



Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface

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Abstract:

In this paper I argue that many of the conventions of digitally-based work or the electronic screen have been presupposed, suggested or, in fact, achieved in the 'phenomenal' or Artist's Book and that the book, in the hands of the artist, becomes infused with interpretive acts. I attempt to unpack the suggestive ways in which selected examples of South African Artists' Books are already virtual; where the codex is an interactive and dynamic form and in which the idea of a book is grounded in what it does rather than what it is. The belief that the codex embodies fundamental 'limitations' and 'drawbacks' when compared with digital forms is premised on the book as a supposedly static, fixed and finite form. That these supposed 'limitations' and 'drawbacks' can only be overcome through the interactive features of the digital is a position I wish to contest.

Introduction:

This paper is based upon the catalogue essays which accompanied my curated exhibition Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface.¹ The exhibition picked up threads left tantalisingly at the end of the

¹ The exhibition opened at the Aardklop Arts Festival, Potchefstroom, 25-30 September 2006 and at the FADA Gallery, Faculty of Art Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg, 5-13 October 2006.

Artists' Books in the Ginsberg Collection exhibition which I curated at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1996, then purportedly, the 2nd largest exhibition of Artists' Books ever staged in the world. In the final

room of the JAG exhibition, three isolated computer monitors looked down on the viewer; the blank centre monitor was accompanied by changing images and texts moving silently within the screen space of the outer pair.

In this work, entitled codex, Michele Sohn attempted a number of things: a questioning of our expectations of what a book is, a meditation on the silent mutability of content and where exactly this content resided, and a critique of the alienation which technology often imposes. In taking 'the digital' as a loose basis on which to explore some contemporary artists' concerns with the book, I attempted, in Navigating the Bookscape, to open up a place for debate and ponder on what the digital and the book have to offer each other when they meet, blend and collide.

I had no intention of offering conclusive evidence of the superiority or inferiority of one form in relation to the other, despite the frequent claims that digital or electronic books 'supersede the limitations' and the 'drawbacks' of paper-based and traditional books. Clearly a bound codex is fundamentally different from a digital image: the light absorbing nature of the paper page as opposed to the light emitting nature of a screen, and the defined sequential narrative of a book against the rapid update, varied and optional window organisation of the screen. In addition the ability to resize images and manipulate a document is something which the codex does not allow. The belief, however, that the codex embodies fundamental limitations and drawbacks is premised on the book as a supposedly static, fixed and finite form. That these limitations and drawbacks can only be overcome through the interactive features of 'the digital' is a position I contest.

Johanna Drucker (2003:np) states:

The distinction that supposedly exists between print and electronic books is usually characterised as the difference between static and interactive forms. But a more useful distinction can be made between two ontologies, active and passive modes that are relevant across media. Interactivity is not a function of electronic media. The capacity of a literal book to be articulated as a virtual dynamic space is exhaustible while any attempt at reducing a work to its literal static form is probably almost impossible.

It is the book in the hands of the artist which upsets claims of 'limitations' and 'drawbacks' and which provides examples of active, interactive and dynamic forms. Drucker reminds us that the idea of a book should be grounded in replacing the identity of what a book is with what it does and that we should ask *how* a book performs its particular actions rather than *what* a book is.

With Michele Sohn's codex repositioned in my mind to raise questions about what it was in fact doing, I encountered Kim Lieberman's Amazon.com - digital on Marcus Neustetter's switch on/off exhibition at the KKNK in 2001. "In this work" says Colin Richards (2000:4),

we can link the dots between forests, books, information and in fact the entire cultural ecologies we inhabit. The wired world in which everything comes to connect with everything, nothing is ruled out...The intimacy of the globe is woven by threads of a million messages floating and spinning in ethereal space.

In Amazon.com - digital I was confronted by what the work was suggesting and how the work was achieving it. The screen was a book containing pages, yet each page became a 'book' containing even more 'pages' with each 'page' containing threads of 'text', each containing the whole image, and thus, restarting the reading process from scratch.

The Amazon, a place from which paper is derived; amazon.com, a place from where books are purchased. I read this work as a book whose pages,

like digital images of the forest, seemed to be, at once an image of the connectedness of life and, at the same time, a text in which everything comes to connect with everything else and in which nothing is ruled out. What the work was doing was suggesting that pages of a book be digitally constructed² as a program for the way in which a book facilitates visualisation of the textual narrative. Amazon.com suggested to me that an exhibition on the intersection between the codex and the digital book was needed.

If, as Drucker (2003:np) suggests, “the idea is to mark the shift from the conception of books as artefacts, or documents as vehicles for delivery of content, and instead demonstrate the living, dynamic nature of work as produced by interpretive acts” we realise that “the traditional codex is also, in an important and suggestive way, already virtual”.

My experience has been that many of the conventions of the digital work or electronic screen have been presupposed, suggested or in fact achieved in the ‘phenomenal’ or Artist’s Book and that the book, in the hands of the artist, becomes infused with interpretive acts. And so the first part of this exhibition was devoted to the suggestive ways in which the codex is already virtual, where the codex is an interactive and dynamic form and in which the idea of a book is grounded in what it *does* rather than what it *is*.

The exhibition consisted of two parts. In the first, I again borrowed from Jack Ginsberg’s³ remarkable collection of Artists’ Books. I attempted to find South African work which, in some way, uses and exploits the digital, but also, and most importantly, suggests that the seemingly different conventions of the codex and digital media intersect within them. These Artists’ Books presuppose, suggest and exploit some important and fundamental conventions of the digital environment which the traditional codex cannot do.

² Without the kitsch simulacrum of page drape and gutter as nostalgic icons of the codex as a material object.

³ Jack Ginsberg, amongst many other things, is an internationally recognised book collector. He has one of the finest collections of Artists’ Books in the world. Jack is also a trustee of the Ampersand Foundation and a patron of the arts.

The second part of the exhibition presented the work of five South African artists who I invited to explore the slippery terrain between the book and the digital interface. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will concentrate only on the works in part one.

Artists' Books as Intersection of Codex and Digital Environment:

Two key conventions of the digital or electronic environment are its scroll-like presentation on the screen and its interactivity. A work which introduces the first of these conventions is Giulio Tambellini's The Journey: Scriddler's Procession Book. Unlike a conventional codex, Scriddler's Procession consists of a number of independent intaglio-printed sheets of paper, rolled out from a cylindrical container and read as a scroll. As each sheet is of a different length when the scroll is unrolled, the edge of one page positions and marks itself in relation to the page and image below it. As a means of navigation, such edges and spatial relationships become, along with the thickness of the scroll still to be unravelled, the haptic equivalents of the progress gauge to the right of computer screen's window interface.

The second convention of digital or electronic work, interactivity, is foregrounded in Sonja Strafella's The Violinator. The book includes manipulating 'buttons' which, when activated, transform the imagery and thus the content of the book. In Drucker's terms, the interpretive act of manipulating this active, interactive and dynamic form seems to suggest and prefigure the hypertextual function of the digital form. Of further interest to me is Strafella's decision to bind The Violinator as a concertina-fold book. By doing this it is possible to view the book as a singular, double or multiple set of pages transforming the codex into something more complex, more suggestive and non-linear. In digital terms, the possibility of having multiple windows open on the screen for comparison and referral through alternation,

toggle and change, is provocatively suggested in Strafella's binding decision.

Although neither the Tambellini nor the Strafella have any conscious relationship with digital media - both containing handmade intaglio imagery and bindings - what seems most provocative is their non-conventional form and language. It is in the exploitation of non-linear narrative strings, book structure and materiality that the language of these forms seems to speak of the digital.

The singular recto vs. verso and double page nature of a codex's paper pages is provided with an interesting and important tweak in Belinda Blignaut's Antibody. By replacing paper with acetate, the viewer is able to glimpse elements of the book's totality. When the pages are turned, the transparent accretion of imagery and text defines, updates and redefines the narrative on each side of the spine. It is important to acknowledge that Antibody, a bleak and foreboding little square, in which cover boards and interior are marvelously integrated, operates through visual texts and images bleeding upwards between the pages. What are signified through the interplay between transparent and opaque information are deeply imbedded wounds and the passage of time over which damage is done and healing needs to take place. As the acetate facilitates this content through each successive turn of the page, so the analogical Antibody becomes metaphorical of Drucker's 'program' for the way in which the digital image may be overlapped, made transparent and brought into conjunction with other visual phenomena.

Cheryl Gage's A Dedication to the History of Medusa exploits more than transparent layers, foldout pages and the potential for non-sequential narrative emulating the manner in which we can negotiate information on a screen. Here, Gage acknowledges, as part of the imagery of her domestic goddess, the digital origins and manipulations of the original images. She

includes screen grab information, such as clock and date data, battery life and other information associated with a digital source. Through the inclusion of these visual/technical elements Gage builds her content by associating her historical protagonist with the contemporary moment. Along with self-conscious remnants of the digital manipulation of her imagery, Gage's book depicts the digital tensions of her domestic goddess.

Fascinating examples of hybrids of digital animation and the sequential turning of pages in a conventional codex are William Kentridge's Macba Flipbook and Cyclopedia of Drawing. All aspects of these books have been digitally prepared and manipulated from existing historical texts – the former includes a series of charcoal and colour drawings onto Jeroni Marva's 1933 Curs Practic de Gramatica Catalana Grau Elemental, and the latter, a series of charcoal and coloured crayon drawings imposed upon the original book published in 1924 by the American Technical Society, Chicago, U.S.A.. Kentridge has scanned and printed the drawings upon the original texts and faithfully reproduced the paper quality, including foxing, in these editions. Notwithstanding the handmade visual elements of these digitally produced books, the filmic and animated element is only brought to life when the reader rapidly flips the pages to reveal their stories. Macba Flipbook and Cyclopedia of Drawing provoke an intriguing interplay between the haptic and the digital, the filmic and the static in book form. The hand controls the pace at which the narrative unfolds and indeed at what point the narrative should begin and end. The physical structure of the codex is the dynamic agent here, reminding us of the centrality of sequential drawing on paper in the history of film animation. What is also of importance here is the dominance of the image over the text, a rare occurrence in a tradition where visual illustration often serves the 'higher' need of the textual narrative.⁴

⁴ The Livre d'artiste luxury editions of the late C19th and early C20th provide examples of such a hierarchy.

What I restate here is that it is often in the mediating space of the Artist's Book, what Drucker (2003:np) also terms, 'the phenomenal book', that we find a shift from the codex as

fixed artifact to that of a work whose existence is contingent on the active engagement of the reader. Always true...this principle re-imagines the space of the book through artistic imagination, revealing the dynamic properties of the codex.

I am intrigued to find these qualities beginning to enter the commercial novel, albeit slowly, when visionary writers such as Jonathan Safran Foer exploit the dynamic properties operational in Artists' Books in an attempt to expand and deepen the content of their narrative. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Foer exploits the conventions of the flip book in suggesting a hypertextual, parallel narrative with which to end his book. By altering text through strikethroughs and the dramatic manipulation of leading and kerning; with the conventional typeface sometimes imposed upon by seemingly haptic additions in red pen; and with the text block dismantled and redistributed in a manner which recalls Stephen Mallarmé's seminal 19th century Un Coup de Dés, Foer explodes the notion that the textual narrative of the novel alone carries the full responsibility of constructing and delivering content.

This active, participatory, multimedia and phenomenal experience, so familiar a convention in the world of electronic gaming needs, it would seem, some mediation and hand-holding in the world of the book and the visual image.⁵

With this in mind, there are two books which present themselves as both bound codexes, as well as digital presentations. The first, Abrie Fourie's Philippians 4.8, is a digital book consisting of screensaver images which

⁵ Marcus Neustetter's (2001:5) curatorial decisions, in switch on/off, acknowledged that: "Viewing works of new technology also requires a new approach...The majority of the art audience in South Africa has not been exposed to such conditions of viewing and therefore many require an entry point to such works. One solution is to illustrate the transition of artists' creative interventions by showing works by the same artist, related in subject matter, but realised in different media." What resulted was a visual dialogue, facilitating entry into, and reception of, digital from conventional media.

rapidly appear and change in a matrix of 16 blocks on the screen. The seemingly random changes, both in order and location within the 16 blocks are undermined and ordered somewhat by the position of the cursor. When the cursor is moved into a block, subtitles appear providing a textual theme to the images playing out in that block. As visual representations of the chaos and unexpected beauty of the urban environment stream onto the screen, the viewer is encouraged, as the biblical passage asks, to think on "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" imploring us to reconsider our notions of beauty. The codex, which accompanies the digital book, when flipped through, provides a starting point for the observation and rendering of the complex mutability and changeability of the urban world. This is something which the flip book can suggest and prefigure for more complex digital arrangements.

The second book is Gordon Froud's Turning the Tables, a flip book of manipulated black and white images. Here, Froud presents both a digital and a flip book codex of tables turning in space, gaining speed and morphing into new forms as a witty pun on both the subject matter and the form of their rotation. In interrogating the stasis associated with black and white photography by presenting sequential images to be flipped through manually, a wry comment is made on the book's ability to reconfigure iconic references, alter them and undermine the stasis associated with the medium. It is, in fact, the book which gives rise to the digital work as the codex, in this form, has the ability to realise first what the digital can achieve.

Tambellini, one of South Africa's most prolific makers of Artists' Books, attempts to combine the digital screen's elements of rapid update, transparency, image manipulation, animation and the potential to read multiple open windows simultaneously in his Pig's Ear Merger. Layered scans of direct male relatives are overlaid with digital photographs to show different levels of identity through genes and blood. The result is a quick journey through a slice

of time in which lineage, self and other are explored. In this form, the artist expects the viewer to handle each page of the book⁶ as if it were a window open on a screen and consider the subtle transformations which each screen manipulation offers. The pages appear like transforming 'screen grabs', each locking in the graphic manipulation of the image through time. As the pages are unbound, it seems possible to reorder them and reconstruct the book afresh with each viewing.

Tambellini's dot matrix-printed Nice Game Nasty Stuffing was drawn using the relatively random accuracy of a mouse, this work derives its meaning from the digitisation of haptically derived images and texts which explore the seemingly random transmission and ravages of AIDS.

A book which exploits photography as a particular digital process is Abrie Fourie's Giant Protea. Here, the artist presents images of casual and available sex amidst, what Clive Kellner (1995:np) describes as "the bizarre back drop of Afrikaaner, Voortrekker, narrative. It is impossible to sanction such acts in our society, that is why these images are so provocative". What is of interest to me is Fourie's cutting of squares and rectangles into the page which evokes the censor's strip. What appears to be a deliberate and strategic cut on the recto becomes arbitrary and non-aligned on the verso allowing for seemingly independent, new visual and content-based relationships to be forged between the main image and the view-through-the-cut. For me, what is suggested here is a haptic program of hypertexts, 'links' to an ever expanding body of information and inference, remote and virtual, yet surprisingly attainable, even if the link is, in Kellner's terms, "a bizarre one".

Donna Kukama's Hair seems to embody the idea of images as a set of singular steps in an attempt at becoming something other: in this case, the transformation of hair into visual static, visible noise, a silent transmuted

⁶ The pages of Pig's Ear Merger are presented unbound.

otherness locked on paper as a record of some form of digital interference. In becoming, through this interference, something unlike hair, Kukama chooses the conventions of the book as a means of recording this temporal electronic event. The book thereby seems the ideal space of recording what, in digital form, and like the static which builds up on hair, might be rapidly lost.

Chris Diedericks' Bitter Love was digitally printed by the artist and bound in mauve linen with a slipcase by the Johannesburg-based master bookbinder Peter Carstens. The seven linoleum cuts are hand printed, stamped and signed by the artist. In working one's way through this book, the reader/viewer is confronted with a multitude of graphic and book conventions. But it is in the act of manipulation: turning, folding out, folding back, viewing one set of visual phenomena through the visual trace of another, revealing and hiding, that the full extent of the book as a virtual space is revealed.

It seems fitting to end with another work by Tambellini. I find parallels between his Breaking Doll and Diederick's Bitter Love, not only in the overlaps in content but also in the way in which both the haptic and the digital find a home within the coverboards. Hidden in the page binding for each digitally and self-consciously manipulated page of Breaking Doll is a drawing on buff coloured paper. These literal pull-downs or pop-ups infuse the work with a wonderful interactivity which reminds the viewer of the work's source as well as its hypertextual links to a field of related ideas, concepts and processes.

As these two books unfold, their very dimensions alter. They seem to breathe, reach for and reveal information, seemingly from outside of themselves, and then produce more, literally from within. These are exquisitely conceived and crafted objects and seem apt examples of what Drucker (2003:np) terms: "An interface that creates a platform for interpretive acts to be noticed as such, called to our attention as performance" marking a shift from book as artefact or vehicle of delivery of content, to "the living, dynamic nature of works as produced by interpretive acts."

References:

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Note:

The digital catalogue of the exhibition Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface can be viewed at www.theartistsbook.org. The website itself was launched at the Aardklop Arts Festival exhibition opening.