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Book: Medium and Object

It is difficult to imagine modern civilisation without the medium of the book. It hands down to posterity cultural values, truths and ideas, and forms relations between the individual and the world he belongs to. In a natural way the book, with all its formal and notional richness, has penetrated into areas of modern art, occupying the spaces between its various disciplines, opening a field of interdisciplinary activities that incorporate experiences of graphics, painting, sculpture, installation, video, performance, music and literature.

'Border' qualities introduced by the artist's book seem to be its most dynamic and powerful feature. These 'borders' allow the liberation of the book from its own formal tradition and the development of a new, at the same time well recognised, language of creative communication.

Although traces of thinking 'differently' about the book can be found in the Middle Ages and the Baroque period, it was in the 1960s and '70s, mainly through activities in the field of conceptual art and Fluxus, that artists' books acquired fully independent and self-referential status. The analytical character of many books of that period examined the very form and its semantic possibilities. They were conceptual and minimal books, books of signs and notations, and books about books. Their structure was spare and precise, corresponding with Wittgenstein's thought that what can be said can be said clearly and the rest experienced in silence.

Jaroslaw Kozlowski was one of the first Polish artists to influence the development of the book treated as a single, philosophical exercise. In his books he examines relations between reality and meta-reality, language and meta-language. Reality, a book work from 1972, reduces a chapter from Kant's Kritik der reiner Vernunft to punctuation marks, parentheses and question marks. They are the parts of
language which constitute a parallel reality, eluding confrontation with that which can be named or described. Another of his books, *Grammar* (1973), contains all grammatical forms and tenses of the verb 'to be' juxtaposed with the time structure of a calendar.

This was also a time of renewed interest in the experiments of the avant-garde. Anatol Stern, a poet and artist of the 1920s, wrote:

'...words have their weights, sounds, colours, contours; they occupy a place in the space. These are decisive values of words: the shortest words (sounds) and the longest words (books).'

This statement found its reflection in many book works, particularly those connected with concrete poetry. Stanisław Dróżdż concentrated his investigations around 'concept-shapes'. For him, a book is a three-dimensional sign, an independent sentence in which the fourth element plays an important role. His *Klepsydra* is an eminent example of a book meant as a meditation on the flow of time. The form of a sand-clock is made of the word być ('to be') put in the future, present and past tenses. In 1977, Dróżdż covered the walls of Foksal Gallery in Warsaw with the letters of the word 'between', though nowhere do they actually arrange themselves into this word. It is the presence of the reader that animates the abstract composition, creates relations and transforms the space into a semantic field of which he himself becomes a significant element. This work visualised the idea that we are not living by the word but actually in it.

In many book works, the very process of reading is implicit for the understanding of the whole object. The book *here and now* (J. H.) is a double pyramid made of the computer printed word 'and'. Opened, it reveals the inside to be light sensitive, containing hand-written spirals composed of the words 'here' & 'now'. The light sensitive notation changes, indeed vanishes, while droplets of sweat on the readers' fingers leave permanent traces on a photographic emulsion. 'The destructive power of time' is a simple concept: indeed, it is a consequence of using an object as a metaphor. This is not as important here as looking at the process of changing some definite fragment of our realm. Thus, a book is understood as an active form of being. 'Nothing is lost, nothing is left without consequences', wrote
H. Bergson at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'Everything that exists carries imprints of events on itself.'

A book can refer to some abstract space (and thus evoke some meta-place) but can also be connected with a concrete place, its historical and geographical contexts. Among them are book works which refer to the concept of a map or a guide. *Handy map of Hiroshima* (J. H.), for example, is based on a tourist map of that city. Here, all streets were embossed on tracing paper. Deprived of their names, anonymous lines were intended for touch rather than for a sightseeing tour. This folding book is twelve meters long, though it can go into a small black box that fits between two hands.

Another of my books, *brick-case* (1993), is an item of personal luggage. A halved brick, provided with a glass suitcase marked with latitude and longitude, contains two books. They are made of Japanese paper permeated with wax. One contains fragments of my handprint, the other catalogued pieces of ash. Two compasses pointing at each other suggest the beginning and the end of mental and physical wandering.

Treating a book as a whole and meaningful item is the way to go beyond linguistic limitations as well as to reveal features of a book that usually remain unnoticed. Joanna Adamczewska's volumes are no longer silent. They are audible as much as tangible. Her *Acoustic Books* are made of different kinds of paper, glue, and sometimes sand or small objects. The books are both instruments and music scores, performed during special concerts.

Structural inventions involving the arrangement and differentiation of pages, tears, folds, cuts, etc. introduce rhythmical values and make the object become an orchestration of some definite fragment of space and time. It acquires features similar to a piece of music. Hence the reader of a book is also its performer. The process of reading/performing a book is as important an art as the art of making it. Engaging the viewer in both mental and physical ways, a book creates a possibility of special, individualised relations between the art object and the person to whom it is addressed. *Cardiocord* by J. H. is a book-instrument whose covers are joined by rubber string that one can play on.
Relations between music and the visual arts enjoy a long and rich tradition, not only because of the phenomenon of synesthesia, which according to scientists is an inborn feature of the brain, but because from the very beginning music notations have expressed the order of the world and changed along with the alterations of its image. Nowadays, when matter is perceived as microscopic vibrating waves whose accidental resonances create our reality, John Cage's statement that 'Everything we do is music' is no longer only a poetic metaphor. Unsurprisingly, music scores have played an important part in artists' books. It is enough to recall the work of John Cage and Dick Higgins, and other artists connected with Fluxus including Hanne Dabroven, Tom Johnson and Boguslaw Schaeffer.

Music for inert repetitions (J. H.) is a series of music scores based on a recording of one heartbeat scanned into a stave. Each book composes one of many possible modules of the narrative. These books assume the form of a pocket edition, or become a part of some more definite situation. In these cases, opening the book activates the sound of a heartbeat in a speaker installed in the back of a seat.

Underlining the importance of communicating on intellectual as well as sensual levels, many artists use different materials as components of their books. The choice of materials, however, is not so much dictated by their aesthetic features as by the cultural codes embodied in them, and by ideas and emotions they evoke. Andrzej Szewczyk uses old dictionaries. He sinks them in wax, pierces and fills holes with melted lead. Through their visual and sensual features (smell), these alchemical exhibits provoke many associations. Lead is a poison, an instrument of pain and torture, but also the essential material in old printing technologies.

Signs of computer language engraved on clay tablets in Robert Szczerbowski’s Treatise refer not only to the universal ambitions of 'the global village' but also situate our own civilisation, with its obsession with novelty and progress on a par with the old, outworn cultures of the past.

Form and medium constitute an integral part of the message. A book of Sonnets by Wojciech Bruszewski is a computer program which generates random series of letters - senseless text arranged in the form of sonnets and read in an automatic
voice. This perverse modern poetry is an ironic commentary on opportunities given by information and communication technology. But even a blank sheet of paper turns out to be a multi-layered carrier. Its blankness is an intellectual metaphor. Its substantiality has its own history, influenced by the context of the place and time of its origin. In his *Manuscript*, A. Szewczyk uses paper from the time of the avant-garde. He violates its sixty-year-old virginity by a gesture of notation, committed beyond mental processes, in noble sepia. In a work by J. H., an office paper becomes a different carrier when, typed over and over, it slowly transforms into a fragile, vulnerable scrap of the individually lived *History*. An interesting *Library* of the everyday is created by layers of old wallpaper taken down by Mikołaj Smoczyński. We can touch these 'pages' and, in our imagination, follow the traces of the discretely revealed past.

Artists treat books in various ways. They make them or employ already existing volumes. Scientific elaborations, chronicles, diaries, albums, dictionaries, periodicals and other documents acquire new meaning when incorporated into the language of art. They are altered or used as ready-mades, questioning their function and the way they define the world. Invariably up-to-date directories and periodicals treated by Jacek Sałaj become a source of momentary sensual pleasure. They are soft and nice, or they resemble the stones that we like to collect. They don't, however, give us any factual information.

Personal data in my *Passport* are replaced by an ephemeral record of my cardiogram. This most intimate, personal signature is, however, indistinguishable from a hundred other, similar ones. Another of my books, *Self-portrait*, also oscillates around the problem of identification. It juxtaposes the instructions one has to follow in the photo-booth (susceptible to various interpretations, e.g., 'select background') with a matrix of official forms, where personal data are confirmed by the required photograph. A blown up, indifferent picture behind official writing remains unchanged while the original, contact pictures are fading away.

Books of traces such as diaries and albums are both evidence of the time and of our tribal affiliation. They talk about the past but also predict the future. *Eliza* by Henryk Gajewski is a family album started at the date of his daughter's birth. It consists of eighteen pages, each one with a designated place for a photo and an
adequate caption. But these sentences appoint future dates and places, anticipating and forcing events which are yet to happen.

The form of a book allows for joining different cultural and historical contexts into one volume. *The book of Life and Death*, printed by the Correspondence de Artes (Museum of Book Art) in Lodz, serves as an example. A book can also engage in critiques of the image-based media culture that shapes our perception of the world. Piotr Uklanski’s book, *The Nazis*, is a set of more than one hundred photos of film stars in uniforms of the Gestapo, Wermacht etc. This seemingly innocent gesture provoked many discussions, not only in reference to the morbid fascination of fascistic aesthetics in the film industry. Deprived of any commentary, the photos remain pure facts open for any interpretations and manipulations, revealing the unclear condition of truth in a media-infiltrated world reduced to a virtual 'now'.

The development of artists' books went hand in hand with democratic trends in art. Being a handy medium of communication, a book could break through the monopoly of official machines of art politics and art promotion and create an alternative cultural network. Multiples and artists' publications, often made by simple means on cheap paper and distributed through independent and personal channels, have been playing an important role in the face of economic and political constraints. The modernist concept of an assemblage-book, a publication made jointly by a few authors, has emerged again. An example of such a production is *Fabryka/Factory*, a homemade publication from the first year of martial law in Poland. In an opening manifesto, Ryszard Waśko stated:

'Fabryka participates in the creation of co-existence within the general framework of art, society and everyday life.
Is a combined effort of artists.
Has an open form.
Eliminates the divisions, classifications and tendencies in art motivated by commercial, economical and political aspects.
Is self government and independent.
Is a place of work and activities.
...organises an alternative circulation of information.
Realises various kinds of art events.
Is financed by artists.'

This manifesto is also applicable to other publications which belonged to so-called 'whip-round culture', for example the magazine Tango (Lodz, 1983-6), Oj dobrze już dobrze (O.K, O.K., Warsaw, 1984-5), Luxus (Wroclaw, 1981-6) and others. Apart from their 'public' function they provided an important working space integrating artistic milieus.

The approach presented so far derives from a widely understood 'modernist tradition'. Besides this, there is a trend which reverts to the old book archetypes - to the notion of a holy book, a book of revelation, containing some spiritual or universal truth. Their visual and literary narratives combine metaphors, allegories and symbols of various cultures with personal notations. A reader is drawn into a mysterious and inaccessible (for the uninitiated) world of hermetic associations. Such are books by Zbigniew Makowski or Anna Maria Bauer. Krescenty Glazik's Landscape scroll, made by means of photography and engraving, is a contemporary version of the medieval 'Book of Nature'. Here, the book serves as an instrument to restore the order of some hierarchical system of values and meanings which broke down in the twentieth century.

Volumes accumulated in J. Kozlowski's Libraries and Reading Rooms are subjected to the aggressive act of isolation. The artist stated:

'Pasted together or painted over, methodologically, page after page, with white paint, skewered on metal rods, confined on shelves, deprived of their individual identity, they testify to their mute, useless presence. And no more than that.'

Books have accompanied us through the ages. They became ready-found (to use Duchamp's term) signs which our consciousness fills again and again with new meanings and senses. The way we organise our thoughts reflects the way we want to organise the world. For G. W. F. Hegel the truth was a whole. A hundred years later, T. Adorno wrote that a whole is false. Resignation from a singular, definitive content of a book and treating a book as a process results in works which are realised in series or in an interactive mode. It is worth noticing that books existing
only in the form of electronic impulses, as documentation or copies of some never-existing originals, sit well with the simulacrum we experience every day.

Whether it gets lost and found within the Internet or provokes an intimate, one to one meeting, an artist's book reveals the strong position of the notion of a book in our culture. A position which, despite some opinions, does not seem to be threatened. The development of this form of creative expression cannot be accurately foreseen, though it is evident that the book is extending its activities in unexpected directions. It constantly confirms its existence, produces its own identities and extends the borders of its language.