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The Futures of Books: Technologies and Forms

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The Futures of Books: Technologies and Forms

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New forms of the book ranging from Amazon's Kindle to artists' books can help students reconsider the assumption that "book" means "codex." In order to draw literature students into discussions about forms of the book, I've designed a series of linked assignments highlighting historical and theoretical issues in the debates about the future of the book. The sequence begins with readings about the definition of "the book." As the students consider the problem of definition, they analyze innovative artists' books, paying particular attention to the integration of form and content in works that adapt or depart from the codex. These assignments prepare the students to read Johanna Drucker's lecture, "The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-Space." After exploring the question of how a book works, students create their own handmade books, striving to integrate form and content as fully as possible. Finally, they write essays about the ways in which the sequence of assignments has changed their relationship with books. When the assignments succeed most fully, students shift their stances on the future of the book; they appreciate and value the codex form, and they begin to imagine possibilities for electronic and paper forms that neither mimic nor threaten the codex.

Because students typically see the codex form as the full and sole embodiment of "the book," they welcome or dread the advent of "electronic books" depending on their level of optimism about a dedicated reader that successfully mimics the paper codex. The Book Arts Web includes provocative readings and exhibits that help students frame new questions about the definition of "book." The work of Emily-Jane Dawson, Karen Drayne,

and Barbara Davison in “Is it a Book?” offers a valuable starting point. In the “Foyer” section of “Is it a Book?” the writers outline their aims:

we will explore some of the possibilities for affecting the perception of text. We are pleased to present an overview of graphic text representation in Western culture, look at nonlinearity in literature and in the book arts, and share some thoughts about the future of text and the book in the new electronic age. (<http://www.philobiblon.com/isitabook/>)

The site is wide-ranging; I ask students to read the “Foyer,” “History,” “Literature,” and “Future” segments alongside Philip Smith’s “The Whatness of Bookness, or What is a Book.” While Dawson, Drayne, and Davison provoke questions about the forms that might be classified as books, Smith’s short note offers a more circumscribed definition of “bookness”:

The qualities which have to do with a book. In its simplest meaning the term covers the packaging of multiple planes held together in fixed or variable sequence by some kind of hinging mechanism, support, or container, associated with a visual/verbal content called a text. The term should not strictly speaking include pre-codex carriers of text such as the scroll or the clay tablet, in fact nothing on a single leaf or planar surface such as a TV screen, poster or hand-bill. . . .

Smith adds grumpily: “A text can be inscribed on anything but this does not make it a book, or have the quality of bookness, even as a scroll retains its scrollness without any text on it. A teddy bear with text on it is not a book!”

The juxtaposition of these readings calls attention to knotty problems that vex attempts to define “book.” The “History” section of “Is it a Book?” offers examples of forms that predate the codex, and students typically recognize that they hold fundamentally contradictory positions about forms that they would classify as books. On one hand, the codex has come to seem the “natural” and perhaps the only authentic form of the book; on the other hand, it seems odd and wrong to claim that ancient scrolls are not books. Then again, if scrolls are books, then surely clay tablets might also be books: both forms involve flat surfaces on which scribes have marked a text. Only the material and the process of rolling a scroll distinguishes the tablet from the scroll, and surely the choice of parchment over clay, of rolled storage over flat, cannot be the defining feature of the book. But if a clay tablet is or can be a book, then why can’t a “tv screen, poster, or handbill”—or, in fact, “a teddy bear with text on it”—be a book? Yet surely, surely, it is not, many students argue. A remarkable level of confusion and distress surfaces in these conversations about the definition of “book.”

The confusion serves as a productive starting point for the next assignment, an analysis of an artist’s book. The Book Arts Web lists many splendid exhibits, and for this assignment I find it useful to direct students to the online version of the Guild of Book Workers’ 2003 “In Flight” exhibit. I select specific works that use forms other than the codex—for example, Karen Hanmer’s *They All Laughed*; Cathy Adelman’s *A Million Miles on United: She Who Flies the Most Gets the Best Seat*; Peter and Donna Thomas’ *The History and Dangers of Flight*; and Patty Bruce’s *Flight: The Continuous Puzzle of Man*—and ask students to choose one work and to write an essay (three to four pages) analyzing its integration of form and content. These concrete examples bring us back to

the problem of definition, and a number of students become quite passionate about the status of the works they've chosen. My role in this discussion is to demand that each student offer an informed and rational case for his or her view.

The readings and analytical essay prepare the students to read Johanna Drucker's "The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-Space," a lecture that repays reflection even after many readings. Drucker's purpose in this lecture is to define the theoretical issues that should inform development of electronic book-forms, but her emphasis on "'how' a book 'works'" provides a means of recasting the questions we have pursued up to this point in the sequence. As Drucker points out, the codex form that readers in the West have internalized as the norm of "the book" developed to meet the specific needs of medieval readers; she draws on the work of Malcolm Parkes, who points out that the book changed more between the 12th and the 15th centuries than it did between the 15th and 20th centuries. Contemporary readers take for granted features of the codex—tables of contents, chapter divisions, and running titles, for example—that developed to meet the needs of scholars and preachers. These features, Drucker notes, amount to "coded instructions for use."

At this point, I find it useful to return to the works from "In Flight." If familiar features of the codex serve as "instructions for use," what unfamiliar features of these works also instruct readers about their use? How, precisely, does each work shape our reading practices? Do the "instructions" prompt curiosity or resistance? In this discussion, students often note that they resist reading when their customary reading practices—so deeply familiar as to seem intuitive—are insufficient. Only after rigorous

analysis of ways in which the formal features of the work enhance the content do many students move beyond impatience to interest or appreciation.

The sequence of assignment now turns from analysis to the construction of a handmade book:

Select a short literary text and describe the specific ways in which you'll integrate the content of the work with the forms of the book. Consider choice of paper, font, images, binding style, etc.

The readings, essay, and discussions have highlighted the range of decisions that book artists consider as they design and construct books. Studying a completed book allows students to examine those decisions as they're formally embodied, but even unconventional choices of form can seem the inevitable choices once a book has been completed. (The challenge that students face when they analyze an artist's book is analogous to the one they face when they read published work in a writing course. Many student writers find it difficult to imagine that well-regarded writers make conscious compositional choices; students often assume that excellent writers simply place their hands on a keyboard and produce terrific prose.) Making a book demands that students face multiple formal possibilities at every step and make a choice that bears consequences for later decisions. At the simplest level, the relationship between earlier and later choices is obvious: choosing rough-textured handmade paper as the material of the book forecloses the possibility of using a laser printer for the text. Other consequences arise in moments of dismayed surprise, as when a student suddenly realizes that the reverse side of the carefully composed accordion book will be completely blank.

The point of the assignment, of course, is not the creation of a beautiful object—though some students have created exquisite books. The assignment aims instead to illuminate the ways in which formal choices emphasize or resonate with elements of a literary text and with the processes of reading that text.

One student, Brittany Carlson, chose short poems by Rumi and printed each poem on a square of colored paper, selecting paper whose pattern and color corresponded with the imagery or emotional tone of the lyric. She folded each of the poems as she would if she were making a lotus book, and she mounted each folded poem on a square of white cardstock. For a library exhibit of the handmade books, Brittany wrote:

Rumi's poetry is subtly profound – he makes existential claims grounded in simple observations about life and the world around us. Unfolding each poem against a stark white background forces the reader to slow down and take time for quiet reflection. As each poem is revealed, so is the colorful paper hidden within each page.

She bound the pages by sewing them onto tapes. This combination of codex form and folded pages worked beautifully to emphasize the experience of reading a poetry book; the reader turns the pages to encounter the white space around and behind the poem and then literally unfolds each lyric, registering its images and ideas.

Mariah Patsner chose nine poems by Charles Bukowski and typed them (using an old typewriter) onto separate pages; she then used cigarettes, coffee, and wine to mark the pages—and used a car to run over one page. She bound the pages inside collaged covers using posts and screws to make the separate pages into an album. For the library exhibit, Mariah wrote:

[Bukowski] reveals a gritty underside of life in America; a stark contrast to the glossy, idealized image we are often expected to swallow. Pages within the glossy, colorful covers are tattered, burned, and stained, representing the reality of poverty and degradation in America.

The pages suggested their particular material histories (stained, burned, run over), yet the album form and the voice of the poems gathered together the individual pages. One of the most suggestive treatments of the poems was the final page; Mariah had folded this page to conceal the poem and carried it around with her to give it the look it might have had if it had spent several weeks in Bukowski's shirt pocket. The unfolded page in the book bore the marks of its folds, thereby calling attention to the courage it takes to "unfold" a poem and let it speak—without knowing who will receive it, or how its reader will respond.

After creating their handmade books, the students write an essay about their experiences with book arts. Because the College of St. Benedict has a book-arts studio, these students have an opportunity to make a few sheets of handmade paper and to set type and print a broadside on a letterpress during an earlier segment of the course. They find those experiences profoundly important, but the sequence of assignments I've outlined here would be valuable on its own.

The final essays demonstrate a synthesis of conceptual, analytical, and creative work. Chelsea Pettit, who created a stunning edition of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* using parchment-colored paper and velvet-covered boards, noted that the experiences of the course had made her a keen critic of books:

When I look at books I own I almost can't help but imagine the way I would change the cover or font, or how I would go about creating a cover design and putting together the book if I were to make it myself. Books, as I see them now, are no longer static, but instead are continually changing entities. I realize there are innumerable ways to present a book and each one holds a different feeling. I started browsing Amazon.com last week and looking at the cover designs of different editions of the same books. Particularly, I wanted to see what sorts of images and designs caught my attention and the possible reasons why. What I found is that designs which complement the text and give the right sort of feeling and imagery tend to be more appealing than those that stray further from the original text and feeling it conveys. I must also keep in mind, however, that book design requires all the senses. In this way, we cannot truly enjoy the art of books unless we do so by not only looking at the design, but also by touching, smelling, and weighing them in our hands.

Chelsea commented that she had kept a copy of *Goblin Market* with her during the long process of creating her edition; having the poem nearby, she wrote, helped her to keep the text of the poem in mind as she made each choice about the materials and form of the book

Several of the other students recalled in their essays our spirited discussions of "Is it a Book?" and our debates about the pieces in the *In Flight* exhibit. Holly Woltjer reflected on these experiences:

Forming a definition of what a book is was one of the most valuable things I learned in my exploration of the book arts. In my opinion, it isn't the author's intent or the book's form that creates the definition. Instead, it is the reaction of the reader. Does the book invite inspection? Do the form and text seem to meld together to create a single message? The answers to these questions are what define a book. Printing, binding and papermaking have all changed my expectation and awareness of books. I now regard the covers, fonts and art of books with a more critical eye. I also have come to be more accepting of those "alternative" and artsy books that push beyond the average coffee table. The experience has stamped out a richer image of what a book and text can be.

The willingness to let an artist's book—or any book in a format other than the codex—offer its "instructions for use" signals a receptive openness that contrasts starkly with the impatient, dismissive attitude toward nontraditional books that students often display at the beginning of this sequence.

The fuller awareness of forms that predated the codex widens students' sense of "the book," but it also provokes anxieties; specifically, students worry about the possibility that electronic forms will replace these tactile forms of the book. Anna Boyer wrote:

One of the most beautiful and important things about book arts I first learned from Emily-Jane Dawson and then experienced for myself while working on my own book arts projects. Dawson writes that "When the content and form of a book are considered together, and given equal

weight, the book becomes more than a simple container – it is instead an integral and active part of the work and of the reader’s experience of the work” (“Book Arts: Is it a Book?”). I think this quote best exemplifies the fundamental purpose of book arts. In this way, however, book arts challenge readers’ ideas about what it means for a book to be a book. Dawson tells us that “the word ‘book’ presents a visual image of multiple planes, covered and bound together on one side and viewed by turning one page at a time and reading the text from top to bottom and left to right. This is not how it has always been, nor, necessarily how it will be in the future” (“History: Is it a Book?”). Will books become solely an art form as the letterpress has become?

The future of the book deserves thoughtful, informed discussion in literary studies; we ought to provide a framework for considering anxieties and possibilities. I offer this outline of assignments as one means of engaging students in this crucial discussion.

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