

# A Few Introductory Thoughts

## On vanity (publishing)

This book, rich with reflections and experiments on the interplay between pixel and paper, constitutes a valuable and timely survey of fast-changing modes of making, reading, archiving and disseminating 'on the page' work.

In the 1960s making a book became a political as much as a creative gesture and independent publishing evolved as a holistic and critical practice supported by a fluid network. Artists often wrote essays and manifestos in their attempt to articulate or exchange ideas, demonstrating the kind of critical self-awareness that academic scholarship requires. Yet for some absurd reason, the academic definition of an artist book is 'vanity publishing', a derogatory label often synonymous with low standards of excellence that is hardly justified. Especially when you consider the big business in peer reviewed academic journals that are written by and for academics. The process of internal evaluation involved is as much about vanity as it is about knowledge since it may be considered as a way of mutually validating one's research and title. Furthermore for the past few decades, it is often within an academic context that the critical history and practice of the codex has been kept alive and up to date (Professors Johanna Drucker and Katherine Hayles are key references in the history of publishing). Many institutions in Europe and America have impressive collections of artists' books and are linked directly or indirectly to small presses. In England, CFPR (Centre for Fine Print Research) is based at The University of the West of England in Bristol and RGAP (Research Group for Artists Publications) initially started within Derby University. In America, VSW (Visual Study Workshop) has links with Rochester University and the Art Institute of Chicago is the home of the Joan Flasch collection. Editors and distributors of conventional publishing could equally be accused of vanity in the way they have become the gatekeepers of artistic excellence. A select few decide what gets printed and disseminated, and as such what will in time become part of history, and this largely based on commercial or financial concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> The BdeM hat label and collection (2007–current) is 70 percent wool, 30 percent adrenaline, and 100 percent original. [www.ewaeckerle.com/projectbox/bdem](http://www.ewaeckerle.com/projectbox/bdem)

<sup>2</sup> bookRoom is a research cluster managing a number of interrelated activities. [www.thebookroom.net](http://www.thebookroom.net)

<sup>3</sup> Carrión, Ulises. (1980). *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: Void Distributors. p. 25

<sup>5</sup> Bodman, Sarah. (2012). *New Pages: Celebrating the Book as a Democratic Multiple in a Variety of Twenty-First-Century Forms*. p. 124

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, Andreas. (2012). *The Speed of Books*. p. 130

<sup>7</sup> Soulellis, Paul. (2012). *Weymouths*. p. 102

<sup>8</sup> Bohr, Marco. (2012). *Appropriation, Surveillance and Voyeurism in Self-Published Photobooks*. p. 80

As part of this discussion I find myself wearing two hats, so to speak: that of an academic leading a thriving research cluster and that of an artist. One who literally knits hats<sup>1</sup> as part of her practice and uses the book to combine and share the various trends of her conceptual and performative work. I have always considered these two positions to be mutually inclusive, yet this has not always proven straightforward since most artists and academics coexist but rarely venture beyond a polite acknowledgement of their differences.

It has been one of bookRoom's<sup>2</sup> missions since its beginning in 2004 to foster working links between artists, academics and those in industry. This was part of the rationale in holding the BOOKLIVE! Symposium from where the pages of this book were first initiated. In trying to find commonality between the canons of the codex and the criteria of good scholarship it is worth referring to early defining texts by artists such as Ulises Carrión who wrote 'Book Works are books that are conceived as an expressive unity, that is to say, where the message is the sum of all the materials and formal elements.'<sup>3</sup> Or to the Mauricio Nannucci text piece *book is everywhere*<sup>4</sup> included here. Both clearly achieve, in a freer form perhaps, the rigour expected of serious research. Many bookRoom projects have managed to successfully pass the 'peer reviewing' threshold of excellence while also managing to exist as artefacts which are exhibited, reviewed and bought by various private or public collections (V&A, Tate Britain, Women Library, Poetry Library, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris), thus doubly avoiding the dreaded label of *vanity publishing*.

With the recent digital mutation of printing and the birth of print on demand (POD), Blurb, Lulu and other online platforms have facilitated book production beyond what was imaginable in the 1960s but to such an extent that knowledge or understanding of the industry is no longer required. There are no more gatekeepers since it would go against digital printers financial interest to provide editing control. As a result photographers and writers are now able to turn into books their novels, poetry, diaries, family albums, portfolios and other photo stories. Commercial or artistic merit is not always the aim, self-published authors may simply be after some form of validation or gratification of their creative or technical abilities. POD has transformed the heavily-protected book into what Sarah Bodman calls a 'democratic multiple'<sup>5</sup> and, as such, has also benefited those who are concerned with artistic and commercial merit, allowing them to produce and disseminate their work with little investment – or to explore the creative potential of all aspects of digital publishing. Some are represented here; Andreas Schmidt<sup>6</sup> and Paul Soulellis<sup>7</sup>, others like Mishka Henner and Joachim Schmid are discussed in depth by Marco Bohr.<sup>8</sup>

Both the artist and the academic in me would agree that, whether academic, commercial or artistic, published or self published, every

book should only come to be once careful consideration has been given to one question. (Why) does it need to be a book? And it is the answer to this question that will determine the amount of vanity involved.

## Is it a book?

Generally speaking a book is a container of data, itself the result of a technological revolution. It is the invention of the printing press that made it so much part of our everyday. Why would we think that the move to digital could destroy it? Did photography kill painting? Or television, cinema? The technologies of production and dissemination have changed rapidly, not the object itself. As Umberto Eco wrote 'Alterations to the book as object have modified neither its function or its grammar for more than 500 years, the book is like the spoon, once invented it cannot be improved.'<sup>9</sup>

We are in a transitional phase. Through a process of trial and error, experimentation and reflection, analogue and digital processes are slowly finding their place and ways to cooperate even. Heidegger writes in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology* that technology is both a means to an end and a human activity.

Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. [...] So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain held fast in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology. [...] Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.<sup>10</sup>

Digital technology is a means to an end; an end that can be a book or an e-book – Sarah Bodman speaks of 'e-paper as opposed to paper'.<sup>11</sup> An e-book has no physical boundaries; it is not a book. It is a virtual container of data contained in a three-dimensional hardware object, which often emulates the form of a book. The same content can equally be found in one or other form, the same way that a film can be viewed in the cinema or on a various smaller digital screens.

The mind has had centuries to become familiar with the book object; it doesn't know yet how to handle e-books. It is impossible for eyes or fingers to reach beyond the flatness of the screen image,

<sup>9</sup> Eco, Umberto & Carrière, Jean-Claude. (2011). *This is Not the end of the Book*, London: Harvill Secker. p. 4

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, Martin. (1977). *The Question Concerning Technology*. In: Krell, David (ed.). *Basic Writings*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 288-317

<sup>11</sup> Bodman, Sarah. (2012). *New Pages: Celebrating the Book as a Democratic Multiple in a Variety of Twenty-First-Century Forms* p. 122

<sup>12</sup> Helgason Gallagher, Sharon. (2012) *What Shall We Want to Have Called a Book?* p. 12

to flick through content or reach the end. A different form of reading is required, one that would provide a virtual compass for digital navigation to allow the mind to wander without becoming disorientated, and above all one that could limit the risks of information overload. The essence of the book is not the book itself or the technologies that were used to produce it, analogue or digital. For an essence to be released from the content of pages, it needs surfaces to rub against and a certain physical choreography of eyes, fingers and mind to unlock it. Sharon Helgason Gallagher, in her keynote speech, spoke of the 'extraordinary symphony of movement that is a great art book, photo book or artists' book'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Mathieu, Didier. (2012). *From site to (web)site.* p. 20

Perhaps the e-book can learn from its ancestor, as it has already done with the Kindle and other digital readers, but it cannot replace it entirely. In the 1960s the artists' book had to redefine itself and chose to place itself willingly 'in the margins', (Didier Mathieu<sup>13</sup>) of its commercial and institutionalised other. It is now the turn of the e-book to find its place. It has to evolve from the unfathomable 'technological monsters' that Joan Fontcuberta talked about in his presentation. It remains to this day untamed and somewhat untamable, lacking interiority, unable to provide comfortable boundaries for our eyes and mind to hold on to and unable to release much digital essence.

<sup>14</sup> MAPP (2011), digital publisher founded in London by Michael Mack, John Koh and Jean-Michel Dentand. MAPP has just published another successful e-book NYLPT by Jason Evans, a great exercise in randomness bringing together Jason's in camera double exposure street photographs with an evolving soundtrack.

Yet there are some interesting experiments suggesting that the e-book is on its way to become a virtual 'concept object' with its own structure, history and economy. A successful example would be *Titanic Calling* developed by MAPP Editions<sup>14</sup> to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Titanic's sinking, using the extensive record of wireless transmissions in the Marconi Archives at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. We can witness the disaster on screen via the radio messages sent by all involved, which are synchronised to the slow progress of the boat on a map of the Atlantic, from collision to the rescue of the lucky survivors. The bringing together of visual, verbal and geographical data creates a virtual space-time continuum for the inevitable unraveling of the chain of events. The effect is mesmerising and could never be achieved via the pages of a book.

## This BOOK is ALIVE!

The aim of the BOOKLIVE! Symposium was to stimulate a dialogue on the current and rapid 'transforming' of the book – instead of the virtual disintegration that many have been complaining about for many years, often confusing the various industries and power structures surrounding the book with the object itself. There is no doubt that the publishing industry is sometimes struggling to

integrate the digital age. Yet, as a result, the book has had to become more valuable, as a way to compete with the rise of POD, but also because it has been declared, rightly or wrongly, an endangered species.

We were aiming for an active and optimistic looking ahead rather than a passive, nostalgic or distressed looking back. We thought that academics, artists and industry people who rarely have the occasion to come together except on a competitive or commercial level, could gain a lot by sharing their various understanding and experiences of contemporary publishing. The number and quality of responses to the call for papers was overwhelming and we were lucky to attract some of the key players in the field, both on and off stage, as well as some fantastic durational performances and readings including the full twelve hours of *Empty Words*, John Cage's epic work on the 'demilitarising' of language.<sup>15</sup>

Right from the start, heated discussions took place – often overflowing from presentations and into the night – leading to fruitful connections in the true spirit of collaboration and exchange normally associated with independent publishing. A few of the outcomes include, Stefan Szczelkun donating his complete 'working press'<sup>16</sup> imprint to bookRoom, prompting a new research project on digital archive and oral history. Sam Francis, Arnaud Desjardin and Stefan Szczelkun sold their publications to the Tate collection; Didier Mathieu was introduced to the work of Joachim Schmid by Marco Bohr; Andreas Schmidt and Joachim Schmid are now represented in the centre des livres d'artistes (cdla) collection and included in the Spring 2003 exhibition. I was even invited by Joan Fontcuberta to write a review for Issue 003 of *Aperture PhotoBook Review*.

It is a great pleasure revisiting all the contributions to the symposium before committing them to print. Some projects have evolved others have been concluded. In time we will be able to tell how far or close we were to grasping the essence of the e-book or dismissing the demise of the printed page. What is important is that the content of these pages and those responsible for them, as much as those reading it, keep the debate alive.

<sup>15</sup> Cage, John. *Empty Words* (1973-1974) performed by Sylvia Alexandra Schimag, produced by Wandelweiser. 'John Cage said in a radio interview, in August 1974: 'So what we're doing when we make language un-understandable is we're demilitarizing it, so that we can do our living' p. 162

<sup>16</sup> 'working press' books by and about working class artists' 1986-1996: unfunded self-publication imprint started by Stefan Szczelkun and Graham Harwood in 1985

# Amanda Couch

## Reflection in Digestion

Durational performance for  
BOOKLIVE! international symposium,  
Saturday 9 June 2012, 09:00 to  
19:30, Keyworth Lobby, London  
South Bank University.

*Reflection on Digestion* is an epic work. As book, it is nine metres, folded back and forth into an eighteen-page concertina form. Its covers are of undyed calfskin with gold hot foil embossed lettering, and its pages are made of 410gsm white Somerset satin paper relief printed from photo polymer plates.

It is book but it is also performance: 37 hours of scribing in the form of *Reflection in Digestion*, which took place on the second day of the BOOKLIVE! symposium and four subsequent days in the Wimbledon College of Art library.

The bodily act of the scribe originated the manuscript, which was then transferred and translated through digital and mechanical technologies with bookRoom press at UCA Farnham, and then hand-made, to produce an edition of three book works.

The scribed text stems from a body of knowledge encountered whilst on a post-graduate course in education. Writing, knowledge and the body are explored, and the metaphors of reflection and digestion consider process, processing, and ways of knowing and becoming. 'Digestion' stems from the word 'digest', which can both refer to an arrangement of written work; and to the processing or making sense of knowledge and experience, as well as to break down and absorb food.

<sup>1</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. (2002).  
*The Myth of Digestion In:  
Formation of the Scientific Mind.*  
Manchester: Clinamen.

<sup>2</sup> Hillman, David. (1996).  
*Hamlet, Nietzsche and Visceral  
Knowledge In: The Incorporated  
Self: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on  
Embodiment.* O'Donovan-Anderson  
(ed.). London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gaston Bachelard asserts in his essay *The Myth of Digestion* that bodily awareness, and in particular digestion, 'lies at the root of the myth of inwardness.'<sup>1</sup> This 'interiorisation' helps us to postulate an 'interiority.' Nietzsche, as argued by David Hillman in *Hamlet, Nietzsche and Visceral Knowledge*<sup>2</sup> speaks specifically of 'entrails' and his sensitivity to them' as a means with which to understand the world. The body, particularly the innards, are 'a principle of interpretation[...] philosophy as a kind of vivisection.'

*Reflection on Digestion's* concertina configuration makes reference to the image of the digestive system and connotes the meaning of the words 'reflection' and 'reflexive' coming from the sense of a physical