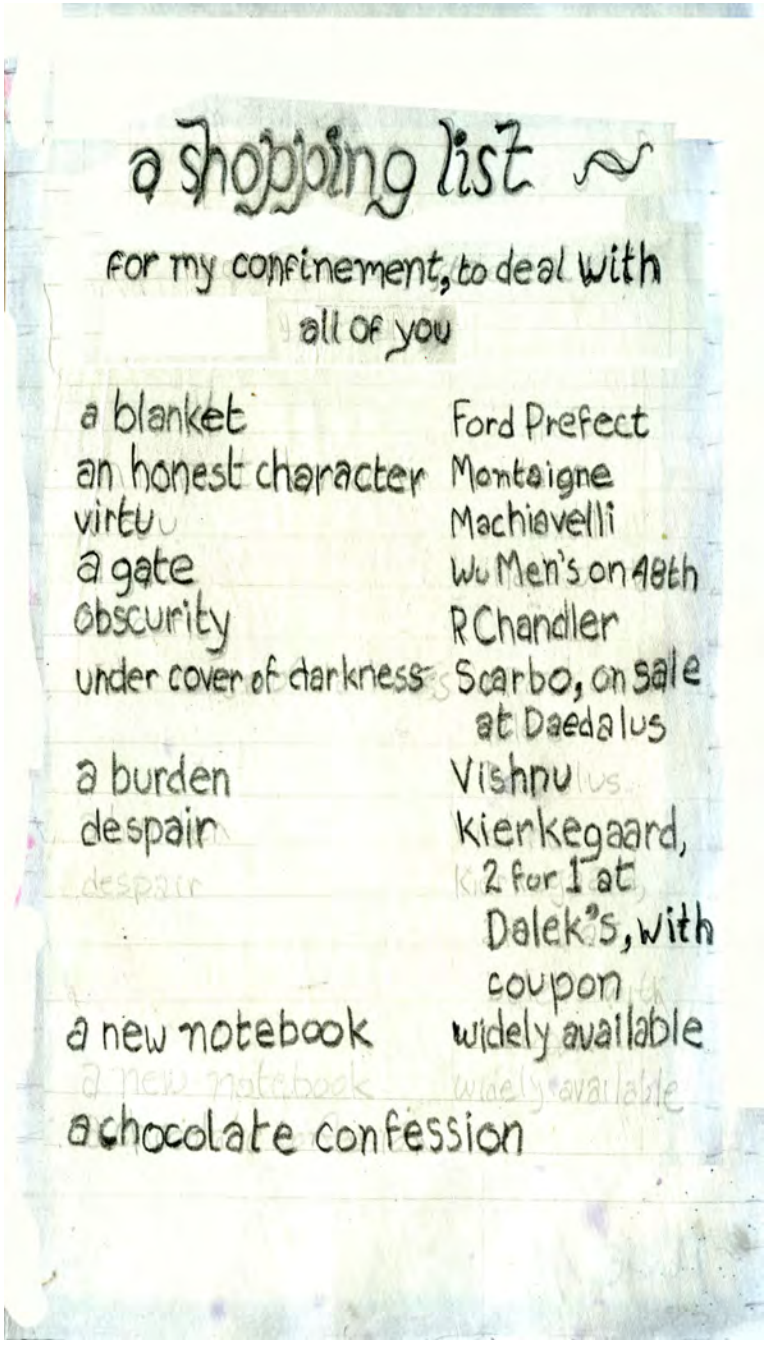
But there's hope, said Rumpel.

No there isn't, Hänsel growled.

The three friends left the studio and Deutwert turned out the light after them.



a shopping list

for my confinement, to deal with all of you

a blanket	Ford Prefect
an honest character	Montaigne
virtu	Machiavelli
a gate	Wu Men's on 48th
obscurity	R Chandler
under cover of darkness	Scarbo, on sale at Daedalus
a burden	Vishnu
despair	Kierkegaard, 2 for 1 at Dalek's, with coupon
a new notebook	widely available

a chocolate confession