They are everywhere in contemporary galleries, regularly uncategorized, commonly ironic if not downright comic, sometimes edgy, outrageous, frequently enthralling—namely (though there is no established name for them) those foreclosed book forms that manifest a no longer viable work in any verbal oeuvre. In their often amusing refusal of all normal use, such sculptural rather than functional books work against themselves when isolated for display. They subtract meaning from their own vehicles. In so doing, they sacrifice text on the self-imposed rectangular altar—the reductive material slab—of geometric form. For what kind of aesthetic thinking is this neutered textual shape a conceptual platform? Addressing this question means sorting through a proliferating mode of museum object, whether solo or lodged in installations or tableaux—an objet d’art for which there is as yet no good, or at least no going, term. But in search of designation, we may in fact get closer to the conceptual instigation at hand. Or not at hand: that’s more to the point—held off in most cases like no book typically is, permanently shut tight, linguistic content in every sense shut up.

**Determinations**

Book art, book sculpture, book-objects, not-books, dummy books, book-works; books found, appropriated, altered, distressed, rehabbed. Or in the terms of one contemporary book “surgeon,” book “adaptations” or “autopsies,” whose contents are operated upon under the knife in Brian Dettmer’s work, hence no longer operable as text. In a piece from 2009, for instance (fig. 1), black-and-white sculptural plates from H. W. Janson’s 1959 *Key Monuments in the History of Art*, as originally printed horizontally
and vertically both, have had their figures “carved” out. With enough pages entirely removed in between these isolated forms, their recessed stacking produces a new sculptural “monument” in a crowded bas relief all

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In work of this sort, the found book, once adopted from the archive of print circulation, is then “adapted” to some new protocol of museum display.

One may have heard the whole range of terms for such altered books even while seeing a mere fraction of the objects they try collecting. I had at first taken to dubbing all such works *bibliobjets*. But, pursued more closely, terminology unfolds a certain further logic. As a museum rubric, *book sculptures* can’t quite suffice, though it’s a fair enough starting point if broadly understood. Nor *artist’s books* either, in the ordinary collector’s sense. Far from it, since many of these book forms seem to take the leisured interart finesse of those early modernist *livres d’artistes* popularized by Matisse and Picasso as the prettified foil—in graphically enhanced belles lettres—to their own latter-day contortions. Book forms more crafty than artful, therefore, may seem bent on displacing the tradition of *beaux livres* with that of the *faux livre*. Mostly unpaged, these recent display objects point to a materialist sense not of the artist’s book but of book art—an art made of books only by the reworking of their raw (rather than verbal or illustrative) material.

Taken as a whole, the phenomenon would seem to include three chief manifestations in the works one keeps seeing. Book sculpture is something done to a book, done with it and others like it, or done in place of it—alteration, assemblage, or simulation. To have missed noticing at least

1. In an “altered book” of the next year by Dettmer, a volume on the history of set design called *The Theater*, enough textual phrases remain nested at random within the 3-D palimpsest framed by the binding’s own carved-out proscenium—like the receding perspective of stage flats—that the surviving textual snippets seem to anticipate and even perform the book’s own fate in dismemberment: “adaptation in . . . found drama . . . here again bound up . . . representation of space between.” For a further sense that such “book autopsies”—or perhaps vivisections is more like it—achieve something beyond just a sampling of graphic material, more like a spatialized skimming of the illustrated text all told, see another of Dettmer’s works, in installation form, that returns temporality to his typical process. This happens in three time-lapse digital videos that “read” every page in its partial or total disappearance, over three thousand shots each, of a three-volume world history. Thus “cutting” not only *into* but *between* pages, and with the adapted books themselves mounted on the wall across from the three rapid-fire projections, Dettmer’s race through *The Chronicle of the Twentieth Century* is summed up in its speed and deletions, at the lexical as well as page level, under its pared-away titles on its three adjacent spines: *Chronicle, Chronic, Con*. The result, in Dettmer’s sculptural as well as moving-image précis, is three “conned” books surveyed with a care no less than incisive even as they are committed to selective and compressed memory traces.

2. As Western culture’s first factory product, the book is returned from duplicability to uniqueness by the artist’s book and then to disuse by book sculpture. Working out his Marxist account of “immaterial labor” in the tradition descended from Duchamp’s unassisted readymades, John Roberts notes in passing, against the normative nature of the book as mass-made product, the wholly exceptional case of artist’s books as not “subject to a process of reproduction” (John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* [London, 2007], p. 75). What I am calling demediation would set in when the singular book is no longer subject even to reading.
some of these museum pieces is as unlikely as it would be to miss in any one of them its typifying mix of aggression and levity.

With many such gallery objects, the term altered book is useful enough, often designating an appropriated and reconceived shape—as with Dettmer’s plastic surgeries, a new form of the assisted readymade. Yet this doesn’t get at the fundamental transformation involved in bringing the book object into museum space to begin with, where it becomes a thing merely discarded if not actively tampered with, disused, or detexted—in a word, and en route to a general principle, demediated. In and beyond the work of book forms in sculptural reduction, demedia
tion names, in short, the process by which a transmissible text or image is blocked by the obtruded fact of its own neutralized medium. In our immediate concern with the equivocal bookhood of the things thus displayed before us, the crucial distinction of their naming rests entirely within—hinged, as it were, on an invisible hyphen. Book-work is what the thing is, or at least once was. Bookwork is what it does. What tasks, then, does bookwork regularly set itself? Or what, one by one, are its works there to display? As form rather than content, in their manifestation as the hollowed or occluded shell of text, how might such “sculptural” objects rework our idea of the book form itself?

And how, in doing so, could they fail to take up a place in that intersecting subfield of general semiotics and material culture known as book studies? “Of all the ways to use books,” opens a recent monograph in this disciplinary mode, “exhibiting them may be the oddest.” That’s a rela-

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3. In the background of this coinage lies the influential title by J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge, 1999), where the operations of electronic image and text rehearse previous message forms (the McLuhanesque argument) in their upgraded mode of transmission. Instead of this layering of former by present functions, what I am calling demedia
tion peels away the message service, leaving only the material support.

4. Alice Schreyer, preface to Bradin Cormack and Carla Mazzio, Book Use, Book Theory: 1500–1700 (exhibition catalog, University of Chicago Library, 8 Mar.–17 June 2005), p. vii. In the exemplary form of Cormack and Mazzio’s Book Use, Book Theory, book studies looks back to the book as an instrument as well as a medium, a tool both of social and material praxis—not just a repository of useful cultural data but a mechanical construct for its processing, where page layout cues a certain performance by the reader. As the comma of the authors’ title implies, book use should thus be intimately caught up with any book theory. Given the evidence of this volume, one might say that the how-to book of early modern cultural circulation goes straight to the broader cultural question of how to book, how to enroll and program information. In this way the so-called instruction manual is matched in other registers by more fully manualized forms of data access, including for instance the layering of pages in the flap-book format of Renaissance anatomy drawings discussed by Cormack and Mazzio, the reader guided in a three-dimensional tour from skin down to bones. And since, on such evidence, book history must be in part a theory of use, textless bookworks are part of that history—if only in the mode of decisive (rather than incidental) disuse.
tively mild irony in context. What, though, if the things on display, in galleries rather than rare-book libraries, were not real books at all, but mere things—or volumes so reshaped as to bear no relation to shelved codices? What way is that to “use books”—or to dupe (rather than duplicate) them, for that matter? The answer: it is one way of studying their material preconditions, and this in the absence of their function as conduits—a function absent and gone but not forgotten. For nonbooks serve to itemize the features of book-based textuality that may otherwise be subsumed and elided by the channels of transmission. What stands denied by the unapproachable book shape of gallery rather than conservationist display, and thus gets all the more forcefully identified by negation, are the instrumental and informational processes alike of literacy’s social function. Two levels of praxis are thus overruled, while also reasserted, by such disuse, such dysfunction: physical uptake as well as discursive intake. So if demediation has its place in media theory, the diverse objects to be contemplated in the coming pages, in whatever numbers or at whatever scale, are—and in the venerable aesthetic as well as historical and disciplinary sense of the term—each in themselves book studies.

Architexts

Imagine the world’s largest book sculpture. More than one million square feet of quadratic geometry composed of four identical open codices, twenty-four stories each in elevation—durable limited editions in steel and glass, each repeating the book form hundreds of times in the vertical format of its separate windows. Below these open-book towers: a vast fantastic warren of a library, accessed separately from each single megatext. A Borgesian dream come true—11 million volumes and still counting, each in turn, like the windows above ground, the synecdochic image of the whole. To encounter such a conceptual book sculpture, undergirded in just this infrastructural way and not imaginary at all, see the real thing standing—and burrowing—in no less visible a site than the French capital. Its 1996 nameplate: Bibliothèque Nationale, Site François Mitterand. While its four elevated folios rise from a sparse urban esplanade, its underground atrium harbors a symbolic forest (a large stand of fifty-foot trees) that has never been, nor ever will be, denuded and milled in the service of book production. Nature meets culture at their mutual point of no return.

Rising to a comparable urban scale in the preceding decade was an equally monumental public structure, temporary in this case, built up entirely above ground. It was made not in the abstract form of but instead out of the countless shapes of real rather than simulated volumes—the
world’s largest found-book sculpture. Designed and orchestrated for a central square in Buenos Aires by conceptual artist Marta Minujín in 1983, after the fall of the junta and its regime of repression, this is the architectural simulation called *The Parthenon of Books / Homage to Democracy* (fig. 2). Previously banned volumes deported to storage during the dictatorship were uncarted and reassembled over a three-week period into a full-scale model of the Acropolis temple, symbolic site of unfettered human expression.⁵ One by one, by the hundreds and thousands, once sequestered texts, given new airing, serve to refashion the pedestals and architraves, the pillars and uplifts, of the *demos* itself. No irony attends the compressed (because temporary) inaccessibility of their contents, their unbudgeable crushed covers, the subsumption of their individuating texts to towering marmoreal form. Each is merely the increment of a collectively liberated bibliography, their words freed from interdiction even if presently illegible. These books must pass through their sculptural reduction as massed shapes—and their architectonic cynosure as such—on the way back to a newly availed reading. When the installation was dismantled after a few

weeks, and the books themselves redistributed among the relevant libraries, a posttotalitarian national archive was thus restored. No darkening sense here, any more than with the Paris construction, that electronic texts would soon arrive to render any such temple to reading more nostalgic than triumphalist.

**Books@risk**

Volumes actual but deactivated versus architectural “metaphors” for them in right-angled high-rise towers: an initial distinction in book sculpture is thus exemplified at an anomalous metropolitan scale. But if any such “architextual” Parthenon—let alone canonical pantheon—were assembled by a book sculptor today, it would no doubt be couched in high irony rather than in a spirit of civic recuperation. Left to weather and rot in a city square, or gather dust in a installation space, it would bear witness in this way to the strictly residual nature, the historical redundancy, of its components.⁶ One readily suspects, in fact, that the increasing prevalence of multivolume book sculpture stands in inverse proportion to the premium placed on stored volumes themselves. In all likelihood in any given case, these works are built up with library castoffs—which have been microfilmed or digitized—that now appear in used-book stalls, if not recycling bins, across the Western world. The waning empire of the book often seems part of the point in this remodeling of an extraneous backlog. And that is part, in turn, of what minimizes one’s recoil from the disused and sometimes abused books in such sculptural composites: the sense that the damage would otherwise have been worse, the superannuated objects assigned to scrap heap or dumpster rather than gallery floor.

In what comes to seem a homeostatic system of institutional economies, the museum space remobilizes a library’s expendable matter in the age of data processing, with textual surplus rescued from pulping for sculptural irony. In general, any such technological eclipse, of one medium by a successor, finds refuge in two prominent venues: not only in the museum but also in the academy. It is therefore no surprise that in literary and historical scholarship alike, book studies is a growth industry that

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⁶ Similar historical forces seem at work in the cottage industry of “reading women” calendars, daybooks, and other point-of-sale image banks of this sort appearing from specialty presses and museum publication departments (otherwise, of course, ordered online) that have flourished inversely with the rise of electronic rather than paper reading: images raided from earlier centuries of realist painting in order to evoke a slower and more leisureed time of consumption. See Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago, 2006), p. 2. The present consideration of book sculpture looks to the 3-D equivalent of those painted books whose pages one can never turn, represented on canvas not just in scenes of reading but in what I have called the bibliographic still life.
often seems fueled by threats of the book’s own passing—as if the loam of the discipline’s recent intellectual ferment were the compost pile of cellulose itself. Certainly that’s how book artists often treat the rumored supersession of the codex. The former paperwork of signage is done in by the warping of form itself in books found and mounded, dumped, compacted, trashed, or axed through, where a more concrete idea of the book form arises by demediation from an abasement of the material base itself. In this sense, again, book-works are a subfield of book history, where wreckage aspires to new recognition.

In 2008 the architectural magazine *Volume*, building on the play of its own name, put out a call to artists for works under the rubric “The Last Book.” Responses included a massive stacking by book sculptor Adam Bateman (fig. 3), where several hundred books in striated, sagging rows, all spines inward, averted and illegible, and bent out of shape under uneven vertical pressure, are nonetheless squared off at top and corners in the mode of a huge minimalist block—modernist museum object par excellence, with its fitting of form to the rectilinear space that contains it. There is no one-and-only “last book” here, just the collective fact of outlasted utility. Remember those Sony ads for ebooks, with their emancipatory “paging” of an onscreen novel shown alongside a bulky pile of old-fashioned actual books too cumbersome to take on vacation with you. Given the sunset of print’s hegemony, such marketing images register the same cultural forces that have in part lent the dated piles of books they pathetically conjure an unusual new prominence in the isolation wards—and obsolescence chambers—of gallery space. Where volumetric conglomerations of this sort are decidedly not for reading. Where the cumbersome becomes precisely the sculptural.

The rapid atrophy of unplugged reading, thorn in the side of the bibliophile, seems instead a frequent spur to conceptual bookwork. These

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8. Elsewhere, in a tradition of book towers and ziggurats familiar from the work of such American and European book sculptors as Buzz Spector and Matej Krén, the Canadian artist Tom Bendtsen builds room-high cylinders of discarded volumes approached from without, like medieval towers, by curved staircases composed of more of the same. These oversized composites appear under scholastic titles like 1999’s *Argument # 6* (eight thousand books), reminding us that all arguments may in fact be intertextual—approached at first from the outside and buttressed through adjacent references dependent, until recently, wholly on the material portability of text. A quite different approach to the reciprocal imbrication of texts occurs in recent work by New York book artist Doug Beube, in which two or three found books at a time have their pages interstitched by aluminum zippers in a variable do-it-yourself composite appearing under the title *Interlocutor* (2004). Again, though, it is the expendability of the given volume as library holding that sends it back into this new mutilated and crossbred circulation as objet d’art.
Figure 3. Adam Bateman, *The Flesh, the Spirit, and Father Smith* (2005).

Figure 4. Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Torn Notebook* (1996).
succeed in “museumizing” the codex as paper-based (and culturally hard-pressed) textual objet. Certainly the effect of such work is more often nostalgic than gloating, far removed from what Nicholson Baker laments in the “e-futurist” dismissal of books as “tree-corpses.” But it can’t be forgotten that the book-work—though increasing in its frequency under digital anxieties—arose to prominence during the first wave of telecommunications and its widespread boost to media self-consciousness. With the “discursive turn” in museum culture of the late 1960s, and well before the digital turn two decades later, visual art at large is often reduced by medial irony to an immobilized public “texting.” In this conceptualist epoch, the book-work as well as the textual wall-work has its decided if shifting place, from Joseph Kosuth to On Kawara, John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, and beyond. Such books are to be read instead of reading the wall—or sometimes in their very position on that wall, as in the case of a 1972 installation of Kosuth’s that Brian O’Doherty, in his influential Inside the White Cube, sees transforming the gallery as “cloister of esthetics” from “a looking room” to a “reading room.”

But more often yet, in the decades since, book-works have rendered their interiors off limits, locked down in illegible dry dock like decommissioned vessels of textual transport. Whether withdrawing under the lengthening digital shadow or not, verbal mediation is at once beneath and beyond all use in such sculptural forms—except for its contemplated absence, throwing the viewer back on an entirely associational sense of reading the nonsequential sign function of a disused cultural instrument now become, under negation, its own epitome and icon. The effect has emerged as a minor staple of contemporary museum experience. In just this postconceptualist context, the illegible book sculpture often seems stationed there as the phantom limb of signification itself. A barbed rhetorical question borrowed by Schopenhauer for The Wisdom of Life sheds an indirect light on this. “When a head and a book come into collision, and one sounds hollow, is it always the book?” No, but sometimes it is, for the

9. Nicholson Baker, Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper (New York, 2001), p. 244. So devoted is his text to the material life of the book object that his publishers have helped turn his bound diatribe—against microfilm and digitization as excuses for freeing up storage space by the destruction of books and newspapers—into a book-work of its own, its cover slightly warped and wavy blurred as if it were seen in a dreary microfilm enlargement.


book—when the collision happens in gallery space—is often in fact entirely hollow, or perhaps rock solid, which in textual terms amounts to the same thing: vacant.

Or at least deactivated, elegiac. Another overscale example: Claes Oldenburg’s twenty-one-foot high sculptural assemblage called *Torn Notebook* (1996), implanted outdoors at the University of Nebraska’s Sheldon Art Gallery (fig. 4). Cursory incisions are etched into and through its stainless steel surface, while its spiral binding is bent and stretched out of shape in a fateful dismemberment. With two of its pages torn loose and discarded at some distance on the museum ground, as if swept away by the very currents of history, the demolished bound form serves as a relic for a passing era of nonelectronic jotting. Change seems in the very air itself, where the opposable human thumb can now execute, rather than merely facilitate, the work of annotation as well as of text messaging. Note pad has been eclipsed by touchpad. Before our eyes in the gross magnification of this valedictory book sculpture, the most rudimentary codex shape has become terminally unwieldy. As with Oldenburg’s antiquated gargantuan typewriter eraser in the garden at the Hirshhorn, dispensable technologies—like the typewriter itself, like the book, like in fact handwriting even—are concretized as pure dysfunctional images when no longer determined by the efficacies of human scale, inflated to monuments rather than instruments.

**Once or Nonce Books: Found or Figured**

I have stalled awhile over the term *book sculpture*, then, for the problems it raises rather than settles. Issues of nomenclature are particularly acute when the objects in question seem to demand our *coming to terms* with them. It’s therefore appropriate, no doubt, that a literary scholar rather than an art historian would be on record with one of the most pointed appreciations of textual absence in what he at first identifies by “the somewhat cumbersome term ‘book-object.’”12 Writing over a decade and a half ago, and even then suggesting how electronic word processing had not only eroded the monopoly of the codex but further schooled us in the separation of “text” from books as its necessary carriers, Thomas Vogler itemizes those aspects of bound writing that book sculpture, whether or

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not in order to mourn it, serves to negate under his alternate and more
telling hyphenate of “the not-book.”

In addition to his own aptly chosen examples of altered or alternative
book forms, Vogler might have cited the overt similitudes by Steve Wolfe,
who paints true-scale wood sculptures of used paperbacks—photorealism
in 3-D—with even the yellowing depth of pages perfectly captured by the
striations of thickly applied tan pigment, interrupted at times by a teasing
bookmark extruded from the impenetrable mass. At a recent Whitney
retrospective, for instance, in a gallery hung with earlier modes of concep-
tualist text art in everything from stenciled lettering to neon lexemes, these
dummy books by Wolfe, affixed to the walls as trompe l’oeil images, in-
cluded Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (fig. 5) with the
enlarged Benday array of its photographic cover—as if its painted wood-
block simulation (Untitled) were actually to be named in regress A Portrait
of a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Among other such simulacra,
there was, more involuted yet, the exact duplicate not of the Magritte
painting and surrounding cover for Foucault’s 1968 This Is Not a Pipe, but
the dog-eared half-title page of the 1983 University of California Press
English edition, cover somehow ripped off—as if to say “this is not Mag-
ritte’s This Is Not a Pipe.” Nor Foucault’s either, since it’s not a book of any
sort but merely the painting of one. In the bas relief of Wolfe’s nonbook
friezes, reading is negated in the recognition of its own blocked basis.

An emphasis of this sort pervades the reprint of Vogler’s allusive cata-
logue essay “Ceci n’est pas un livre.” Retitled “When a Book Is Not a Book”
for its anthologized version, the effort is all the more explicitly to fore-
ground the criteria for noncompliance. What is it precisely about the co-
dex that a book-object isn’t? Beginning with the three-way distinction that
sets off book as “text” from a book as material object and in turn from the
book as “institutionalized mode of a composite technology” (“W,” p. 448),
Vogler sees the not-book defined by pertinent negation as, in effect, none

13. As anatomized by Vogler, a book is a “structural mechanism” with “turnable pages”
even as it is also a “sequence of moments” (whose temporal seriality, Vogler adds, “pre-enacts
the structure of subjectivity of which the book has long been a primary cultural agency” [“W,”
pp. 458–59]); it is also an object premised on functional assumptions about “scale,” about
“contents” and their physical containment, and about “reproducibility” (“W,” pp. 459–60). In
sum: a manifold mechanism, time-determined in its successive operation, human-scaled,
content-dispensing, and duplicable. Though Vogler doesn’t put it this way, a jamming of all
these functions at once is a common feature of the book-object: a nonsuccessive, entirely spatial
rather than temporal, often overscale, and verbally evacuated one-off; denied, that is, the time,
the means, the matter, and hence the very medium of reading, including its multiplication and
dissemination.
Figure 5. Oil, lithography, modeling paste, paper and wood, $8 \times 5 \frac{3}{16} \times \frac{3}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.
of these. But the process is reciprocal. Whether real and reworked or entirely simulated, found and treated or built, given or made, the nonbook limns its own absent model. In the former case of the appropriated volume under negation, Vogler rightly detects one of the precedents for this swerve from the bibliographic norm, this materialist veering, in the Situationist notion of détourner. This is the revealing “deviation” that persists into the current French designation of the appropriated codex—in the form of a “treated” (or “altered”) book—as “livre détourné,” or in other words “deviant book” (“W,” p. 456). And it is just here that Vogler subdivides exactly those aspects of the book that are deviated from by such works, including both its material format and its training ground of subjectivity.

Further, and in the flagged terms of tropological literary study, Vogler notes importantly that “unlike alternation or treatment, which operates on the individual book as physical thing, book-objects can be ‘troped’ books, figative constructs where the book as general cultural artifact is the subject for representation, imitation, or violation” (“W,” p. 459). These “troped” objects in Vogler’s sense are fictitious volumes rather than found ones, so that Steve Wolfe’s faux books, though unmentioned, would no doubt offer a limit case of minimal “turning.” But a whole range of more oblique figuration remains tacit in Vogler’s best examples. There is Byron Clercx’s 1993 Purification—redone in a “twenty-first century edition” in 2002 (fig. 6)—with a text from Francis Ponge’s prose-poem Savon (“Soap”) printed on a towel hung on a rack beneath an open volume carved from a gradually self-disposable lump of soap and silk-screened with more of the Ponge text (see “W,” p. 443). This is just the kind of effect Vogler has in mind as a “troping” of the book shape in surrogate material. Same with Clercx’s word-embossed salt-lick books mounted on lecterns and rubbed down over time by the tongues of passing cattle. But more seems “figured” in both cases than the bifold rectangle of the codex shape as a “general cultural artifact.” For these are each perishable objects in which the reception over time of an actual text is, though absent, still emblemized—a trope of consumption itself in a book’s being taken in or merely used up.

Though this is a mode of supplemental figuration not emphasized by Vogler, such a metaphoric displacement remains the most compelling “deviance” of many nonbooks, the turn that refigures some aspect of reading itself under arrest or, say, sculpts it into formal view. This concretizing gesture goes beyond the codex shape to its rhetorical force, offering particular tropes of legibility per se, its durations, its impetus in transmission, its serial ingestion, rather than merely of its bound form. For when Clercx
pieces sawed-up and laminated books together in the form of a chair and calls it Reading Context, he reminds us that all textual experience—in one historical context at least, if no longer its exclusive one—rests on the materiality of the bound volume. It does so even while providing—when scores of texts in another piece are carved into the shape of a canoe under the name Passage—the launched craft of animaginative foray. In Untitled (Power Tool) from 1992, when the same book artist carves a hammer out of cross-sectional fragments of Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors and cushions it on two sickbed pillows, the effect is a further metaphor of rhetorical force: the trope of impact itself. So, too, with those strategical deletions in Brian Dettmer’s found volume of Janson (see fig. 1), which would appear to trope a touchstone text of popularizing art history as a “key monument” in its own illustrative and resculpted compendium.

So it is that the “détourned” aspects of both simulated and treated books, which is to say of strictly figural volumes along with blatantly disfigured ones, can operate to rethink by categorical abstraction the spatio-temporal phenomenon of the text form—the activated machine of literacy—from which they deviate and devolve. The nonbook is in its own right, that is, a translation or decoding of the book form at large. Such is the textual work of its own illegibility. In an anthology called The Future of the Book, “mediologist” Régis Debray, without reference to nonbooks or book-works, enters in effect upon the same distinction Vogler makes between instance and category, a book and the book, by identifying the latter manifestation as a “symbolic object”—or in other words a cultural archetype. With deviant and “turned” books as well as with their standard-issue formats, it is this aspect of book-works that a full-scale “mediology” would address, estimating not just the bound volume’s material status as layered and hinged “power tool” but its shifting cognitive and social function within media culture.

And if the book is a symbolic object from one point of view, an icon of itself as vessel, it is from another, as the dispenser of symbolic language, not an object at all but an idea (or a set of them) in transmission. We are helped to see the inferences of this in terms adapted from Gérard Genette. After

14. Drawing out the trope here only indirectly, Vogler mentions the allusion to Nietzsche’s “philosophy with a hammer” (“W,” p. 463). More importantly, the effect of this particular book carving by Clercx is located for Vogler in a Heideggerian middle ground between equipment and its labor, tool and use—or, in our terms, between volumetric form and the bookwork it performs; see “W,” pp. 463–64.
Gutenberg, the immanence of text is no longer predominantly autographic but allographic, duplicated without loss of essence or effect. In what Genette calls the “allographic regime” of print, when I speak of my favorite book, and mean my favorite novel, I don’t as a rule have a particular volume or edition in mind. When sculptural bookwork takes any such volume or edition, single or multiple, out of reading’s line of sight, retiring or actually defacing it, this action may leave the textual system of that book, even if presently uninstanced, in every sense untouched—neither held nor eradicated. And not just because we may solace ourselves lately that the work exists in another (electronic) medium elsewhere.

The point is conceptual, not technological. It isn’t that you can slice down the middle of its grammatical conjunction all the paperback copies you want of War and Peace and array them combatively against each other in dismembered fragments on the museum floor—while resting easy that the narrative prose, if not the exact typeface of any particular edition, has been safely digitized somewhere. The effect is more immediate than that. The aesthetic charge of such demediated print forms, rent or otherwise unreadable, is their own manifest contrast with the reading they disallow—the felt absence of usable text right here and now. Felt absence, yes, but only in the service of confirmed existence as idea—in an elsewhere that is also now too. Again, demediating a text by suspending our access to its form as legible object only isolates it as mental entity. Moreover, if we shift the focus from regimes of inscription in Genette to their underlying material support, including the figurative rhetoric often generated to characterize it, we find that the suspended immanence of any text in the materially reduced book object, the gallery rather than library form, leads (beyond Genette’s vocabulary) to something like an allotropic mode of bookwork or book sculpture, with the valences of an immanent reading troped in absentia by plastic form. It is in this way, well within the aegis of book history, that such nonbooks, even with no typeface visible, study their own prototypes in the actual book.

**Anarchive**

Under the rubric book sculpture, certainly no work comes sooner to mind than the giant tomes of postwar German artist Anselm Kiefer. So

16. Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), p. 93, where, as charted in comparison with other medial forms, the level of textual manifestation (whether inscription or recitation; in other words, notation or performance) is an epiphenomenon of textual immanence, the latter remaining unchanged despite the mode of transmission.
what does contemplating his outsized sculpted volumes as not-books tell us about the cultural function of the books they aren’t? And, more specifically, what is such obviated reading there to figure? Certainly his ominous stacks of book rubble, like apocalyptic detritus, have grown synonymous with the Book of Culture in decimation—but lodged there in front of us nonetheless, for contemplation, in all their smelted mass. Perhaps in evocation of petrified cellulose, the metallic bulk of Kiefer’s bookwork is tasked repeatedly with the heavy lifting of historical memory—or the equally weighty labor of repression. Molded from lead, tin, and steel, his broad-spread and literal Book with Wings (1992–94) bears the negative uplift of textual burden itself (fig. 7). Here the connection between sculpted and collaged books in Kiefer’s work is instructive, the latter appearing at times in his gray, scorched landscapes. In his vast canvas at the Hirschorn, The Book (1979–94), an open volume of blank lead pages—a nugatory diptych in its own right—focuses the canvas just off center, with the background expanse divided in turn across two huge, thickly worked panels offering the receding perspective of a seared ashen plain. By its stationing just to the right of the central vertical axis, the cleft of the lone volume marks it all the more obviously as the Book of a World out of join and joint.

This evocation in Kiefer’s work of the text as self-cancelled biblos, definitive and encompassing in its obliteration, an annealed logos, is extended—more recognizably yet in his oeuvre—to whole primal libraries of disuse. There is The Breaking of the Vessels (1989–90), a seventeen-foot-high bookcase of oversized lead volumes and glass shards. Equally scaled and unavailing for the reading eye is The High Priestess (1985), its industrial shelving loaded with what one assumes are delphic archives to whose mysteries there will be no present or future initiation. These books are, as usual with Kiefer, entirely textless; the only lines in this case are thin wire filaments that twist uprooted among the volumetric forms, the only transparency that of shattered glass dispersed amid the volumes and strewn on the floor below them. In these anarchives of bare survival, logos has come again as chaos.

Largest and most complex of his works in this same leaden mode, and with its perhaps even more unnerving associations for modern German history, is Volkszäh lung (1991), or Population Census (fig. 8) at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, where a three-sided library of massive lead books encloses, on the floor inside, a glass polyhedron that alludes to the abstract isolation of a similar impersonal geometry in Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving of Melancholy, shown in reproduction on the nearby wall (fig. 9). Population Census is the archive of humanity itself, in a tabling of a folk, a people, that can at any point turn lethal under genocidal regimes. From its upper shelf, and linking this instrument of population control to
Figure 7. Anselm Kiefer, *Book with Wings* (1992–94).
a history of surveillance, a dilapidated 16mm camera overpainted in gray is pointed at the large metallic film strips layered inside the base of the glass polyhedron—the innards of another kind of collective modern representation, whose only visible traces of human record in this case are two or
three separate corroded photographs affixed to the metal ribbons in spaced sequence. Travesties of the single photocell of the filmic frameline, they are like nameless ID shots of the statistically enrolled.

In this collateral register of optical rather than scribal transcription, such detached and unidentified photographic images render all the more doeful the otherwise faceless archive of everyone, the overarching monument to impersonal recognition. If a single human life is often imagined respooling the film of its days at the end, in Kiefer’s sepulchral installation the human multitude is caught in a permanent freeze frame. The very anarchy of individuation is suppressed at the cost of an obliterated record. With human history as a closed book in this forlorn, deconsecrated tabernacle, the bookwork of Population Census has degenerated to a negative mold for the kind of Borgesian metaphysical fantasy to which other book artists have often turned: the open stacks of a global and continuously cross-referenced library of the world, the universal bibliothèque.

But why, one lingers to ask, should Kiefer’s signature book forms be triangulated in this one case, by reference to engraved melancholia at the pinnacle of German art, with a defunct film apparatus, camera and exposed strip both? What has the book as symbolic form to do with cinema as the seventh art, now equally prone to outmoding by digital technology? In each, to begin with, time is stopped, history with it—in one case by tabulation without narrative, in the other by fixed frames, together the tracks and gravemarks of loss, a loss figured by illegibility itself as effacement. These two reigning mass media of the last century, print and photoprint, charged as they were with recording its horrors, have each entered the archive as if it were a tomb. And more: in each, evoked under petrifaction, history is thus demediated. No names are read, no faces recognized, no human agents chronicled, no events retailed, no information accessed. Modern history is like a tale that is told, bound tight in a tonnage of thundering traumatic silence, lugubrious and useless—except of course as a manifold cautionary trope. Bookwork tells what no archive can.

Dememediated: there again is the melancholic function inflected in this case, indeed overdetermined, by the convergence of Dürer’s two-dimensional art both with cinema and with Kiefer’s typical volumetrics of the ungraven tablet. Recurring to that “mediological” focus in Debray on social context as well as material form, we may say that in bookwork like Kiefer’s the demediated text shape, all verbal content banished, is turned as pure form to a new social use, but one best appreciated, now, not by mediology after all but by a rhetoric (or tropology) of estrangement. Borrowed or fabricated, the once or never book is the iconic placeholder, in museum space only, for a loss historical or phenomenological or both. Without giving
you anything for reading but the fact of its prevention, without putting words in your head, such unbooks keep reading in mind—and hence keep on reading our need for the cultural experience they suspend. And all the more so when their troped or simulated status as nonbooks serves in further part to figure some facet or aftermath of the verbal encounter they refuse. This is the textual work they do without being textual works.

And for which film, in this unusual piece by Kiefer, is a clarifying complement. Hence the defining logic of his intersecting and triangulated medial forms. The intertextual engraving of Dürer’s is not just alluded to by Kiefer’s imponderable glass polygon; that form’s now useless transparency is put into play with sculptural molding and opaque filmic inscription alike. In an earlier epoch, Dürer could render the philosophic subject as an agent of inward humanist reflection. Centuries later, the communal repository of textual or filmic transmission, absent all figuration of a human reader or viewer, is flattened to its material surfaces. Across the terms suddenly generated, even in negation, for book and film together in relation to engraving (obviated typography over against cancelled cinematography), in each case a medium of transcript and duration is blocked by leaden tropes of its own material base.

Borrowing Debray’s category, then, we may say that the book is no less a symbolic object when it is no longer a functional one, converted instead to a mere thing. For at that point it has become, by default, quiet entirely a symbol, a totem, a fetish—but, as such, also a figure, solo or collaborative, for some bracketed aspect or other of real reading. To call Kiefer’s lead folios antibooks, as in antimatter, would get rather directly to the materialist ironies of their particular demediation. Reading matter is displaced, in historical foreclosure, by sheer mass. From the other direction, in Rachel Whiteread’s “sculpted” book shelving, such matter is evacuated by sheer absence. In one of her largest plaster-cast installations, from 1997, alluding perhaps to Kiefer’s three-walled demonic tabernacle of absent text in Berlin six years before, her negative casting leaves behind only crenellated trenches where books once were—irregular book corridors on three sides of the viewer—hollowing out the solidified space between the gaping horizontal grooves of former shelves (fig. 10). These “paperbacks” are indeed suitably “untitled” in their plaster-backed absence. Hers is a book sculpture only in the drastic sense of having been molded by the book before its absolute removal. For Kiefer and Whiteread equally, gone missing in each case, each anarchive, is that founding cultural object of which shape itself, impenetrable or empty, is the demystified symbolic remnant.
Kiefer’s influence is more direct yet, no doubt, in another artist’s use of the lead rather than read book, a deployment that naturalizes the scale without minimizing the melancholy of such leaden dead weights. An extensive 2007 exhibit—“The Modernity of Melancholy”—at the Palazzo della Ragione in Verona includes, along with Dürer’s original etching, an almost black-comic homage to Kiefer. One of the founders of the 1960s Arte Povera movement, Pier Paolo Calzolari, produced a sculptural nature morte in which the allusive bottle of a Morandi-style still life is flanked by four life-sized (rather than oversized) lead volumes on a felt tablecloth hiding a refrigeration unit mounted out of sight on the table’s underside (fig. 11), the whole setting stationed in front of a uneven off-white diptych not unlike the angled abstraction of an open codex. Perspiring with cool beads of condensation, the metal books—Kieferian miniatures—exude a continuous aerated bubbling of milk-based paint that, while staining the cloth support, transforms their imagined contents into a pulsing froth of opacity and evanescence. Ironizing the material base of print culture as a thing unstable, fluid—and in this case indigestible—the stiff lead forms of the books are pitted against the frail deliquescence of their oozing content. In the
Figure 11. Pier Paolo Calzolari, *Natura Morta* (2005).
overdetermined context of melancholia, they install the mixed-media update of the classic vanitas with books in the painting tradition, where the imprinted script of open pages is often withdrawn just over the optical border of fidelity and is, like the unfinished wine or fruit of other tabletop offerings, put forever beyond consumption. But, in Calzolari’s kinetic assemblage, the self-altering book has become the performance piece of its own illegibility. This constant sluggish churning of an outmoded mechanical form, here parodically electrified, seems, in its implied “tropology,” a reductio ad absurdum of the book form as perpetual motion machine.

**The Thing of It Is**

The found or false book, the readymade or the simulacrum, the poached text or the mock-up—by suspending mediation within an often abstracted case of book as formal shape—stands, even in the shelved company of others, estranged by its own isolation as idea. The bibliobjet tends to deliver the sample of mass production and its disablement at once, the self-decimated specimen, renegade and derelict both. Under erasure as text, such book-works are thus the received instrument of culture and a case of its cancellation, the cited object of immaterial desire and the de-purposed physical thing of its prevented activation. In this sense the material “conventions” of the bound volume—no longer revealing inscribed text—are revised from within, by cultural estrangement, into a case of sculpture as occasionally incised but largely demediated bulk. Plus, of course, the images of reading it still manages to concretize.

But concretize in what revised medial form? Art innovates on its own tangible conditions; it has nothing else to work with. It tests limits, calls its material bases to account. In this manner, as Diarmuid Costello has argued, it may well defy our predictions as to what would constitute genuine

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17. Helping indirectly to bear down on the conceptual parameters for such malleable terminology, recent issues in (as well as of) *Critical Inquiry* converge on (1) the very status of the concrete instance as aesthetic case in point, (2) the thingness of its material form, and (3) its equivocated, compromised, or erased “mediality” as text object. I refer, first, to the place of the “case” in cultural and literary production, as explored in the first number of a special issue edited by Lauren Berlant, *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007); before that to the specific case of the thing in representation, the thing as distinguished from the intentional object of image or discourse, as pursued in another special issue called *Things*, ed. Bill Brown, *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn 2001); and, since then, to a freestanding essay—itsel responsing to a previous exchange in the journal on the question of medium specificity—that looks to those hybrid cases (not highlighted as such) that put the whole notion of determinate mediality in question: Diarmuid Costello, “On the Very Idea of a ‘Specific’ Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 274–312.
new art in that given medium. The aesthetic instance installs its own revised principles. An important new painting, say, doesn’t just show us something or, if nonrepresentational, show something forth about its given visual mode (that second something being—or instancing—its thingness as applied pigment, the stuff of its manifestation). Such new work shows too, at the far edge of expectation, how it is to be understood still as painting. Here the question of the case is vexed, suspended, redefined by the effort at origination. Aesthetic innovation offers, we may decide, a singular instance of something otherwise unexampled. So that, in regard to book-works, the one-of-a-kind may not be a so-called kind of book after all. Which may result, though Costello doesn’t put it this way, from an act of demediation to begin with—well before a fresh acknowledgment of material means and their new ends. In Costello’s complementary examples, Jeff Wall stages his photographs as if he were painting; by contrast, with his studied optical blurs, Gerhard Richter is, as the artist himself puts it, “practicing photography by other means,” making it rather than just taking it. One is encouraged to extrapolate. Book-works are texts by other means, not to be read in as discourse but rather—as denatured things, alienated, dysfunctional—to be read whole. In them are to be deciphered those aspects of reading they often so strangely solidify in the form of material tropes.

In this way thing theory links up with case theory around the very object largely unexplored so far by either: the visual artifact. And this in a further connection to medium specificity and its states of exception, departures from the received case of a given aesthetic means. All text excommunicated, the book-work is a null case of the printed codex, bereft of referen-

18. This is where Costello’s essay on medium specificity comes in to round out Critical Inquiry’s recent consideration of both representative instance and its material presence, case and thing; see n. 17. Though Costello’s approach to a medium and its delimitations lays no stress on the case in or beyond previous discussion in the journal, there is a tempting convergence of these matters (of medium and exemplification) upon the foregrounded materiality of given book-works, altered or otherwise. This is because distinctions between the book as copy and the book as example, the book as replicated product versus the book as potential epitome, cannot help but address—within the realm of aesthetic originality and its abdications—the inherent question posited by Berlant in her introductory essay “On the Case,” about the “adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from” (Berlant, “On the Case,” Critical Inquiry 33 [Summer 2007]: 666).

tiality, its material presence entirely self-designating—even when, as in Kiefer’s multivolume census, it proffers itself as the Book of Everybody. But only in this way is the book as thing opened to concept over the lost body of its function as textual object. What the bibliobjet can then do to retextualize the illegible, at this second stratum of self-demonstration, is the actual work of these negated books.

To be more specific about the body of a text gone missing in this way, a sense of book art as involving a demediation of textual surface calls to mind, if only by reversing its terms, the use made of Heidegger and Blanchot by Peter Schwenger. Only mediation, though not Schwenger’s word for it, allows the realization of the communicable object in the erasure of the material thing. In “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” Schwenger stresses the way language alone can bring the being of things into recognition as such, as being—but no longer as empirical things.\(^{20}\) Once conceptualized, these same things vanish in respect to their thinghood. Naming is the corpse of the existence it elicits. Things are no sooner spied and identified by name, that is, and thus deconcealed in their being, than lifted to the plane of objectification as idea, in all its communicable use. It is not difficult to transfer these distinctions into the realm of the book as adopted (appropriated) or more drastically adapted (altered) museum piece. With such a quasi-sculptural form either found or constructed, the elevation of quotidian factory product to objet, the multiple made singular, is likely to involve at the same time a reduction of temporal vehicle to immobile object. The worded continuity that is a text is effaced by the image of its archetypal form—otherwise (in the combined rhetorical and mediological terms of Vogler and Debray) its self-troping as symbolic object. The concrete universal emerges as its own fossil. The very being of the book is repressed by its static image, real or depicted, whether it be the neutralized object itself or its artificial figuration. Text is found murdered under the hinged lids of its own sealed coffin.

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20. See Peter Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn 2001): 99–113, once again from that volume on *Things*. Though not investigated in these terms for his book of two years before, Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning (Stanford, Calif., 1999), it is in fact the disappearance of the thing into its designated being, this process of abstraction through language, that allows (in reverse) for the phenomenology of reading itself, where ideas of a world need no grounding in that world’s material presence in order to be envisioned (rather than seen). Addressing the way reading is conceived as visualization, his chapter called “Painters of Reading” concerns not the reading scene in painting but, as it happens, certain painters of the page in “artists’ books” (closer in his examples to what I would call book-works). These involve graphic effects designed to visualize the very process of textual consumption in the half century from the lettrism of Isodore Isou to the imposed graphic overpainting of found pages in Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (London, 1970).
In this regard, William James has an important distinction between what amounts to the thing versus the intentional object—as, for instance, the difference between a shiny silver-gray metal oblong and its immediate recognition as a table knife. This is James’s example of the way the routines of habitual use “‘plough deep grooves’”—his very phrasing, as if by association with the blade itself—“‘plough deep grooves in the nervous system.’” 21 Discussed in Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things*, the Jamesian distinction is given a fuller treatment in an earlier essay by Brown, where James is quoted in his exemplification of the thing/object difference—a cluster of attributes versus a concept—with the contrast of “grayness and thinness and length” to the culturally coded “apperception of a knife.” 22 The latter abstracting tendency could just as pertinently be noted about the routinization of books as objects of consciousness, where the “grooves” of recognition—in part line by line along the depthless runnels of the imprinted page—tend to inoculate against response to their own physical format: their material instrumentality for coded transmission. Book sculpture lifts this conditioning format back to view, isolating the physical support of portable reading as a now objectless (or purposeless) thing: the sculptural objet turned demediated double of its former (industrially cloned) use as cultural tool.

Words murder the thing. And in bookwork, vice versa. As we will see in Ann Hamilton’s *lineament*, the nonbook may resemble not just a closed coffin but an exhumed grave, its very typography removed from the pages in which it is set. Whereas the far poles of such bookwork are no doubt established by Kiefer’s rectangular solids versus Whiteread’s gaping molds—leaden foreclosures versus sheer holes—a frequent third term helps reconstellate thing, case, and medium around the question of figuration. For between the totally impervious and the totally open codex form—tangible void and manifest vacuum—is the far more common bookwork format of the present and visibly excavated volume: sliced open, carved up, gouged into, dug out, or burnt through. 23 In this vein, the

22. Brown, “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism),” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 6. Again, case theory (a knife as well as the knife) rubs shoulders with thing theory under the umbrella of medium specificity and its dissolutions. For a knife is recognized as such only as a case of cutlery, the instance of a utensil, not just as a metal shape. By analogy, a geometric stratification of pressed paper requires a linguistic regime to come under description as the case of a textual object. Book sculpture can estrange that regime on the spot—and precisely by demediating its linguistic content.
23. On view, for example, in London in the summer of 2008, there was a *bibliobjet* by Anish Kapoor, under the title *Wound*, that had carved a gaping jack-o-lantern scar, several inches deep, into unprinted bound pages, somewhere between a grimace and a distorted vagina; see
demediating work of Hamilton’s 1994 lineament is a complex summa of any such site-specific “mediology” by negation, a case of the experienced book stringently “delineated” (Hamilton’s own tacit pun) by its own dismemberment.

Hers is a performance piece whose only legibility as such derives not from the untitled and desecrated book on a suspended tabletop but from the intertext in Wallace Stevens, where the word “lineament” functions as a play on textual lineation. All that “mattered” in this text is that poems “should bear / Some lineament or character... / Of the planet of which they were part.” But that planet is entirely a textual one, as the title, “The Planet on the Table,” makes clear. To trope this, Hamilton (who in another installation of the same period, called in fact tropos, burns out the lines of a novel with an electric cauterizing tool to figure their consumption) here slices through the print rectangle of an unidentified found book. Silhouetted by the shadows cast from a movie projector with no photo strip of its own, the artist (or her assistant) spools the shredded ribbons of text instead, hypertactile now in their linear sequence, into a growing ball of fragile paper strands (fig. 12). With the human figure thus projected in profile as a shadow portrait of the reading agent (fig. 13), a radically demediated planar text has become instead a whole planetary system, a world of

the exhibit “Blood on Paper” at the Victoria and Albert Museum. While, across town at the Royal Academy, a hand-sewn book whose open page looked from a distance like it contained only a large black disk of exaggerated typography actually involved, on closer inspection, the burning out of smaller and smaller circles in a descending cone of volcanic silence called Seethe: a “limited edition” by Kate McGwire in which the illusory black-on-white basis of print reproduction is manifested instead as material destruction.


25. One of the reading sessions thus “burning through” the text as fast as hand can follow eye is illustrated in Stewart, The Look of Reading, p. 350. Closer to the slicing (rather than singeing) technique of lineament are the remade packets of excised text, only a couple lines wide and many dozens of pages deep, that are glued and stitched together at random by Hamilton to produce, en masse, a cultural counterweight sufficient in sheer pastiched bulk to lift up, via pulleys, a cloth-winged basket on its circular track around the inner helix of the New York Guggenheim. This is a work installed for the 2009 show The Third Eye: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989. Hamilton’s idea seems focused on the ultimately dematerialized heft of reading that goes assimilated and unseen in the force of transmission within or between cultures (as she explains in terms of her own for a video about this installation on the museum website). The Human Carriage, as the installation is titled, suggests that our predigested textual influences—multiple, partial, interleaved, and forgotten in their detail—nonetheless give ballast to our human stature and its conveyance, our posture and gesture as literate beings, in cognizant transaction with each other. Further, the piece verges on a mechanical allegory apart from the wordplay of “carriage.” For, in an almost literal enactment of the conceptualist legacy, textual preconditions take part in circumscribing the inner space of museum display, here the reverse cone of the Guggenheim’s most famous modernist vortex.
its own, no longer flat but "englobing." Demediation alone can bring this fantasy to light, can in the full paradoxical sense materialize its phenomenology, can figure its encompassing figment of a deciphered world.

Textuality by Other Means

Johanna Drucker, our best practitioner-critic of book art—including at times its more experimental forms—cites, amid more traditional artist’s books, at least three provocative instances of demediated text that offer extreme cases of arrested reading. Buzz Spector’s 1994 work—a kind of treated, indeed mistreated, text in the distressed mode—is given pride of place in closing her chapter on “The Artist Book as a Rare and/or Auratic Object.” (This is the same Buzz Spector who, as a strictly readymade book sculptor, once shelved dozens of books, spine-side-in, under the title All the Books in My Library by or about Ann Hamilton.) In the work examined by Drucker, with its clipped title A Passage (fig. 14), every leaf of a hand-pressed book is “altered” by being torn off toward the left, leaving a wider and wider remainder of jagged-edged surface each time. At a glance, the downhill wedgelike slope of the pages still sustains for the eye a visible if skewed rectangle of lineated print. And a readable one, too. For the further trick, as we realize on closer inspection, is that the same paragraph has been printed on each page, so that the rips do not in fact prevent a continuous deciphering of this one discontinuous excerpt—concerned, as it happens, with Talmudic citation and exegesis. We can imagine the nonexistent Borges story it might have been conceived in homage to: “The Infinite Excerpt.”

As the eye of decipherment passes across this staggered, terraced surface, the play of the work’s title (repeated as well on the torn, layered, self-collaged running heads) might be said to have troped, or in other words materially refigured, the dead metaphor of traverse in the ordinary language of textual progress, with the act of “passage” concretized here as the downhill slice and slide through the entire book from first to last—like one fierce pass with a serrated blade.

Drucker groups Spector’s A Passage with other examples of the “unreadable” book, despite the composite legibility of its unprecedented multipage, single-paragraph extract. She contrasts it with books hermetically "bound shut" in her later chapter on “Self-Reflexivity in Book Form”—

pieces, in our terms, where textwork has been subsumed entirely to bookwork, the usable codex turned upon itself as impenetrable thing, no longer an intentional or functional textual object.\textsuperscript{28} The wit of their self-inflicted impairment as linguistic conveyance is, again, very much in the Borgesian spirit of some mystic \textit{biblos} withheld forever in the inaccessible penetralia

\textsuperscript{28} Drucker, \textit{The Century of Artists’ Books}, p. 178.
of its own mystery. A 1993 work by David Stairs, owned by (of all holders) the New York Public Library, is a round book of a few inches’ diameter closed by spiral binding along its whole circumference. Its punning title, *Boundless*, suggests the infinite speculation opened by bookwork at large when it is all binding, no text. Illustrated alongside it by Drucker is Maurizio Nannucci’s 1969 *Universum*, an artwork from the high moment of conceptual art. A classically bound book with a comparable (Borgesian) pun for its title, it boasts two (rather than one) elegant, curved spines, thus sealing its pages off from both points of entry at once, with volume 1 embossed on one end, volume 2 on the other, yet with all internal succession blocked.

In this impervious book-work, there is no difference between first and second installments, origin and sequel, when the temporal form of reading has been so implacably cancelled in the first place, re-versed upon itself—or in other words, as in *Boundless* as well, when the volumetric shape of text is locked tight as sculptural monolith rather than functional manifold. If the artistry of these “artist’s books” extends inward to their unavailable pages, no reader will ever know. Their work is exhausted in the frustration of all textual use, the nominated vastness of their content lurking so near yet so far. Self-contained, impenetrable in the most basic sense, involuted book forms of this sort do not open mental vistas to the literate mind; rather,
they travesty such phenomenological horizons in the antisocial thinghood of their withdrawal from any and all “textwork” beyond their ironic titles.

Less austerely witty than these reflexive metatexts of the book-work canon is a piece, more recent than Drucker’s study of the “artist’s book,” that seems more clearly embroiled in what she has since identified as the contemporary aesthetics of “complicity,” marked most obviously by appropriation, hybridity, and pastiche. I refer to a twofold readymade executed by a Paris art collective formed in 2004 and known as Claire Fontaine (its name borrowed, in fact, from a popular brand of French notebooks). As reproduced in a catalogue called Unmonumental, this untitled piece of antispectacle wraps the “found” dust jacket of Guy Debord’s La Société du spectacle around an industrial red brick so as to suggest, perhaps, not just the density of Debord’s text as one keystone of contemporary social critique but its potential use as an assault weapon against an unexamined culture of display (and with an inevitable allusion to Debord’s own Situationist film Can Dialectics Break Bricks?). Thus is the former provocateur of deviation himself “détourned.” When such a gesture needn’t be just tossed off in isolation by this recent artistic collective but can be filed away in the imagination of the audience with others like it, such a work, such a faux book, becomes less a lone claim staked than an ongoing stake raised. Whether complicit or resistant, the unreadable book-work, here comically intertextual in this 2004 incarnation, takes its place in that genealogy of demediation descended from the depictorialized surfaces of conceptual art.

### Tutorial and its Primers

This lineage is made unmistakable in the “Learn to Read” exhibit at the Tate Modern in the summer of 2007. There altered book-works, their pages at times more visible than usual, appear in the instructive proximity of handmade text-works bearing a clear affinity with that aspect of conceptualism summarized, in the same year as the Tate show, under the title of a retrospective survey whose capped words are run together as one seventeen-letter lexeme on the spine: WORDSTOBELOOKEDAT. Dozens of images at the Tate explore nearly every conceivable facet of

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29. See Drucker, Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity (Chicago, 2005).
31. Liz Kotz notes that conceptual artists “could be seen as applying classic minimalist strategies to the burgeoning worlds”—and of course proliferating words—“of information and the mass media” (Liz Kotz, Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art [Cambridge, Mass., 2007], p. 2).
écriture and signage in its more reductive and cryptic shapes; they create an ABC of conceptualist textuality in the familiar form of what I have called, in its devolution from the scene of reading in painting, the full-frame “lexigraph.”

Halfway between lexigraph and book-work is a drawing by Kris Martin that reduces the linguistics of the signifier to mere punctuation by giving us only the reductive destination of literary duration, stripped of all narrativity, indeed of all text markings entirely—except for the last dot of finis, the final period itself. In End-point of “The Ballad of Reading Goal” (O. Wilde), the autobiographic volume is not just demediated. It vanishes altogether behind the one-point landing of its last foregrounded pinprick of imprint, marked by a highlighting circle like a ringed target. Uncaptioned, the piece wouldn’t seem textual at all, just pictorial, a pointless bull’s-eye. But when identified (via the place-name pun on “Reading” and the displaced signature relation of “O” and “.”), it is the telos of closure itself that feels troped, swallowing up the entire experience at its point of arrest.

Another metatext by Martin, this time a 3-D book-work halted at midpoint and shown alongside a complementary effort at arrested progress, approaches novelistic transcription from the opposite angle: hypertrophic rather than minimalist. This “sculpture” by Martin reduces a canonical published novel to a kind of precodex diptych by returning it to handwritten script in twin piles. In the distressed or abusive mode, the adjacent piece by another artist slices a published novel in half to divide and conquer its subject matter—and thus drives a very sharp wedge, knife sharp, between the text’s dual aspect as material form on the one hand, referential figment on the other. In the former case, the artist of the Wildean narrative End-point now gives us instead the visible midpoint in his 2005 transcription of Dostoevsky’s The Idiot, laboriously evoking what Genette would call the “immanence” of the novel through a return from print culture’s allographic “regime” to a willful autographic regimen. For what we see are two matching 1 ½-inch stacks of inked copy piled neatly a couple inches apart, with the first visible excerpt from the novel beginning with “it would have kept him occupied for a thousand years!” In less time than this, though with painstaking labor nonetheless, Martin has copied out the entire novel sheet by presently unreadable sheet (as explained in the gallery flyer), everywhere replacing Myshkin’s name with his own: a task of con-

32. See Stewart, The Look of Reading, pp. 329–73. In the Tate show, such “wordworks” include a postconceptual return of image into text, with the crowded “bubble letters” of TOGETHERNESS, in the eponymous text by Frederick Kunath, offering a reductive sense of graphic reading that W. J. T. Mitchell might locate within the broad orbit of the image/text. See W. J. T. Mitchell, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago, 1986), p. 180.
tinuous identification or projection that we must take on faith in proximity to the “Please Do Not Touch” sign.\footnote{This manumission of bound novel from cold print to invested script recalls that 1974 battery of conceptualist text-works whereby Allen Ruppersberg transcribed at painterly scale, one large canvas after another, every line of Oscar Wilde’s so-called \textit{Picture of Dorian Gray} as if it were somehow a pictorial series rather than a novel.} Not stand-alone artifacts, books are multiples made to be held, to be processed over time by the eye. Not touching is the first line of attack in the demediation of text forms as cultural implements, the first museumized stage in their reduction to things, regardless of whatever further disuse or mutilation—or lunatic rewriting, as if every reading were nothing less—may be suffered by them.

Take, for example, the contiguous and most flagrantly altered volume in this “Learn to Read” show, by a well-known German practitioner of conceptual text art, Kirsten Pieroth. It is the purest piece of book sculpture in the exhibit, though at first seeming like merely a found rather than reworked text. On an angled lucite book-rest leans an elegant German version in pearl gray jacket of Jules Verne’s \textit{Reise Un die Erbe in 80 Tagen: Roman}, its cover art completed by a vignetted photograph of the author and the imprint of the publisher, Aufban Bibliothek. Only the artist’s rather than author’s title of this apparent found object thus triggers the conceptual work of its recognized sculptural desecration. \textit{Around the World in 40 Days}, not the canonical eighty, is discreet in its irony almost to a fault. Only if one registers the discrepancy between the two titles—that of literary versus museum object, in the latter’s reduction to volumetric and sculptable thing—can the irony take hold, inducing further inspection. It may and should, that is, bring us to look at the other side of the volume—where exactly half the pages have been torn away, number 110 being the last visible on the angled back side of the violated text. The joke of course has to do with length and distance in geographic rather than textual space. One doesn’t belabor it, I hope, by thinking it through. For it is more than a joke, in this “Learn to Read” venue or any other; it is yet again, and once recognized, a call to the conceptual. Needless to say, the topography of world transit would have to be elided by vehicular speed, rather than just truncated in the report, for the circumnavigation to be completed in half the allotted time. So that, through the vandal’s wit of this misshapen piece, one is reminded of how narrative space is regularly felt to peel away from typographic space and duration into a rounded world of its own. Such is the phenomenology of reading, opening in imagination onto audiovisual terrain entirely dependent upon—even while cognitively liberated from—the inching forward of its silent signifiers, page after page. Such is the troping of textual duration per se.
What one “learns to read” (the Tate imperative) in the case of *Around the World in 40 Days*—in its blunt literalism, by negative and mangling example—is that the entire power of reading opens within the difference between book as thing and text object as mental event. It is within this difference, as Martin’s *Idiot* also suggests next to it, that the work—the affective work of identification—alone (and placelessly) resides. In reading, according to any phenomenological model, it is always a little like we are letting the author’s words happen again in and through us as we project through them into the characters, making the plot our own, its travels and travails carrying us along with them. Not cutting short its fraught or fantastic journeys by materialist aggression (as in the altered Verne text), we let a novel have its own way—take its own time, book its own passage—with and in us. Even without the extreme demediation (via retranscription) of Dostoevsky’s mass-printed novel or the farcical demediation of Verne’s (a text torn off, rather than launched, in medias res), the fact of so-called reading time remains. And the *bibliobjet* as sculptural form can work to summon those same temporal contours at a prolonged—though no longer serial—glance. In this sense the bookwork is indeed a primer regularly designed to *resculpt* our conception of text as a traversed thing always in process, privatized and vulnerable, whether overinvested in or left off too soon—or, in the terms once more of Spector’s title, or of Clercx’s text-laminated canoe for that matter, a mental passage always keyed to override the materiality of its conveyance.

**Anatomies of Reading**

Implicit in the sawed-off Verne and the handmade Dostoyevsky is a spectrum of the *bibliobjet* running from the fact of the book as object through the figuration of both its structure and its field of force as read. This spectrum can become an explicit trajectory within a single book-work installation. I want to follow out such an arc of response—from material fact through metaphors of form to the figured force of receipt—in the openly intertextual as well as ethical gestures of a contemporary book artist who returns found books to legibility even while reappropriating their unsaid for figuration. Thomas Vogler mostly limited his sense of the “troped” book, we recall, to the duped book: simulated, analogized. Widening the category, we have watched found or fashioned books in a more pointed tropology of one aspect or other of their materiality or reception. This metaphorics can be retained even when the page is made available to a primary legibility in the first place, from which refiguration then ensues.

In a recent multivolume book-work installed at Zurich, the Glasgow conceptual artist Christine Borland excerpts the Creature’s monologue...
from the original German edition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Borland reprints it several times bound with a borrowed jacket image copied from the anatomical drawing of a skull in a German textbook by Nazi anatomist Herman Voss, a scandalous text also excerpted and similarly bound in several interspersed volumes. Though his book was still in public school use as late as 1978, the experiments described by Voss are based mostly on autopsies carried out on the bodies of Polish resistance fighters during the war. Across Borland’s enforced nexus of Shelley and Voss—these no longer segregated texts of moralized science fiction and brutal science fact—two textual records of human aberration arrive under the same image (metaphorically under the same neutral scientific *cover*) of cold-blooded grave robbing and mutilation. The more common ironies of the “dummy book” and its faux binding are turned here to medical polemic rather than medial satire.34

Borland’s ironic interest in what we might call the *Frankenstein* syndrome is anticipated in a 1997 work titled (from the Creature’s own Miltonic apostrophe) *Did I Request Thee, Maker, from My Clay to Mould Me Man? Did I Solicit Thee from Darkness to Promote Me?* where, even beyond the direct address, the installation is staged to “trope” response more directly. Two identical bound books of the Creature’s extended monologue rest on two chairs waiting to seat anyone choosing to free their space by picking up the volumes; the body of each reader thus potentially enacts the very displacement that leads to identification. Moreover, and here is the materialist reduction more typical of conceptual bookwork, these are texts produced on a bad photocopier, streaked and splotted; they are an imperfect *second-generation* duplicate like the abjected creature himself, flawed at point of generation. In a play on reproduction itself, Borland has thus folded our most common means of automatic remediation back into the cautionary message as its visible materiality—not demediated entirely, but flawed, visibly devolved.

Focused implicitly around the *Frankenstein* intertext yet again, Borland’s most original and disturbing bookwork composite foregrounds the inhuman invasiveness of medical science during the long eighteenth century’s rise of the biological episteme. Created for the Turner Prize exhibition in 1997 and called *After a True Story—Giant and Fairy Tales*, it lays open a found book by that name on a pedestal in front of us. Its two facing pages are transcribed from museum labels that purvey sketchy narrative biographies explaining the skeletal remains originally on display there, descriptive placards reprinted in a

34. I think by contrast of London conceptual artist Fiona Banner’s *Life Drawing Drawings* (2007), “29 dummy books” whose faux bindings are copied from salesworthy female nudes “drawn from” the covers of real instruction manuals and whose execution by the present artist thus realizes the enclosed lessons by superficial repetition.
supposedly child-friendly volume of grotesqueries. This is a curiosity-mongering Victorian text of giantism and dwarfism that sits before us under a vitrine cube and is flagged on the artist’s own wall label as follows: “Their stories can be found in the open book, which is a part of the exhibition.” Printed there, on the two pages we see, are accounts of a diminutive early nineteenth-century girl from Sicily and an Irish male “giant” from the late eighteenth century, both coming under the anatomist’s knife at their untimely deaths. They are true stories, as we are assured at the bottom of each page, “Adopted from Display Labels, Hunterian Museum, Royal Academy of Surgeons of England, London.” Once again, ironies of mediation go hand in glove with a withering critique of forensic science, especially when the book’s labeled but unpictured remains are projected into gallery space—from one museum venue to another, surgical to aesthetic—by Borland’s mordant precision and ingenuity.

It is as if the absent visual remains are materialized in front of us by the very act of a sympathetic reading-in. On a wall ten feet beyond the book are separate glass shelves supporting the outlined shapes of the two figures’ denuded bones, once picked clean by science, here copied by art (fig. 15). Based to begin with on Borland’s replicas of the museum remains, these are shapes brought out now only by a penumbral dusting—as if to insist that all flesh is long gone under the dissectionist’s knife. The further suggestion is as clear as it is unnerving. Even the biblical circuit of dust to dust—in the normal cycle of the lived and buried body—has been prevented by the medical predators, so that it is up to the artist to complete that humanizing trope in another material form. Borland has achieved this by tracing her own full-scale model of the actual bones in an outline of fine-grained powder affixed to the glass. By optical inversion on these mortuary glass slabs—these oversized forensic slides—we now see, actually see, what the book is talking about, as well as the cruelty it elides.

And that’s only the first stage of effect in complementing the book with the making-present of its described images, supplanting the effect of words by yet more graphic and incriminating pictures. Maximizing this verbal demediation, Borland translates the freak-show narrative anthology—as text—into a phantasmal gallery space that serves to return us to the book’s conjured image of the original surgeons’ museum. For the glass slabs have a further dimension of death and disembodiment operating at right angles to the initial skeletal reconstructions in dusted outline. Absolutely incorporeal, the shadows they cast appear now like revenants of the described experimental corpses—less material even than the words that report on them. The whole twofold effect depends on a kind of optical hinge. Through each morguelike transparent evocation of the dissecting table,
Borland shines an overhead spot, typical of display in either art-historical or anthropological contexts. Here is a literal spotlight on medical malfeasance that throws a vertical shadow on the wall beneath, so that the outlined bone forms are returned to beamed white shapes, the lost flesh to shadowed darkness. The absent bodies become their own ghosts (fig. 16). Like X-ray images engraved in light, these luminous doubles of the traced remains operate also like a photographic process tracked back through its inherent visual reversals to an imagined if absent body structure. The material vestige becomes an optical effigy.

Rather than a direct simulation of display cases in a so-called natural history museum, Borland’s distancing turn on the unnatural theatricality of any such exhibits seems instead to have rehearsed the semiotic triad of symbol, index, and icon (arbitrary signifier, trace, picture). It has done so by passing through a veritable gauntlet of demediation in the reversible binaries of light and shadow, yet where all too many morally gray areas remain. The trajectory of her bookwork has moved, that is, from a print text of lurid historical details in a gothic popularization of unscrupulous science (via the cited captions of the not presently visible London remains) to the indexical trace—and, in turn, to the projected positive icon—of absent skeletal evidence in figments of weightless light. The deferrals and reversals operate until the whole optically as well as physically disembodied installation begins to seem like a twin cenotaph for the variously removed bodies of these anatomical curios. The book is “part of the exhibition” indeed, deciphered before our eyes. And since the intended prurient reading of the transcribed “curiosity” labels evokes both the ghostly overlays of the daguerreotype and the later tricked negatives of Victorian spirit photography, what we find here—in the demediation of cold type by the manifestations of its reference—is critique as virtual séance. The book-work converts the literal fact of a found book to a different kind of phantasmal medium in its refigured field of force.

Textual Projection

What lies only latent in the faceless graven volumes of Kiefer’s ominous Population Census, the roll calls perhaps of eugenic experiment and extermination—as trooped in his case by a vast morgue of coffinlike volumes—is the kind of accusation made explicit in the ethical animus of Borland’s installation, which reserves its tropology for effect rather than cause. It possess a spooky empathy with historical characters actually read into view from within the installation, projected into concrete forms of recognition. Unlike most experimenters in this mode, Borland’s book-work works out from real text to the further legible ironies of its reception—as regards, in
Figure 15. Christine Borland, After a True Story–Giant and Fairy Tales (1997).

Figure 16. Christine Borland, After a True Story–Giant and Fairy Tales (1997), detail from underneath the glass plane.
the three installations we’ve examined, first binding and cover art, then flawed photomechanical reproduction in the Xerox mode, then rudimentary human response at the level of projected content.

*After a True Story—Giant and Fairy Tales* is the third in another, inadvertent series as well. Borland’s piece provides, as it happens, a notable further example in this essay of an intermedial triangulation via thrown light (or its extinction). In Kiefer, lead books and dead film, linked to classic engraving via the adjacent Dürrer intertext, serve to foreground the demediation of a closed bureaucratic archive, optical as well as tabular, while troping on the historical nightmare both of its former implementation and of its later silencing. In Hamilton, defaced text and nonphotographic projection, linked to the allusive intertext in Wallace Stevens, isolate the performer’s body in a shadow play associated with an extreme material reduction of text to rewound strands of type, mere punning lines, even while troping on the whole planetary “englobement” that reading can nonetheless seem to induce. In Borland, far less abstractly, the questionable ethical practice behind a biological display case is inverted to a diagnostic case of display.

And so for a third time a text, open and legible in this instance, is contrasted with a gesture of projected light and cast shadow. A paracinematic process, having been cancelled in Kiefer and engaged but evacuated of film in Hamilton, is in Borland backdated to a static Victorian slide show. If her installation thus remediates the book in a chilling phantasmagoria, it is only by demediating the typographic buffer zone produced from the start between the mournful museum objects and their dissemination as print narrative. Only the manifestation of their inverted shadows on the gallery wall, where museum art regularly ends up, could correct the open book’s supposedly antiseptic but in fact toxic medical neutrality. Borland’s works, in sum, use aberrant materiality or demediation to trope vectors of ethical response. By contrast, most book-works, self-referential rather than extratextual, trope their own materiality or its seductions, as in Hamilton’s *lineament*, figuring by a more severe demediation the very conditions of their vehicular status over a time of reading that is heuristically prevented rather than, as in Borland’s case, recruited and even visually performed. Returning to more normative cases in closing, we are now able to bracket the abiding poles of this genre with two opposite ironies of pagination in the leaves of the not-book: their radical absence (Brian O’Doherty) versus their blurred simultaneous copresence (Idris Khan), each negating the textual from the site of its tantalizing but buried promise.
Art Book as Book Art

Consider a satiric faux book impenetrable on any of its three dimensions, its solid wooden form a figure for the petrified temporality of art history itself. We return again to O’Doherty (whose sardonic and engrossing Inside the White Cube is itself, happily enough, an all-white foursquare book-work in its 1999 revised edition). In the previous decade, he had turned his hand, more literally than expected—in an artisanal rather than discursive mode—to a commissioned history of postwar art. The result is one of the most conceptually charged book-works in postmodern experimentation—and certainly one of the funniest. For O’Doherty finally meets Praeger’s deadline by delivering up a painted wooden simulation of Art since 1945, with the reproduction of a minimalist Ad Reinhardt canvas on the cover, a black-on-gray cruciform abstraction that is not mechanically printed but repainted by hand. Reverting as author or authority from expository to manual skill, O’Doherty nonetheless feigns surprise at the insistence of the publisher that his advance be returned for failing to meet the terms of his commission. Though not producing an art book, he pretends to think that his publishers might be willing to pay for book art instead. He then goes on to exhibit (in the manner of Hans Haacke and other such interventionists) the publisher’s terse correspondence along with the trompe l’oeil rectangular solid in his display of this nonindustrial book object: a museum-worthy piece that is neither an artist’s book, on the one hand—because not a book at all—nor, on the other, an instance of (or prototype for) mass reproduction.

The handmade has in this case become a travesty of the readymade rather than the other way around. The empty density of wood, rather than the pressed, sliced, and folded instrument of the bound page: that is one extreme reach of denied content in the book-work. Ironies multiply, crisscross, and ricochet. Who needs to look inside such an art-history book anyway? We all know the old and oft-told story, the tired discourse of the masters and their upstart inheritors. By the same token, any full discursive account of art’s postfigural evolution would include such ironic conceptual gestures as the metatext put before us in O’Doherty’s offering: wrap-up as well as send-up of the postmodern moment in its ironies of representation. Art since 1945 as a purely sculptural “volume” rather than a manuscript awaiting typeset—a volumetric thing in real rather than negative space, but a textual negation just the same—is therefore the digest of an epoch after all. Not only a digest, however, it is a lone, inert version of this aesthetic output. You paid me for Art since 1945. Well here it is, a case of it—at its leading but always retrospective edge. It is another resistant
instance of such art, O’Doherty might have added before returning his publisher’s advance, in the typical form of a cryptic conceptualist disquisition. From the deadpan lesson of this virtual Text Book we do indeed learn to read, or at least reread, the art-historical moment in which we find it.

**Paged Time**

Not all illegible book-works, of course, sum up their era with such eponymous brio as O’Doherty’s decoy text, *Art since 1945*. But a considerable number of altered or mock books do offer compressed and eccentric renditions of the successive and thus temporal content they deny us: a curtailed journey in Pieroth’s Verne, for instance, or a passage there is no way not to undergo (but only by spatial travesty) in Spector’s reproduced single page. For a last arresting version of the whole as made manifest in the part, we can look to another and more recent set of automated rather than found instances—unreadable ones—of the paginated text. Opened eerily to all their pages at once, these are the hugely enlarged chromogenic prints by London conceptual photographer Iris Khan, works that come hauntingly close to capturing the temporality of the reading act in a mere two dimensions. Once again, as with Kiefer, Hamilton, or Borland in their disparate ways, the optical trope for bookwork as a projected graphic scene rises to mind. For the multiple superimpositions of Khan’s magnified diptychs, as tall as a human reader, are printed on shimmering aluminum more as if projected on a wall, like a time-lapse film, than composited into a single print. They include every page, for instance, of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (fig. 17), its trenched bands of impacted print being still somehow discernible as such, rather than just as rows of smudge. The shaded gutter, though, is thickened by overprinting into a wide black gulf running straight down the blurred flange of this manifestly deep as well as dense Nietzschean text.

There is an art history here, as well as a delicate technical artistry. The suppressed drama of reading in the painted scene of figure with text, so often brought forward into gallery space with a 3-D book, treated or not, has surrendered its third dimension again to secure a further immediacy. Khan’s book-work photos, not just of Nietzsche but the Qu’ran, Freud’s “The Uncanny,” and other volumes, are not pictures of a given book. Rather, they picture its work, its operation as text, turning it into a kind of mystic writing pad in its own Freudian right. In effect, they are its reading—to be read as such in turn. With Khan’s photo image, we get all that Zarathustra spake at once, like a fast-forward graphic cassette of optically traced text. Or, in one phantasmal stroke, the whole uncanniness of Freud’s disquisition. All the turned pages without the turning: a case of mind over
matter that puts us in mind of just that matter—and its processing by eye and brain. What Khan’s photography reads is the very event of reading.

Bookwork, we’ve seen, functions tropologically across a whole range and scale of effects. Released from the not-book, figuration gives us the like-book. Even when not perfect similes in the form of illusionist similitudes, like-books install not only spatial metaphors of the codex form but metonymies of its process or affect. The limited evidence behind us in this essay should be enough to make the variety clear. Whereas the book as shape is like a shrine, a coffin, a biodegradable block, reading is like a slice through textual space, a vessel cast off from shore, a circumnavigation, a planet all its own, a hammer blow. Bookwork yields up a rhetoric of rhetoric itself. Or in Borland’s case, an ethics. Reading is, or can be, a seeing of the light.

With O’Doherty’s vaunt, the like-book is at once a built-to-scale metaphor of the canonizing tome and a metonymy for its postmodern ironies.
of form, with its lampoon of the hardbound archive in prestige format to be readily associated with other such negated textual objects. Khan’s bookwork reverses this effect in two dimensions, returning to the literary canon by figuring not its shape but its assimilation. Whereas no pages need turning in a work of foregone conclusions like *Art since 1945*, in Khan’s untitled replay of Nietzsche all pages are turned at once. His overscale photographic imprints become, precisely in their missing third dimension, a metaphor for the open page as absorbing diptych. But they also generate that special case of metonymy, part for whole, termed synecdoche—in this case, the instantaneous trope of reading as an ongoing temporal event, a duration caught in sample and resumé both. And with the cinematic overtones of their scale and superimposition, it is tempting to think that Khan’s “pagings”—in their demediation as text—achieve in a new sense André Bazin’s master trope for filmwork. For in the serial densities of their photographic pentimento they visualize not just “time embalmed,” like all photography, but a more quasi-cinematic “change mummified.” The book pictures once again the tomb of its own continuous renewals.

### The Temporal Synecdoche

Latent with enunciation, books on a library shelf are points of departure for a temporal performance and sometimes an imaginary spatial transit. Not so with the displayed book as readymade. Bound and gagged instead, book-works on a museum floor or shelf, instances or replicas either one, or in photomechanical digest on a wall, are the alienated and negating ratification of their once expected service. Gone in such objectification, even when its image is all but photographically preserved, is actual reading time. Left behind is only the anomalous prod to aesthetic absorption in literacy’s external form. Representation is stripped away to a bedrock—or in one case merely a brick—of sheer nonsignifying presence. This is, for the most part, neither theater nor display nor happening. It is suspended animation, a literate instrumentality called to a halt in a single static jolt. Or, as in Borland’s work, it recoils from the manifestation of its own words. Or, in the case of Khan’s petrified but still visually rippling overlay of sedimented phototemporality, it is an impacted case of text transfigured from duration to weightless spatial lamination.

By evoking in part the crisis (the medial e-mergency) of nonpaper text forms—even from within his lush imprint homage to a passing biblio-

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35. On Bazin’s influential metaphors, in their application to photography and film respectively, see Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (Chicago, 1999), p. 142.
graphic tangibility—Khan’s images also round out a larger circuit of this essay’s concern. For if there is such a thing as an art of reading, a plastic art—and a learning curve steep but feasible enough, via repeated tutorial, to meet not only conceptual lexigraphs halfway but the sewn and hewn forms of sculptural book-works as well—then it may indeed feel in practice (with the given medium inoperable) like a case of reading by other means. Khan’s overprinted photowork operates by way of a demediating gesture—which is to say a deliterating one—so complete that the book image appears to have become as large in graphic scale as it should instead be extensive in linguistic duration. Subordinating time to space, yet (at the same time) subsuming space to its instantaneous displacement as evanescent page forms, Khan’s layerings seem calculated to sustain a certain theoretical resistance to all medial a prioris, spatial and temporal both, concerning the materiality of the bibliobjet. The inevitable lack of any sculptural third dimension to these photographic book-works becomes a large part of their point. For Khan’s photos make books by other means, page over page. They remind us of their three-dimensional counterparts in the self-instantiations of the book as symbolic form, whose effects are so often poised between figures of reading’s inner premises and synecdoches of its expended duration.

That’s what demediation does. It makes material again the suspended modes of our reception. Its sudden insistent tangibility—in the case of a book-work’s eradicated text—can seem to weigh in, as well, on the side of all those other sensory materialities, phonemic and graphemic alike, that instrumental reading typically overrides. And that’s why photographs like Khan’s, in the cancelled third dimension of the pages they shuffle through, can nonetheless count as bibliobjets. Like so many altered or refigured books, so many demediated book-works, the effect is, recalling a phrase from Keats, to convey the feel of not to feel it. But there is no final voiding no matter how radical this disuse. Negation is not removal. The material latency remains, pregnant in its own muteness, swollen with the medium it remembers without releasing. French has it best, both by standard grammar and phonetic accident, where the aesthetic action that abolit, even the textual object thus aboli, nevertheless still lit—still reads as such, as book form—even in its linguistic abolishment.

The interdict of reading, alright—but not its driving from mind. Sawed fragments of War versus Peace don’t begin to assault Tolstoy’s narrative conception. This is just where the constitutive troping of the bibliobjet accumulates toward a refurbished sense of immanence in the reading moment. There’s no attempted mystification in saying so. It isn’t that a dramatic enough reduction of the phenomenal somehow releases the
noumenal. Obsolescence doesn’t deliver essence to view. But it can, and often does, put us in mind of it, of reading’s routinely internalized contours. This is how the retraction of content may lead to some renewed conceptual abstraction of the cultural form. Pressed paper minus type leaves behind, as we’ve seen, an absence to be conjured with, and this by turning aside (troping) from physical and geometric to entirely cognitive dimensions of such textuality. Refiguring various immaterial aspects of the reading experience through the material parody of its normal conveyance, fragment or mutant or remnant, does by these means serve to deposit a certain collective leftover from the suspended delivery system of text. Each nonbook can manage to refigure some intangible facet in the weightless material freight of each and every book.

That’s what bookwork as a genre does. It studies the book by generalizing it. So the ultimate force of the troped book isn’t that metaphors turn even nonbooks rhetorical. It’s that book forms—denied, violated, or evacuated in content—operate as art only, in Genette’s terms again, by negotiating the gap between cancelled allograph, let alone autograph, and a residual idea of immanence. There is a strange feedback loop in all this. Tropes disembody the bookwork object into idea so as to objectify those immaterial and often temporal features that the experience of a book as mere physical object tends to defer. But the loop isn’t a facile short circuit. It isn’t the case simply that spatial metaphors make book-works into rhetorical texts in their own right. It’s that texts are recognized to begin with as making the traversed space of their own content metaphoric, from uphill climb to smooth sailing, panoramic sweep to vertigo, you name it. Or, as played upon by Idris Khan, a layered and cumulative density of encounter. Pulverize or dissipate the physical support of that imaginative prospect, transit, or immersion, and the textual content, which subsists beneath each and every concrete manifestation in print, persists still in conception. It is in this way that cause and effect rethink each other in the processing of bookwork. Filling with cognitive tropes the vacuum left by demediation doesn’t work primarily to disembody the book as object. Rather, disembodiment, epitomized by troping, comes to be accepted, all told, as the true and immanent condition of text—again, not as thing but as entity.

In the normal course and discourse of literate experience, books are of the world as well as in it, populating it while repeating it by representation. And often, it would seem, they carve out counterworlds of their own, valved enclaves of worded text. Unreadable books are merely things in the given world, all description of it or its alternatives imploded or swept away, at least for a bracketing conceptual moment before they have claimed their
place as texts again, gallery objects, art messages—often synecdoches at least, elsewhere manifold conceits, puns, rebuses. In that conceptual before, that transitional and purely materialist moment, that almost palpable suspension of reference, the no longer vehicular thing—the suddenly isolated *bibliobjet*—does its real and demediating work. That’s its mad tenacity as well as its abandon.