

***Bonkers on the Head:
artists' film,
artists' books, and
intermedial blending***

Emily Artinian

Speaking at a recent conference at Goldsmiths College in London¹, the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliassen took a question from the audience about what sort of effect working in different countries – Iceland and Italy specifically – has had on his practice. Eliassen remarked on the quality of light, noting the severe angles and long shadows in Iceland and comparing this to the direct, overhead Italian sun. After struggling for several moments to find words in English that would describe the way Italian light falls on objects, he struck the lectern sharply with his hand and blurted out ‘it’s just bonkers on the head’.

This choice of words is something probably no native speaker of English would come up with, but it seems particularly apt: as a description it is much more emphatic than either ‘bang on’ or ‘hits it on the head’, which seem to be the expressions Eliassen was confusing. Speakers of a foreign language often possess this kind of accidental eloquence, landing on weirdly appropriate grammatical mistakes and inaccuracies, in the process creating a kind of idiolect that lives in the space between languages. Gaps in knowledge of the second language are filled either by analogy (with one’s original tongue or with other known languages) or by a misapprehension of the second language, or perhaps through a combination of the two, providing a rich space for invention and the generation of new coinages, new metaphors, new ideas and concepts.

This phenomenon of linguistic creation in the gap is familiar to us all. Disjunctions between different frames of

reference create opportunities for invention all the time: in everyday language (think of the last nickname or pun you made up), in literary language (metaphor, parable, and allegory all function this way), and also in more complex systemic languages of abstract thought (any kind of interdisciplinary work happens in this ‘space in between’).

In this essay I will look at a particularly provocative gap between two languages of the visual arts: the artist’s book, and the artist’s film². The similarities between these two natural cousins are often remarked upon, but oddly enough they have not been examined together in an extended way. One reason for this oversight is that there is such a small body of scholarship in the field of the artist’s book. Another is that while there are many artists’ books and book forms that are deemed to be ‘filmic’ (the most obvious examples being the flip book and textless photo books), and while many artists’ films bear a strong resemblance to artists’ books in their play with narrative duration and presentation, there are relatively few people overtly exploring the gap between the two in their artistic practice.

‘Accidental’ or unconsidered production of twofold film/book works seems to happen with a fair degree of regularity, even though there are surprisingly few instances of the intentional use of the two media together. However, judging by these and by the small number of examples of intentional simultaneous use of both forms that *do* exist, it is clear that this combinatorial space is a rich seam to be mined by artists and audiences alike. Below I consider

a number of such cases. Significantly, intentionality on the part of the maker can have broad implications for the meanings created ‘in the gap’.

Double scope cognitive blending and intermedia

The work of literary theorist Mark Turner considers human reactions to contradictory frames in an intriguing way. With cognitive scientist Gilles Fauconnier and independently (1996, 2004) he has written extensively about the uniquely human aptitude for double scope cognitive integration. Research in the cognitive sciences has shown that all kinds of non-human mammalian species demonstrate some ability to process ‘blends’; that is, they are able to interpret objects outside of themselves in terms of their own internal mental worlds, in a very basic way. This is simple cognitive integration. In Turner, what it is that makes us distinctly human is our capability for double scope blending. Very simply put, we are able to place ourselves in another’s shoes. In his recent contribution to *The Journal of Cognitive Studies* (2005:90-91), Turner uses the example of a human being and a seal looking at each other. While the seal can recognise another animal, and presumably can differentiate the person from a nearby rock, the person is able to imagine what it feels like to be soaking wet, and a bit cumbrous out of the water, what it feels like to view the world from a vantage point of a couple of feet high. Further, we are able to imagine what we ourselves might look like to the seal, to place ourselves in its mind and look back at ourselves standing on the beach, looking out to sea.

In his 1996 book, *The Literary Mind*, Turner elaborates on this proposition, making an extended case that literature is not the superfluous diversion it is often understood to be, but rather is the very means by which we live in our day-to-day lives. We live by narrative, which is to say by slipping mentally into others’ bodies and minds in the same way that we do when we read fiction or watch a film (or when we stand on a beach looking at a seal, for that matter). For Turner literature is not just an added pleasure in life: it is the essential expression of the main cognitive characteristic that makes us human, and he goes so far as to question models such as Noam Chomsky’s universal grammar, claiming that literary thought (Turner’s specific categories are *story*, *projection*, and *parable*) predates linguistic thought. This model seems to me to be highly relevant to the visual arts, and it is not hard to imagine an analogous and complementary proposition called, perhaps, *the artistic mind*. For the purposes of discussion in this short essay, Turner’s model is an intriguing lens through which to consider the artist’s book and the artist’s film, and I will apply it to some specific examples below. In addition, I would like to posit here a higher order blend (something Turner frequently applies in his analysis of narrative): that cases in which artists use both film and book together are instances that insist on audience recognition of a disjunction of frames, thereby forcing them into a greater awareness of their relationship to and participation in the artwork – above and beyond their awareness of the content presented by the work.

A concept that has deep resonance with Turner’s double

scope cognitive blending is Dick Higgins' still exceptionally relevant idea of 'intermedia'. In the early 1960s Higgins began using this term – first used by Coleridge in 1812, as Higgins noted – as a means by which we might understand works that 'fall conceptually between media that are already known' (Higgins 1965). Through his career he was at pains to distinguish this from the terms 'mixed media', and 'multimedia' which he acknowledged usefully describe works executed in more than one medium, but do not account for instances of the *synthesised combination* of media. In intermedia, there is what Higgins called a 'conceptual fusion'. In the examples below I will consider the degree to which the works qualify for intermedia status, and this, to my mind is analogous to the degree to which they form a complex and productive blend, in Turner's lexicon. A work in this category could be thought of as an 'intermedial blend'. Note that while it is specifically book/film under consideration here, a more extended discussion could of course encompass the whole gamut of visual arts media. In fact there is a great deal of research being done in the area of intermedial art – see for example the *Leonardo Synaesthesia and Intersense* project led by Jack Ox and Jacques Mandelbrojt.

Instances of simultaneous book/film production can very roughly be divided into three categories. Firstly – and by far the most commonplace occurrence – is the case in which the book is used primarily for documentation of an exhibited film or video, often with the main objective of commercial furtherance of the life of that work beyond the gallery. Secondly we have what I will call 'media ex-

perimentation' – works in which two or more media are used separately, but not *intentionally* in relationship to each other, to examine the same ideas and content from different angles. Finally, there are strongly 'intermedial' works: film combined with book in Higgins' full sense of the word. Moving from the first to last category, the blend of forms becomes more conscious on the part of the artist, and as a result, more apparent to the audience, and it also becomes richer and more fruitful: it provides more opportunity for those delightful, accidental constructions and realisations that are *bonkers on the head*.

1. Documentation: the unconscious, 'accidental' blend

Most of the major public collections of artists' books and artists' films in the US and Europe were started informally, when art museums recognised that their growing assortment of documentation of conceptual works in the 1960s and 1970s wasn't so easily categorised simply as 'exhibition catalogues'. Very often print and video documentation of conceptualist works such as happenings and installation art was deposited in museum collections and curators slowly realised these constituted a unique category.

With conceptual art it was natural that book and film-as-document appeared. These provide an opportunity to reactivate works which are impermanent by their very nature. In many ways however this documentation has become as important as the work, to the point that, in many cases it has almost come to be considered the work itself (to name just two of many examples: *Art Language*,

the journal of Conceptualist group *Art & Language* and the widely distributed *Fluxfilm Anthology*).

This trend continues apace – in part an extension of these publications of the 1960s/1970s and also an aspect of the continually accelerating commercialisation of art today. Books and videos/DVDs are made to coincide with exhibitions with what seems like ever increasing frequency. Often these arise from the marketing strategy on the part of the museum/gallery and are not artist led. Often too, these productions are a simple reiteration of the work, and are not particularly well articulated. In some cases, the works are created by the artist or with the artist's involvement, but are not developed in direct relation to (in dialogue with) the initial work. With books in particular, there is much confusion as to the role of the piece because of the form's close resemblance to ordinary catalogues. However, sometimes in these cases there emerges an interesting tension between the record and the primary work – whether the artist is aware of it or not.

Consider the example of Christian Boltanski's *L'homme qui tousse*. On the occasion of a recent exhibition of this 1969 film (2003) – the film being the 'primary' work here – a corresponding book was published by 9 Février Editions. This was created not by the artist, but by graphic design team Antoine+Manuel. In spite of the lack of a direct connection between book and film, the book serves as an intriguing comment on the film, which depicts an anonymous and presumably homeless man throwing up in a dark abandoned building. In the

book, six stills are reproduced in a binding that allows the very grainy images to spread unbroken across the page. The selection of these six frames necessarily – and intriguingly – reframes the narrative itself. It reduces it to a skeletal form – to just those images needed to get the basic action across. The effect is to slow down the story, creating pauses at every page turn. Further, the book pares down the protagonist's existence to just six images: where the film exists to record the forgotten, homeless man and his situation, the book strips this record bare, almost to nothing. As with much of Boltanski's work the film's central concern is creating a memorial to the forgotten or ignored: the book's reduction contravenes this intended meaning. Importantly, at the same time, the book's form also echoes this meaning and multiplies it tenfold, as the book is by its very nature more permanent than any exhibition of the film could be. This irony – a productive, intermedial blend that references both the content and the form of the film and book all at the same time – seems to be accidental, resulting mainly from a profit making agenda on the part of the gallery exhibiting the film. Interestingly, in the book version, a CD of the film's soundtrack is included in the binding; if only this had been a DVD of the film itself so that the two were contained together, and if only the artist had been more closely involved in production of the book, I would call this a fully intermedial blend. As it is, it is an intriguingly accidental one.

Another example – again not clearly intentional on the part of the artist – is Emma Kay's *The Story of Art* (2003). The core work is an austere film of animated

black text on a glaring white background; in rapid succession paragraphs a few sentences long flash the sum total of the history of Western art, as remembered by Kay, with no recourse to printed texts or supporting materials. As with Kay's other explorations of the fragility of memory (other works include maps of the world drawn from memory, and the bible and Shakespeare's entire oeuvre rewritten the same way), the piece examines our instinct and our capacity for mapping, and also our limited capacity for remembering. Many of Kay's details are wrong; whole centuries are omitted.

Quietly accompanying the film is a small pamphlet that includes an alphabetical listing of all the artists noted the film. However, this booklet was intended not, it seems, as an intermedial work, nor even as an integral part of the piece, but rather as a museum guide. At the exhibition of the work I saw (Kay 2003), there was no mention of the relationship between the two forms, and the booklet seemed to have been produced possibly as an afterthought. If you blinked you would miss it, and its relationship to the film was not noted on the information placards on the wall. The booklet has in fact a very interesting relationship to the film's main theme, in that it is a document that the gallery visitor can take away, that obviates the need to memorize, that *gets around the central problem addressed in Kay's work in general*. Film – as presented publicly, in a gallery or museum or public space – is fleeting, intangible, forgettable. The book is portable, always with you, memorable. Another tension between the two forms arises from the work's allusion to and questioning of E.H. Gombrich's 1950 'classic' art

history, *The Story of Art*. The title of the film makes this reference subtly, but the pamphlet makes it unmistakable through the use of a font similar to that on Gombrich's cover (and also by virtue of the fact that it is a book itself). So the book makes this link much more explicit.

The relationship between Kay's film and booklet is an intermedial blend. It seems unfortunate that many exhibition visitors will have missed this complex relationship. Even if an artist is not involved in production of a book/film combination, if the combinatorial meanings are not the express intention of the artist, for the audience accidental doubles of this sort provide an opportunity for reading a blend. However, it is a hidden opportunity, one that is easily missed.

2. Blends that result from experimentation with form

Ed Ruscha's artist's book *Crackers* (1969) and film *Premium*³ (1971) are based on Mason Williams' short story 'How to Derive the Maximum Enjoyment from Crackers' and depict the same basic narrative, using the same plot structure and the same minimalist visual vocabulary Ruscha is well known for. In this somewhat bizarre story set in Los Angeles, the protagonist – who comes across as a parody of the comical character of the 'hep cat' – goes to a supermarket and buys ingredients for a salad, then proceeds to a cheap motel, rents a room, and carefully assembles the salad in the bed, covering up his construction with the sheets when finished. He then brings a reluctant date to the hotel and convinces her to climb in with the greens and be covered in salad dressing.

Smugly looking on while his date seems to be reveling in the situation and enjoying herself, he states in a matter-of-fact manner, 'Oh, I forgot the crackers', and exits abruptly, proceeding to a store where he purchases a box of crackers (with the brand name *Premium*), and then to a glamorous Hollywood hotel where he again rents a room – for himself – and feasts on the missing ingredient alone, in his luxurious – salad-less – bed. A large question mark hangs over both book and film; namely, how much the audience is meant to read them as parody. Both reference low budget pornography, film noir, and especially the surreal nature of Hollywood and its seedy underworld types. The book seems more sincere (and a bit naive), less ironic about its subject matter. This difference in tone arises largely from differences in form: the book (as we have seen with Boltanski's work) of necessity presents a storyboard, rather than a continuous narrative: we read in it a series of outtakes, and those images Ruscha has chosen for inclusion here (these are not stills from the film, but rather a separate set of still photographs) seem to glamourise the characters and events. The selected poses almost resemble the stilted imagery of fashion photography. The film has greater narrative density and also the added features of sound and continuous motion, allowing for a greater depth of information, and less contrivance. When the character is preparing the salad in the film, his body language is comically self-satisfied and also methodical, creating an atmosphere of creepy suspense. In the argument over whether the woman is going to get into bed, Ruscha uses extreme close ups of her distraught face in a jarring fast edit that creates a nervous energy the

book does not have. It seems possible that the different moods in the two have something to do not only with the form, but also with the fact that Ruscha made the film two years after he made the book, and his relationship to the material had matured. But it is intriguing that he chose to rework the narrative as a film: it is as if he could not decide upon the right mode of expression for the work, or as if he was not happy with the work in book form. And though the two were not intended to be 'read' together intermedially, considered together they give a more complex understanding of the content of both book and film, asking the viewer/reader to consider how meaning is constructed.

Another more recent example in this same vein is the work of American-born artist Pamela Golden for her 2005 exhibition, *The Word*. The focus of the exhibition was Golden's paintings, but a three volume book published by OneStar Press and also a short video were produced to accompany the work in the show. The two cover much of the same ground, and function in some ways as an intermedial pair. What distinguishes this combination from those of the first category above – the *accidental* blend – is that they are both obviously directly made by Golden, and further, like Ruscha's *Crackers/Premium* combination, they appear to be a kind of workshopping of the same idea. In this body of work Golden is examining contemporary obsessions with mental and spiritual health, and is searching for the roots of this cultural phenomenon, focusing in part on 1960s correlations between weather and body/spirit. The bookwork consists of three volumes collected in a

slipcase, all perfect bound paperbacks titled ‘The word: body’, ‘The word: mind,’ and ‘The word: spirit’ – an allusion to cheap, self-help bestsellers. The three present various historical photos and diagrams pertaining to physical and spiritual self-improvement, juxtaposed with weather forecast statements. The arrangement of the material is not very deeply meaningful (it is just a random collection of statements and images, with no apparent structure). Similarly, the short film presents a rather confused assortment of newsreel footage from the sixties, a yoga instructor, and a soundtrack that opens and closes with the sound of helicopter rotor and throughout plays a Bhangra track. In this case, neither book nor film has really been used to its potential (apart from the books’ clever reference to the self-help paperback format): they are both used as simple containers, and their sequential power is not utilised. However, with respect to the intermedial blend, the film and book are interesting as repetitions of the same idea in different media. It is as if the artist were trying to work through the idea, and in relation to each other, the book and film might prompt the viewer/reader to consider the expression of content and choice of form.

Again though, because of a lack of full intentionality and consciousness on the part of the artist, the possible blend is easily missed. The audience is not really encouraged to query the choice of medium, and therefore the viewer is likely to consider the artefacts in isolation. But in this second order of blending, when the artist is aware of the dual approach to form, at least to some extent, there is more capacitance for questioning the gap, and for greater

understanding of the content as a whole.

3. *Intermedial blends: the book and film synthesized*

Contrast Ruscha’s and Golden’s pieces with a recent work by John Wood and Paul Harrison, *Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things)*. This is a series of 26 short videos querying the relationship between the human body and the three dimensional space and things that surround it. In the videos Wood and Harrison interact in a simple manner with a variety of different objects. In one piece, for example, Harrison and Wood stand facing each other on a small hemisphere, straining to keep their balance in a co-operative motional eloquence. Wood’s and Harrison’s video pieces are compelling in their own right, but they are brought to vivid life by a reanimation, a re-enactment, in book form. Prior to the 2002 exhibition of the videos, the artists sent copies to 26 different people requesting written responses to the works. The resulting statements – some descriptive, some interpretive, some poetic – are collected in a boxed set of A4 sheets. Also included are pages showing the artists’ preparatory sketches for the videos. The book functions similarly to the above ‘accidental’ blends in one way – its primary intent seems to be a commercial one, to carry the work beyond the exhibition space. However, this combination is a fully intermedial one: the two in combination do something that neither could do on its own. The book records one audience’s experience, and then presents this experience to the gallery audience *in combination with* the videos. Here the book acts as more than a record or a repetition. It functions *in dialogue*

with the videos themselves, providing a reinterpretation of the original pieces. This creates a clearly apparent space for blending, a gap where the audience becomes aware of both the underlying structure of the films (blending their viewing of the videos with their viewing of the schematic drawings), and the way schematic representation can generate rich multifold meaning amongst different readers (blending their own viewings of the videos with their reading of others' reactions). Here, something very interesting occurs. The intermedial blend has a structure of its own that echoes the central concern of the artwork: the book and the film are in constant dialogue with each other, in a hard and fast relationship, in the same way that humans and physical objects and three dimensional space are shown in the videos to be inescapably interdependent. Also, in the case of the small audience who wrote short contributions to the book, the act of writing means that they were *physically involved* in this work that is concerned with physicality. The blend of media languages here *creates a structure that echoes the structures pointed to in the content of the work*.

In *The Literary Mind* Mark Turner discusses blends that have an 'emergent structure' of their own:

A double scope blending network has inputs with different ... organizing frames and an organizing frame for the blend that includes parts of each of those organizing frames and an emergent structure of its own. (Turner 2004:92)

Turner introduces the example of a seal and a person

on a beach because he goes on to analyse the emergent structure found in Irish and Scottish Selkie legends – the Selkie (a seal/human hybrid) – which is a structure arising from the blend of the human being placing itself in the seal's mind, while remaining the human being, where you have a person's mind in a seal's body. In the examples considered above, there are hints of an emergent structure of this sort in the first two categories of blends. When we get to Harrison's and Wood's work, a fully forged dialogic work is present, with the viewer aware not only of film, or only of book, or even of film *plus* book; here the film merges with the book in a unified whole – Higgin's intermedial work.

What the intermedial blend demands from and gives to the audience

To continue with the above citation from Turner:

In such networks, both organizing frames make central contributions to the blend, and their sharp differences offer the possibility of rich clashes.

The fruits of 'rich clashes' between book and film in these combined works are multiple and all relate to developing the audience's self-awareness as viewer/reader *and relating this status to the content of the work*. In the short space of this essay we have seen just a few of the correspondences between book and film from which this awareness can arise: (1) the related yet different capabilities of book and film for preservation/recording; (2) the differences in meaning produced when aspects of sensory

experience are added in or taken out (sound and motion in Ruscha's *Premium* for example); and (3) the relationship of film and book to each other as time based media *with different velocities, different clocks* (viz. the skeletal selection of six frames to represent Boltanski's film).

In an era when the act of interpretation is ever more foregrounded in art, audiences are somewhat more aware of themselves as interpreters and participants in the creation of a work, more aware of the ways in which they construct sense from an absence. But even in this age of third generation Conceptualism, audience experience of art remains predominantly intuitive, ex-linguistic. In comparison with other media, the artist's book and film are unique sites for the production of a particularly intimate intuitive audience experience; they are uniquely concentrated forms of interaction between artist and viewer, where verbal language is usually secondary to preliminary understanding, and the higher order language of the medium is tertiary. In the act of viewing/reading artists' film and artists' books, you can lose yourself in a pre-linguistic blend; giving yourself over to another frame for a moment. Works in film-book dialogue provide this intimacy, while at the same time creating an awareness of its nature. This to my mind evidences the case for an ex-linguistic literary/artistic mind, but one that is inseparably bound up with language.

Turner concludes *The Literary Mind* with the following:

The story I have offered reverses the view that language is built up from the sober to the exotic;

that out of syntactic phrase structures, one builds up language; that out of language, one builds up narrative; and that out of literary narrative comes parable.

It works the other way round. With story, projection, and their powerful combination in parable, we have a cognitive basis from which language can originate.... Language is the child of the literary mind. (1996:168)

Having looked briefly here at intermedial blending between book and film, it seems that the artistic mind may be activated more energetically when a blend that provokes an awareness of form and its relation to content is present. This would seem to suggest an equal footing for language/grammar and story/projection/parable. It is my sense that we will see more and more fully conscious intermedial forms involving the artist's book and artist's film – and other media as well, and will thus have greater opportunity to examine dynamic, complex relationships of this sort.

Coda (a blend)

The idea of pre-verbal literary/artistic mind would be extremely interesting to apply to a research project currently in development at the University of California Santa Barbara and led by Marcos Novak, author of the influential book *Liquid Architecture*. I would call this project 'futuristic', were it not for the fact the mad structure Novak has dreamed up is being built now.

Novak's group has raised funding to build something he calls the 'allosphere', a 60m diameter, 360 degree IMAX theatre-like shell in which a viewer (the 'immersant' in Novak's terms) stands on a catwalk at the centre of the sphere and is connected to fMRI scanners that feed back to software 'writing' images and sound that are in turn projected onto the sphere. The viewer's mental reactions, his readings, literally re-author the work, in an endless loop. A case could be made that Novak's allosphere is the book and film integrated. The allosphere is the engaged film, the reader's film. It is the space of the in-between, an intriguing space to watch.

Notes

1. *Neuroaesthetics* Conference. See reference under M. Novak.
2. Though there are significant and much debated differences between artists' films and artists' videos, for the purpose of economy here I take the term 'film' to refer to work by artists on film, video, and also digital video. Further, I use the term 'artist's book' in the broadest possible sense, not limiting the discussion to artists who define themselves primarily as book artists; rather considering anyone who has made extended use of the book as an artistic form.
3. Rucha has made two films in his career; it is surprising he has not made more, as his artists' books so obviously reference the medium of film. One critic recently referred to Rucha's well known book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as 'one of the best movies ever made about Los Angeles, or in Los Angeles, for that matter' (David 2005:113).

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