

Virtureal – traditional and virtual artists' books, and the space in between

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Note: this is an extended version of an article originally written for the online journal, How2, specifically for a book arts feature curated by Susan Johanknecht, in which invitees were asked to address the following: "As text comfortably settles into the virtual format, are there still situations where the constraints/possibilities of the material codex...are intrinsic to the writing process?"

Bookarts feature: (<http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/current/bookarts/>)

This article: (<http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/current/bookarts/artinian.html>)

When I first became aware of artists' books I was a PhD student studying literature, spending too many long hours in the cold and harsh glare of my computer monitor. Time spent in the library making marginalia and notes by hand and paging through old foxed and cracking volumes provided a welcome respite from the attenuated actions of typing, 'cutting', and 'pasting' pixelated thoughts onscreen.

Over time, the physicality of direct interaction with books and notebooks became compelling enough to send me looking for an alternative to academic writing, for a medium where my ideas could be both worked out and expressed in a material form. A form that could, in turn, be both mentally and physically experienced by my own readers.

After a good deal of searching in various corners of the visual arts, architecture, and theatre, I found the artist's book, and with it the place to get my ideas about literature stuck into the material world. I have been making artist's books ever since, and until recently, I gave only fleeting consideration to putting any of the work back into pixelated form.

Real fiction

My artist's book *real fiction* is about the writing of Portuguese author José Saramago, whose stories often foreground the shifty line between fiction and reality. I was intrigued by this quality in his novels, and as a book artist rather than as an academic, instead of writing an expository essay about it, I went to Lisbon to physically experience the texts, walking around the 'real' city and photographing places that seemed to come out of Saramago's imagination. These photographs and a journal of this experience became the material for a 'thesis' in book art form.

In *real fiction*, excerpts from Saramago's prose are bound together with my photographs, my journalistic commentary, and also references to critical essays that informed that commentary. All of this content is linked back and forth with a multi-directional footnote system, and the reader's physical engagement with the object – movement between sections, viewing the photographs, and feeling the texture of the page –

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complements and enhances her understanding of the main ideas expressed in the book (that fiction is something we experience and construct both in the mind and in the body, and that both subjective and objective understanding of fictional meaning is heavily reliant on body memory and sense of space).

It was also fundamental to my own understanding of Saramago that I experienced his texts physically, and that I designed and bound *real fiction* by hand. I wrote the text and developed the layout and structure simultaneously: the bodily activity involved in the act of making informed and shaped the ideas in the text.

This direct physical experience is central to my work and is something I feel would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create in a virtual medium. One can imagine a version of *real fiction* as a website with links applied to the extensive footnote system, but this would make for a poor simulation – a two dimensional space in which the reader would be easily lost, unaware of his location, unable to construct a gestalt of the work, and also unable to experience it simultaneously in mind and body. The virtual world at present remains a pre-Columbian one – uncharted and flat, much of its territory existing largely in the imagination alone.

A virtual shadow

That said, one of my recent projects does have a kind of shadow life online.

This work grew out of my meetings with an avant garde writers' group in Armenia, and it focuses on issues facing people working in experimental poetry and prose in that country today. In this post-Soviet republic, funding for and interest in new writing are extremely limited, and, further, links to western publishing structures are almost nonexistent.

A major aim of the project is thus the distribution of new Armenian writing to a wider audience, particularly a western one. Naturally, a website suggested itself at first. But I felt strongly that the content needed to be given a physical presence, rather than simply scattered to the electronic winds of the web. The point is to bring writer and reader together across geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers, and for this I wanted a connection with my audience that was intimate and tactile. One that would hold the reader, and one that the reader could hold.

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The book – now decidedly a physical object, titled *From Ararat to Angeltown* – is a bilingual Armenian/English edition that contains new writing by six authors, photographs of my discussion sessions with them, and excerpts from those discussions. It is large (82cm x 59cm when opened out) so that the writers in the photographs appear at almost life size, and the reader experiences a strong physical sense of their presence, something I feel could not be achieved using available electronic media. There is however an important aspect of this bookwork that is virtual – one that is closely connected to a stubborn problem in the world of artist's books: limited accessibility.

A 2005 *LA Times* review of an artist's book exhibition at the Getty Museum highlighted this longstanding issue. The piece began by lamenting the fact that the books on show were locked away in vitrines, unhandleable and unactivated, and the reviewer expanded this complaint into a broader indictment of the whole form. The essay concluded:

Artists' books are almost always handmade, in small, often self-published editions. Most go out of their way to distinguish themselves from paperbacks, which make great literature available for a pittance. And no matter how expensive a painting gets, a museum can hang it so that many people can experience it up close and in person...Artists' books function differently. In a sense, they provide the worst of both worlds, replacing the cheap accessibility of books and the readily shared pleasures of publicly presented art with the fetishized preciousness of collectibles.

(David Pagels, *LA Times Calendar*, 7 June 2005)

Though this dismissal misses out broad swathes of book art activity such as the cheap multiple and the form's often effective circumvention of the museum and publishing house as cultural gatekeepers, *it does have a point*. Artists' books are hard to access, mostly locked away in library and museum special collections, and book art exhibitions are often mute affairs with books in glass boxes, no more than tantalising but ultimately frustrating paper peep shows.

The debate about accessibility is a recurring topic in book arts circles because *it is a problem with the form*. Recently I heard a student on a book art MA course make an impassioned argument that the Tate Library (which holds one of the world's largest book art collections) should open its doors, put all 4,000 of its artists' books on show, and let the public at them. This would be wonderful to experience as an audience, but fatal for the objects themselves. A look at any of the mangled catalogues provided in exhibition reading rooms shows why at a glance. Artists' books are fragile; they *are* precious objects. This is at once one of the form's best qualities, and perhaps also its greatest failing.

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From Ararat to Angeltown is printed in an edition of 250 copies. It is being shown in a number of venues where the audience is invited and encouraged to handle it as much as they like. But ultimately most of the relatively small edition is likely to end up in library and private collections, unavailable to a wide public. This is where the 'virtual shadow' of the book comes in. Selected page spreads, stories and poems are available on my own website for viewing and reading, and the new English translations (commissioned for this work) are to be added to the writers' Armenian websites. A couple of the translations have found their way to other websites, and as a result of email correspondence amongst the writers, the translator and myself, one of the pieces has been selected for a print literary journal (the author's first publication outside Armenia). It is hoped that similar publications of the other writers' work will follow. I see these online events connected to the book – both the documentation *and* the expansion of it – not as separate entities, but very much as an extension of the physical book itself, a kind of echo of it in the virtual world.

A place in book art for the virtual

For well over a decade now book artists have been making extensive experimental use of new media as a locus for their work – exploring the relationship between traditional book form and the hyperlinked world of the virtual utilising technologies from the now banal CD-ROM to the latest hot new toys such as sophisticated gaming software and wikis. Much of this work is exciting and dynamic, stimulating in its challenge to our understanding of the concept of what the book is and what it will become.

However, in the excitement of the new, a most essential aspect of the relationship between the virtual world and the artist's book is ignored. This is the documentary potential the web provides, the space and means it allows for a much needed record of physical artist's books. This expansion of documentation is present with just about any subject you can name, but in the exceedingly limited access world of the artist's book, this augmentation of the form is vital.

A look at the links pages on one of the most comprehensive (if clumsily designed) book arts websites, www.philobiblon.com, gives a good idea of the extent of this documentary activity. Countless individual artists, presses, and book stores are putting their work online, creating a vast informally interlinked catalogue of artist's books. [Printed Matter](#) in New York and [Bookworks](#) in London are just some of the organisations that have created extensive visual catalogues of their work, in some cases including ten or more images of page spreads for each book, enabling the viewer to 'leaf through' the text (in a manner similar to Amazon's 'Look-Inside' feature). Around the globe, major libraries with book arts collections offer their catalogues online and slowly they are adding visual data to their predominantly verbal entries.

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Much of this activity has simple documentation as its purpose, but beyond the fact that it provides an effective solution to the problem of accessibility, it is also interesting in terms of the strategies artists and institutions are using to record the work: these range from the use of selected still images to the above mentioned sequences of click-to-turn page spreads, to videos of books being leafed through and the sophisticated – and very expensive – software the British Library uses in its 'Turning the Page' project, a touch screen interface that allows the user to mimic the act of turning the page by dragging the hand across the screen. One particularly interesting project can be found at www.diffusion.org.uk – the site offers dozens of artists' books that the viewer can download, print out, and assemble himself. Part of Diffusion's mission is to '[break] the dominance of mouse and screen as the primary forms of human computer interaction. The format's aim is to take the reader away from the screen and computer and engage them in the process of production.' All of the above can be seen as attempts to allow the user to escape from the flatland of the screen, and correspondingly to move from a purely intellectual encounter to a more holistic, and more innately human, mind/body experience.

In her essay *The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space* [<http://www.philobiblon.com/drucker>], Johanna Drucker considers the various (mostly failed) commercial attempts at the creation of an 'e-book' and suggests that we examine the cultural and technological functionality of the artist's book as a means of better understanding the potentialities of electronic space and the question of why the e-book hasn't lived up to its hype. I would argue that it may be similarly fruitful to consider these issues in light of the ways in which book artists and institutions are documenting their work online.

Drucker argues against the mimicry of such things as simulated page drape and click-to-turn pages, but these emulations are physically engaging on some level, more so than simple mouse clicks that send one on a disorienting unmapped trail through countless cascading windows. These simulacra of engagement with the physical book are certainly far from satisfying, but there is something in them that is superior to the frenetic jumping around involved in hyperlinked online texts: further investigation of documentary use of them might help to uncover better means by which we might develop the virtual reading experience.

The invitational letter for this *How2* piece asks, "As text comfortably settles into the virtual format, are there still situations where the constraints/possibilities of the material codex...are intrinsic to the writing process?" To my mind there's not much yet that is 'comfortable' about text in the virtual world. The book – and by extension the artist's book – remains an unparalleled locus for the multi-sensory communication of ideas. In spite of the effectiveness of many new media projects, the virtual world can't at present do

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what a good artist's book does. It does not provide the same opportunities for thinking through making, or for experiencing ideas physically and mentally as an audience. At present the physical book is still far more comprehensively expressive than its electronic little sister – it possesses a much greater degree of interactivity, something that is so often and so wrongly praised as the domain of electronic media.

A multitude of groups – ranging from cognitive scientists to the more economically motivated such as Microsoft's Advanced Reading Technology team – are working doggedly at enhancing the onscreen reading experience. Fujitsu launched its much anticipated flexible electronic 'paper' (actually plastic) in 2006. Three-dimensional programming and graphics processing to handle it is developing apace. It seems likely that the virtual world will eventually be able to provide a reading experience that is more than just a tepid two-dimensional approximation of the real one we know, but even with high speed internet connections and the relentless march of Moore's law, the truly interactive artist's e-book seems still to be very much the stuff of science fiction. As yet the virtual has nothing on the physical book – artist's or otherwise. The virtual and the physical book considered together, however, are an intriguing mix. For the time being, perhaps it's enough that the virtual world is doing such a marvellous job at improving visibility in the foggy skies of book art.