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Materiality and the Future of the Book

With the development of Gutenberg's printing press in 1451 and successive improvements thereafter, the book as we know it became the standard for communicating ideas, sharing stories, and archiving information. With the advent of new technologies, however, the idea of the book expands beyond the archetypal codex to include multiple designs or renderings. These new experimental or artistic books highlight the materiality of their medium, bringing design and content together toward greater expressiveness.

In the same way that electronic literature allows for the expression of ideas that cannot be represented in print form, so too do experimental books remediate their genre. Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs*, for example, could not find a place in print; its design is integral to its message. The specificities of sound, moving images, and phonetic representations come together in the electronic environment in ways that cannot be replicated using different media. What Charles Bernstein calls "the value of using a medium to do what can only be done in that medium" is a matter of discerning which media to use and employing its specificities with artistic intention (Bernstein 514).

For N. Katherine Hayles, media specific analysis (MSA) is essential from the reader/user's point of view, for interrogating the material specificities of a work yields insight to authorial intention. More important than intention, perhaps, is the reality that "a medium is a mediation constituted by what it does, for whom, and how" (Bernstein 514). Post-literate reader/users must be adept at interpreting medium as well as content. In this hyperliterate hybrid age, "any form of writing is a kind of notation and any form of reading is a type of performance" is thrown into sharp relief; reading in the digital age is a continual performance of Hayles' media specific analysis (Young 25). Writing itself "has its end not in a fixed and final text but rather in a series of alphabetic and performative versionings;" readers, then, must engage in the performance (Bernstein 509).

Writing in the modern age, with the multiple media available, allows writers and artists to choose between and among media for specific design purposes. As Keith Smith notes, "The type of book cannot be arbitrarily chosen and then contents stuck into it. The binding and display will alter the contents and one type of book will allow a better development of an idea than another" (Smith 63). To construct a text is to consider its form as well as its content, and to determine which form best allows for the emergence of intended (and unintended) meaning. When writers focus on this aspect of their material production, the work of reading changes and the first step to reading becomes acquaintance with the physical object (Smith 62).

With particular attention paid to a book's materiality, artists have begun developing artifacts wherein a "book [is] created as an original work of art" (Drucker 376). In focusing explicitly on its materiality, and artist's book "integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues" (Drucker 376). The artist's book exemplifies the principles of media specific analysis, as "artists' books are almost always self-conscious about the structure of the book as a form" (Drucker 376). Artist's books, in their focus on appropriate materials and expressive design, are designed for exhibition rather than mass production and in that way differ from the common trade paperback prevalent today.

The artist's book transcends the realm of what is possible in mass-produced print as a form of intermedia that combines art forms in new ways (Drucker 381). In an artist's book, "attention to materials, their interactions, and the content bound within the book is an integral feature of a book" (Drucker 384). That the artist's book at times takes the form of a print codex is not incidental, for "an artist's book has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason *to be* and *to be a book* in order to succeed" (Drucker 384). The

artist's book, aware of its function as a print text, transforms the medium by extending beyond the limits of the mass-produced codex.

The book, in its traditional mass-produced form, reflects the cultural changes instantiated by a shift to alphabetic writing technology. In cultures practicing primary orality, speech was necessarily formulaic in order to aid the memory of both rhetor and audience (Ong). However "if you write something down," as we do in modern times, Bernstein notes, "then you don't have to remember it and you don't have to write it in a way that will help you to memorize it" (Bernstein 506). Through the practice of writing, "the alphabet provided novel, non prosodic, means of textual organization" (Bernstein 505). With the advent of alphabetic technology, "the immemorial possibilities of textual writing put the memory in the text rather than using the text as an aid to memory" as in the Greek *hypomnemata* or copybook (Bernstein 507; Foucault 363). The practice (or discipline) of writing profoundly changes structures of thought, for "alphabetic writing makes its own particular marks on language, allowing for greater levels of abstraction and reflection" (Bernstein 508).

The relationship between speech and writing endures. Using the alphabet, a system of *WYSIWYH*, or "what you see is what you hear" was developed (Bernston 504). The alphabet and, later, the book, functions as a "machine arresting flow of speech" (McAffery 18). Yet while "the dialectic... is between book and voice" (Rothenberg 16), we know also that alphabetic transcription of thought and speech "is a matter of morphing more than storing" (Bernstein 508). To transfer thought and speech to alphabetic text is a remediation of the voice, one that necessarily distorts and influences the final product, for "to capture is also to misrepresent" (Bernstein 505). Despite the alphabet's impact on language and thinking, however, "alphabetic technology does not replace oral technology anymore than cars replace walking" (Bernstein 508).

The dialectic relationship between writing and speech is conducted through all written language, as readers interpret alphabetic marks and signs using internal speech. Even in unfamiliar languages, signs take on meaning when attached to aural sound. Xu Bing, in his experimental work *Tianshu*, attempts to interrogate the use of signification "to produce a '*tianshu*,' a meaningless writing, an inscription of the meaninglessness of Chinese culture. Paradoxically he produces a work which has transcultural resonance and translatability" (Cayley 501). Even when the marked specificities of understood language are absent, meaning is made through the use of writing as signifiers of speech and language. While the "*Tianshu* was produced as a text aiming explicitly to subvert *all* lexical meaning," viewers experienced the work as *meaningful* through the signifying function of language itself (Cayley 498).

We enter an age now where the dialectic has expanded beyond writing and speech, as "we are now living in a period of overlaid oral, alphabetic, and photo/electronic culture" (Bernstein 512). Graphics have a historically significant place in the book, as evidenced in Ezra Pound's work *The Cantos*. As an experimental book of the early twentieth century, Jerome McGann notes:

The *Cantos* summons up the power and authority of the most elementary forms of language, its systems of signifiers, and it apprehends these signifiers as historical artifacts. The graphic presentation of Pound's books is thus made an index of their aims. Through book design Pound makes an issue of language's physique, deliberateness, and historicity. (McGann 232)

And while writers can employ graphics in the print genre, how much greater a degree of expressiveness can be expected "in this age of photographic and electronic reproduction [which] is fundamentally postalphabetic in that it no longer relies on scripts to store and transmit information" (Bernstein 512). With hyperliteracy and the manipulation of digital media increasingly prevalent, "alphabetic culture [is] soon to be eclipsed (but not replaced) by photographic, electronic, and digital media" (Bernstein 512).

What becomes of the book in the digital age is an emerging phenomenon, one that proves promising based on the development of hypertext and electronic literature (Hayles). The experience of reading/using/interpreting these works grows richer with each (re)mediation as we internalize the reality that "textuality is a palimpsest: when you scratch it you find speech underneath. And when you sniff the speech, you find language under that" (Bernstein 516). In the digital age, modern books will include screenfold texts (Young 28), bodies tattooed in poems (Young 31), *dos a dos* techniques (Smith 60), and

use of transparencies (Smith 64) but will also extend beyond these mediums to explore the possibilities of digital media.

In this hyperliterate digital era, “postliteracy does not mean that literacy is no longer necessary but rather that it is no longer sufficient” (Bernstein 516). The practices of reading and writing as embodied in the book, then, are no longer sufficient for the expression of ideas made possible by advanced media techniques. The materiality of information retains its importance in the digital age, for “the book *is* as old as fire & water, & thought *is* made in the mouth—as it is also in the hands & lungs & with the inner body. If that was our condition in the beginning, it will be also in the end” (Rothenberg 13). While it may be true that “everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book” (Phillips 430), what is meant by the word *book* will continue to expand until it represents the reality of “the world [as] the One, the Only Book (Khlebnikov 201).

Experimental Book Description

While Artist's Books and electronic literature highlight the materiality of their medium, popular literature is too often enclosed within the confines of a codex that contributes little to the message of the work. Memoir, a genre typically associated with stories of transformation and personal growth, typically appears in traditional paperback or hardcover books marked primarily by uniformity: the material of the page, the front, colors, and other design elements are consistent throughout. Tone, language, and style rarely change as the memoir evolves. We have a message about transformation forced into the confines of a uniform, immutable space.

The book format, despite its limitations, does provide a canvas for the creative expression of narrative that takes into account the symbiosis between the medium and the message. Instead of taking the fixed, pre-packaged, boring space of the traditional trade paperback with only cover art to differentiate it from any other text, why not experiment with space that reinforces the message?

A subcategory of the memoir genre, the weight loss memoir provides ample opportunity for experimentation with physical embodiment of the message in the material. Approaches to the weight loss memoir vary widely, as should the finished product of the work. The following are ways that memoirists could use design elements to bolster and extend the message of their work:

- Weight loss memoirs will usually have some variation on the theme of finding peace and acceptance with one's body: sometimes this takes the form of the "real me" emerging as weight drops, or of weight loss, regain, and body acceptance. Regardless of the memoirist's specific journey to body acceptance, there usually is dissonance followed by resolution. To demonstrate that progression in the medium, it would make sense for the opening font to be slightly out of focus, or inconsistent, or lopsided, or out of balance to achieve visually that sense of dissonance that comes with lack of stasis between body and mind.
- In *A Book of the Book*, McCaffery writes, "the most comprehensive definition of narrative would be simply our sequential life experience" (17). We know, however, that in a memoir some events are more significant than others—there are defining moments in our lives, events that stand out, some more so than others. Why, then, must all pages in a book be the same size? Why not have large pages for important events, smaller pages for less important events or even better—smaller pages for those events that are so poignant so as to boil down to a major, life-changing motto. In Allen Zadoff's memoir *Hungry* for example, he writes about his revelation that "my body is none of my business." That belongs on a page that highlights its importance. It's pithiness. It's centrality to his story. The page upon which this revelation rests should be different, should be unlike every other page. I suggest different page sizes are one way to signal that different events/reflections/experiences ought to be represented in ways that signify their place in the overall story.
- Weight loss memoirs ubiquitously include the infamous "before" and "after" photos while the work itself is completely centered on progression, a "journey," a series of daily decisions and constant work. Weight loss is never immediate. To condense a *process* into two photos of dramatic difference when the reality is minute change that is often imperceptible on a daily basis poorly represents the content of the text. What makes more sense, particularly in memoirs that use a journal or diary structure, is to include *many* photos along the way—this means photos on pages 11 and 18 might be seemingly indiscernible. But photos on pages 11 and 196 might show drastic change by comparison: this would be far more realistic, far more representative of the actual weight loss process than dramatic before/after photos that condense vast amounts of time into the space of one page.
- Another central theme of weight loss memoir is the notion that weight itself is only one facet of the story. Self-perception, identity, care of one's self, one's place in society are wrapped up in issues of weight and body image. For books to proceed linearly when the psychological process is

recursive fails to align with the content of the work. One way to resolve this issue is to represent the reoccurrence of thought using transparency or shaded words or phrases repeatedly throughout the work. Frances Kuffel's memoir *Passing for Thin*, for example, includes a story about a childhood Thanksgiving wherein a family member calls Frances "fudge face." Later in the memoir, after losing weight, Frances relates that her self-perception is still of her former self, that she struggles with identity. To have the words "fudge face" floating on those pages, transparent underneath those thoughts on identity, would signal for the reader a memory of the author's childhood experiences, and demonstrate through design the reoccurrence of those thoughts later in the memoir.

Attention to the materiality of the medium would allow memoirists and publishers to relate elements of the narrative within the structure of the book. The slow and gradual change, the impact of some events and revelations compared to others, the reoccurring questions of identity—all these common elements of the weight loss memoir are contradicted by the uniform, even paperback book format. Attention to materiality ought not be limited to artists' books and electronic literature; when the medium is the message, even memoir belongs on pages that reinforce the elements of each story.

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