

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.

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

² 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.'¹ This 'interiorisation' helps us to postulate an 'interiority.' Nietzsche, as argued by David Hillman in *Hamlet, Nietzsche and Visceral Knowledge*² 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



and metaphorical bending or turning back paralleling the visual image of the gastrointestinal tract with its nine metres of twists and turns crammed into the body's cavity.

Alimentary undulations are further mirrored in the loops and garlands of the handwriting itself which is a joined up text, each word tied to the previous, the next, and to the subsequent line, so that it is a kind of *Boustrophedon*, a continuous line running from left to right and right to left from the beginning of the book to the end. This continuous script refers to Latin texts from the early Christian era, when there were no spaces between words in a manuscript. In my *scripto continua*, the language is not easily legible enabling the lettering to hover between word and image, content and form.

The performative aspect of *Reflection in Digestion* is also embedded in the experience of the audience. It reconnects the reader to a corporeal relationship with the book and reading, in that they are required to negotiate the monumental, physical nine-metre form of the book, as well as the awkward image-text within, reconstituting a relationship arguably severed by the invention of the printing press.

The body and metaphors of digestion are deeply embedded in the history of the book, according to Mary Carruthers. Reading, she writes in *The Book of Memory*³, was 'a bodily performance' rather than simply the decoding of words on a page. 'The medieval scholar's relationship to his texts is quite different from modern objectivity. Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud'.

Reflection on Digestion is funded by a
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³ Carruthers, Mary. (1997).

Reading With Attitude:

Remembering the Book.

In: *The Book and the Body.* Frese and

O'Brien O'Keeffe (eds.). Notre Dame:

University of Notre Dame Press.



Above: bookRoom launch and reading of *Reflection in Digestion* at the Small Publishers Fair, London 2012.