This is Not a Book: Melting Across Bounds

Gretchen E. Henderson
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THIS IS NOT A BOOK: MELTING ACROSS BOUNDS

Gretchen E. Henderson

This is a shortened version of the keynote address for the Five Colleges symposium on "Non-Visible and Intangible: Artists Books Respond to E-Books" at Hampshire College on November 8, 2012. To learn more about the exhibition and other works discussed in this article, scan the QR code with a mobile device.

In Clarice Lispector’s novel of metamorphosis titled The Passion According to G.H., she begins with some:

"This is a book just like any other book. But I would be happy if we were read only by people... who know that an approach—to anything whatsoever... must traverse even the very opposite of what is being approached."1 When we see or feel a book—whether an artist book, an e-book, any other book—what assumptions do we bring to that object? To that four-letter word b o o k? Most of us likely can agree on the look of a book: "just like any other book," to borrow Lispector’s words, but to what lengths might we go to suspend our disbelief of what a book is? No antonyms for book exist in the thesaurus (except in verb form: to burn out or cancel), innumerable, first, let us), which steers me back to the verbs to charge, take into custody, schedule, reserve.2 Paradoxically, to buy a book (the book (x) the book is) is to arrest said object in time, to stall its potential evolution. "Not book" provide an abstraction that illuminates what a book is through a process of elimination. A book is not a supersecret jet, a Pentium chip, or a pipe painted by René Magritte. But what is not a book?

In her recent "biography" The Book: The Life Story of a Technology, Nicole Howard writes that books "may not immediately strike a parallel with more familiar technologies. Hundreds of pages seems too big, bearing printed or handwritten material, hardly compares to supersensitive jets and Pentium chips. But in fact, no other technology in human history has had the impact of this invention. Indeed, the book is the one technology that has made all the others possible, by recording and storing information and ideas indefinitely in a convenient and readily accessible place."3 If we start from the premise that the book is not booked, that it is not arrested as an artifact but also functions as a technology, an art, and mutable medium, then we see that books bear a kinetics evolving across time. The book's clockwork may seem harder to pick apart than a watch, but there is something essential that makes the book rich, that has made it function as a portable storage system of information, as an interactive storytelling device, as a poetiques of space, as book and product and process for cultivating and questing literacies and knowledge systems, and so much more, for hundreds of years. The book nests in our psyches as a potent and potential metaphor, animate enough to stir upon cry of its impending death, while being very much alive and tickling. We live surrounded by and connected to so many different kinds of books that, in a sense, each deviance calls attention back to some vibrating Un-object that may not even exist: non-readable and invisible. A kind of phantom book.

This phantom or book haunts any object that calls itself a book, multiplying its potential with each new incarnation. In The Century of Artists’ Books, Johanna Drucker writes:

"All media have their metaphorical associations—painting, writing, sculpting, film and video—each conjures tropes in which the activity has a symbol as well as a pragmatic value. These metaphors attach to the book’s iconic form as well as its cultural significance in so many ways that it is impossible to invoke the book as a form without some of these many phantoms attaching themselves... Artists’ books take up these metaphorical associations from the broader cultural function of the book form, often deliberately turning them into self-conscious gestures or even clichés. The rich cultural history of book forms—

from illuminated manuscripts to volumes of pulp fiction—is part of the language available to artists making books while new forms and firmats are continually emerging."4

This "available" language for artists grows in and out of this shape-shifting history, interlacing with cultural changes, shape-shifting the book in kind. As much as books and their surrogate draw us together, their metaphors play as vital a role in the transition from pulp to pixel, scroll to screen, codes to computer, book to byte, and other alterative logs that practitioners and theorists have charted. By studying this history, we begin to realize that the book—so we think—seems so different now. We can or can’t pick up any rare text and ask: where is the table of contents, or the index, or the copyright page? Is anything missing? How are pagination, chapter breaks, and notes indicated? What is it or is not happening in the margins? What markers bear the identity of author versus printer versus editor? How is the book bound?... and is it more many questions that suggest that books didn’t arise at once or in isolation, but through a dense web of makers and users in a changing world. The farther back in time we go, the more latitude we give ourselves to imagine the future of the book, artistic and otherwise.

Many people reading this have a vital stake in the book: some are book artists or printers, writers, research librarians, catalogers, theorists, programmers, and more, and all of us in one way or another are readers. To bear each of us speak about our notion of the book, individually, might mimic the Indian talk about the blind men and the elephant, where each person touched a different part of the animal—a tail, a trunk, a tail—and came away with a different impression of what an elephant is. Without listening to others, we have a diminished and even erroneous sense of the whole. Disparate disciplines engage with the book, from chemists who work with conservators to determine the properties of silicon or paper, to engineers who work with historians to compare the mechanics of volcanoes and muscular parts to more recent interactive features, to media theorists who place the digital revolution in terms of earlier breakthroughs in print culture, to rare book librarians who invite creative writing students to interact with unique materials and remix them in postmodern twists, to programers and publishers who harness new technologies to extend the materiality of the book. All of these engagements and more don’t take us farther away from the book but rather magnify us toward it kinetec core. Like the failed men touching the elephant, we too are groping around some larger organism that no one of us entirely comprehends. By sharing and questioning together, we can imagine bridges between our perspectives and experiences and skills, between the past and future of the book—through the artists’ book—whose material form grows out and back into its context, engaging textual and visual literacy, mutually interacting to activate the book as a site of artistic practice. Artists’ books in some ways perform the book, remaking while reimagining its inherent form.

To speak about artist’s book in the age of e-books, while keeping with the spirit of exploring what is or not a book, I want to expand upon some of the inherent questions by focusing on one underlying question—What is a book?—addressed through an artist’s book in the "Pulp to Prints" exhibition that uses that very question as its title. What is a book? (minus the letters “x”) is part of the publishing venture of the artist, Paul Chun, called Rodlands Unlimited. This artist’s book consists of a limited hard copy edition of one (that sells for $890, along with two artist proofs), an unlimited e-book edition (for $9.99), at a free downconvertable PDF. Made from loose sheets of hardwood overprints overlaid with text and images, the undone sourcebooks were re-built into material and virtual book forms. Founded in 2001, Rodlands Unlimited describes its mission: "Rodlands Unlimited publishes e-books, limited edition paper books, and artist works in digital and print forms. Historical distinctions between books, files, and artworks are dissolving rapidly. We publish and produce new works by artists and writers that embody the spirit of this emerging dissolution." The words "dissolving" and "dissolution" might suggest that the book once was a...
solution, an answer, or at least, something solid. What is a Book? is far from an answer, self-posed question, part of a series of questions, lacking answers, but the very truth.

To swipe through the eighty-page virtual book is to tangibly skim a number of traditions and invite a wide range of associations, that the book history and varying marriages of text and image. The multi-directional text and images, accompanied by those quasi-typical textual snippets of narrative about print history. As What is a Book? is the book, the very title of this central novel, we can see that in this book, its form, it is no longer a book, having less reflection as a book to enable a "body" to the reader, a "life shared with a book," an important kind of focus with "time as a medium." The book thus becomes a space where both maker and reader become extensions of the book, participating in that "zone of activity" between which an equally productive negative space that enables rethinking the book: by what it is not. Not just the book. The reader does not become the reader as a form of "time shared with a book." This (what) suggests not only the spine, the head, and the book of the book itself, but also the writer and reader, as a form of "time shared with a book." The writer, character, and warbrain-controlled communication and entertainment. Her central question is a quieter quality in a form of "time shared with a book," where narrative is transferred via brain waves, where narratives will be, and then—what as it does—letting go of the question: What will happen to us?

We have no idea what the future of the book holds, art and otherwise, and it raises interesting and important questions about us, about our culture, and about our humanity. That is another talk entirely, and romanticizing the book doesn't allow us to sit back, relax, and read books. Instead, it asks us to think of the book as a form of "time shared with a book." What will happen to us? What will happen to our culture, and about our humanity? Another talk entirely.

In poor Series (2011–12), Francesca Panetta engages with what she calls "sensitized collaborations" with print issues of ArtForum and her own readers, engaging in the incarnate journals to each other's pages appearing in the present, with part of the cover intact and recognizable, appearing next. Similarly, in More in the Matter of the Bag (2009, by Jeff MacVittie-a book, better than reading the stack reveals the pages that matter -introduction. Page-turning forces a focus away from the text, as the cover pages reveal the shape of the distant field. While not digital books, apart from their online exhibition announcements and portfolio presentations, these alternate books serve as reminders that every tool or a book artist uses is a kind of technology, even when not driven by digital chips. The presentation of digital surrogates or representations also become important for archival, cataloguing, and access purposes, since artists' books often defy genre and may be limited editions or one of a kind.
forms with new content, exploring our changing world and engaging with the changing nature of the book. Many questions remain. Preservation of digital data is a major issue, as is the question of how to incorporate technologies that may become defunct. We will tend to find ways to these technologies gracefully degrade, or will we risk our coded comments and error messages become another layer of reading? What alternatives have we not even begun to anticipate? Throughout this evolution, we will need new aesthetics: artists' books become highly abstract, often in film, that confused catalogues, and that raise fascinating questions that in turn can be harnessed to expand the possibilities for artists' books, e-books, any books.

In her article "Artist's Books in the Digital Age," published fifteen years ago, "an understanding of why the use of computers in art books is hardly a new phenomenon. She charted preceding decades that witnessed a range of experimentation with all forms of production technology, from silkscreen to letterpress, offset and beyond, stretching farther back in time and moving forward toward hypernet and more digital realms. She describes how "artists for whom the book is a primary medium have always been interested in technological advance," and that this affects notions of authorship, readership, production, distribution, originality, materiality, and an array of other considerations. Those who are investigating electronic books, Lovsky describes, tend to include those who wish to better reflect contemporary information, sensibilities, where a work's content and its interaction can and help understand "living social relations it is in turn with the appropriate artistic and technical energy of its time."

By drawing attention to what books are and are not, the practice of making and thinking about artists' books and e-books invites play and provocation in that interior space where books—and where we re-consider our own narratives. Unmaking the book becomes a way to reflect upon what is happening, to participate and follow these questions into the future, learning from past practices to imagine possible futures, working within and around and beyond the bounds of inherited notions. As book artists incorporate different technologies, we will continue to ask how future books might look and feel and act. As strategies of reading, of writing, and the book itself dealing with these activities—evolve, they will influence the future of books, artistic and otherwise. Sticky is as it seems, the book as we know it has assembled over time to the technological we now hold in our hands, and it reflects or anticipates something that emerged fully formed. While it may seem fixed, it is merely frozen, with the possibility to meld with...

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the concept of the melting book and the frozen book hits home more metaphorically, also literally. The hurricane destroyed the majority of books housed in the New York Public Library at Printers Matter: over 9,000 books, along with many other printed and equipment.

The Printers' Matter Archive also was severely damaged, leading to the loss of important documentation on artists' books. This new book and a record of Printers Matter's own history since its founding in 1976. According to guidelines from the Museum of Modern Art and other cultural institutions, the recommendation for artists' books is to keep the books damaged books and works on paper as fireproof as possible. The book by Franz Kafka once said, "A book must be the one for the frozen we initiate us with." Paul Chan has adapted this analogy, saying, "Because we have to survive, we preserve ourselves, fire ourselves, and then find ways to break loose again." The book is a narrative of the book, or to imagine how emerging technologies will affect the shapes, scopes, and sensory dimensions of artists' books; history invites this dissolution and reincarnation, begging and engaging with what's around us, to help shape that change. Looking back at this book this maladroit title invites me to look forward, to know that the book is resilient, adaptable, versatile, dynamic and alive enough to have a gravitational pull strong enough to pose both a promise and a threat, even as we are complete in its making and unravelling.

While many might think of the book as a frozen block of pages, artists' books and e-books are actively engaged with melting the book—not into extinction, not into nothingness, not into inertness—rather melting the book into its future forms.

NOTES