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Marta Minujín's *Tower of Babel*. Photo: Facug.

Reminiscences: A brief introduction to 'bookwork' gratiela dumitrică

Increasingly, data flows once confined to books and later to records and films are disappearing into black holes and boxes that, as artificial intelligences, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands. In this situation we are left only with reminiscences.

– Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*

They are carved, sliced, folded, burned, shredded, pulped, and sculpted. They are torn apart, nailed together, and sawed into pieces. They are stacked in great towers and suspended from great heights. Their spines are broken and their innards exposed. Often representative as artefacts of the past, these books will never again be read but are rather viewed as conceptual pieces, to be exhibited as materials of art. These days, deconstruction is a common fate of books and it seems important to indentify why the number of artworks that use books as their primary material has increased significantly in the past two decades. Are books simply a different kind of “canvas”, a coincidentally popular means of expression for contemporary artists? Or is this surge of artistic interest symptomatic of the physical book’s digital age “crisis”?

In this era of textual transitioning—from handwriting to typing, from paper to the screen, from the book to the e-book, from the analogue to the digital—the Codex as we have known it is going through a process of transformation. Of course, it is easily argued that history repeats itself in transformational successions. Clay tablets evolved into scrolls and manuscripts. The bound codex was implemented in the second century. Manuscript production was made obsolete with the advent of printing, first by hand and, afterwards, on an industrial scale. The book established itself as a veritable institution of knowledge and communication, a ‘resilient and deepening microcosm, in which the reader can move around at great length, without getting lost within its “walls”’. However, along with its function as a carrier of knowledge, in many countries the book is still considered a highly valuable, even sacred, cultural object. Government policies are still being implemented in the European Union with a primary aim of preserving the cultural value of the paper book. Book art, with its dual aspects of destruction and creation, is likely to face criticism from certain groups who view

this form of manifestation as mutilation, even sacrilege.

Consequently, a new question arises: what are books if they cannot perform their main function as vessels of necessarily legible text? Is there a term that could better define these unreadable books? According to theoretician and visual analyst Garrett Stewart, material books that have lost their utilitarian role as transmitters of textual knowledge but gained new conceptual meaning as works of art should be known as bookworks. Historically, the field of book studies looks at the book in its various roles as instrument, medium or symbol. However, bookworks no longer exclusively belong to the realm of art history and, as questions of textual physicality in the digital age become more prominent, they are entering the field of book studies in general, especially considering their proliferation in recent years.

Considering the printed book as a mass-produced object of cultural transmission, a certain evolution of resistance can be clearly traced. The pocket paperback, the cheapest type of book ever produced, can be realized with tens of thousands of copies in a single edition. The obvious response to this mass duplicability can be found in the opposite approach: special and limited editions, hand-made books with few issues, or unique artists' books. Finally, the ultimate rendition of the book consists of its disuse by physical transformation so fundamental it transcends its text-container status. Books without text are, in fact, all the more relevant due to the fundamental characteristic that they cannot be read – or, at the very least, not in the way we normally understand “reading”. They are then exhibited without any of their traditional functions, as vessels of text or images, available. From this point of view, the book appears to be in an indeterminate state, and although it remains recognizable through its familiar features pages, spine and cover, it also runs the risk of being redundant, even obliterated. Thus, artists have responded, in one way or another, to what the book symbolizes, trying to retrace, redefine, decompose, deconstruct and conceptualize the book as an idea via its physical shape.

A good example of the phenomenon of bookwork can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, during the Futurist movement. Typographical experimentation, a focus on the future, particularly its mechanical and technological possibilities, and a complete disregard for traditional book-making materials laid the foundations of Futurist book construction. It is through their books bound in tin and other metals that the concept of the book-object came to light. The *Depero Futurista*, containing Fortunato Depero's manifesto, appeared in 1927 and embraced for the first time the “machine book” model envisioned by the Futurist movement. The binding consisted of two aluminium bolts that held the pages together, while the inside of the book featured the creative use of paper combined with typographical and chromatic innovation. Five years later, in 1932, the accomplished mechanical book appeared in the form of Filippo Tommaso

Marinetti's *Parole in Libertà Futuriste, olfattive, tattili, termiche* (*Words-in-freedom: olfactory, tactile, thermal*), also known as *The Tin Book*. It was constructed of twenty-seven lithographed metal pages and represented the epitome of pioneering avant-garde at the time: the rule of industry. Bound with a wire structure, the tin book represented the perfect container for Marinetti's manifesto by literally mirroring the text, which called for the aggressive use of technology and encouraged visual manipulation.

When some artists first start to seriously conceptualize the idea of "book", they do so as a reaction to social, political or cultural movements. A relevant example is Marta Minujín's architectural simulation *The Parthenon of Books/ Homage to Democracy*. Designed and created in Buenos Aires in 1983, it marked a crucial year that saw the fall of the military junta and the first free general elections after the demise of the National Reorganization Process dictatorship. Approximately 25,000 books that had been banned by the dictatorship were used to build a full-scale model of the Parthenon, the temple built on the Greek Acropolis in honour of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Minujín's work represented a national awakening, the importance of freedom of expression and, ultimately, became a symbol for the newly democratic rule in Argentina. After three weeks, on Christmas Eve, it was publicly dismantled and the books freely distributed. A decade earlier, in 1970, Joseph Kosuth created a special reading room in the installation *Information Room (Special Investigation)*. In a gallery, the ultimate aesthetic space, two long wooden tables were piled with texts on philosophy, anthropology and psychoanalytic theory from Kosuth's own library, transforming the gallery into a reading room, a room of ideas. Resisting Marcel Duchamp's idea of "ready-made" culture, Kosuth's installation insists on the representation of an idea in itself: the nature of art manifesting itself through the power of ideas. In the 1990s, when mass publishing was reaching its peak, Brian Clerx's *Purification* (1993) envisioned an open book made from soap, silk-screened with fragments from Francis Ponge's prose-poem *Savon*, suspended above a towel printed with the same text. It symbolizes the book as a perishable object, a consumable good which is meant to be used up and which is easily replaced.

Navigating closer to the twenty-first century, artists have vigorously responded to the new digital medium in relation to the physical book. Their "demediated" books are vehicles for ideas that redefine the book's function, affording it new significance. Doug Beube defines himself as a 'biblioclast' who explores the meaning of "book" itself in the digital age. He cuts, pierces, drills, gouges and excavates books, which he calls 'intractable' and 'inflexible' technologies, to emphasize their elegance. Alicia Martín constructs static streams of books cascading out of old buildings. Her conceptual book sculptures reimagine the book as a living organism out of control. Her use of books is reminiscent of consumer culture and the excess of the Western world, especially

in terms of the current state of so-called information overload. In another look at books as living organisms, Georgia Russell ‘vivisects’ books and then encloses them in specimen jars, as if to preserve them. However, they then take on the appearance of dead creatures, as ‘taxidermy objects of a past existence’. Russell’s shredded books are a form of ‘creative destruction’; she first liberates the permanence of the book’s form by sculpting it into a new shape, but then encloses it under glass, in a state of conservation. In this regard her books become a link between the past and the present.

These are just a few examples of the great number of book sculptors, book architects, and book designers—many of whom are featured in this publication—that redefine the meaning of the book. Their bookwork allows for the creation of unmediated ‘conceptual objects: not for normal reading but for thinking about’. They offer us, the viewers, a visual and intellectual reinterpretation of the book, allowing us to rediscover its inherent qualities and to reflect upon its future in this age of digital uncertainty. Can bookwork reimagine the physical book as a vessel of both informative and symbolic content? As usual, we are left with more questions than answers.

Further reading

- Beube, D. *Breaking the Codex. Bookwork, Collage and Mixed Media*. New York: Etc. Etc. The Iconoclastic Museum Press, 2011.
- Sloman, P. *Book Art*. Berlin: Gestalten, 2011.
- Stewart, G. *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Thompson, J. *Playing with Books: Upcycling, Deconstructing and Reimagining the Book*. Beverly: Quarry Books, 2010.
- Wallace, E. *Masters: Book Arts: Major Works by Leading Artists*. Asheville: Lark Books, 2011.

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Lorem Ipsum II (From the Summer Reading Series). Manipulated, screwed, ink-splashed, hand-stitched book assemblage. Photo: Paul Kodama. All images courtesy of the artist.

Bookwork #1

Jacqueline Rush Lee

Jacqueline Rush Lee focuses on the book as object, medium and archetypal form. Working to reveal or transform the nature of a book, Lee is interested in the aesthetic of books as cultural objects that come with their own histories of use and meaning. By using books as a canvas or building block, Jacqueline transforms their formal and conceptual arrangement through a variety of practices in which the physicality, and thus the context of the books have been altered. Drawn to objects that record physical processes or bear imperfections and the scars of life, she is interested in creating evocative works that are cerebral with emotional depth. Remaining open to the physical and metaphorical transformations that occur in the working process, Lee's residual sculptures or installations emerge as a palimpsest – a document that bears traces of the original text within its framework but possesses a new narrative as a visual document of another time.

www.jacquelinrushlee.com



Inside Out Slice (from Volumes Series 2001). Soaked, dried, scraped book components.
Photo: Jacqueline Rush Lee.



Inside Outside Slice, detail, 2001. Soaked, dried, manipulated books screwed together.
Photo: Jacqueline Rush Lee.



Tehran: Collective Fictions Burnt, 2010. Book covers.
Photo: Rob Jaffe. All images courtesy of the artist.

Bookwork #2 Matthew Picton

Cities are often described as living organisms, viewed as subject rather than object. Matthew Picton engages with this tradition of humanizing the city by deconstructing the clean, uncompromising aesthetic of the cartographic city plan and imbuing it with the unique history and culture of each place. *Venice*, for example, is constructed from excerpts of *Death in Venice* written by Thomas Mann after his visit to the city in 1911. During his travels he experienced a cholera outbreak and was witness to a strange mixture of official denials. The novel's protagonist falls victim to his own obsessive desires and yearnings in a metaphor for the state of the disease-stricken city of Venice. The walls of text are interwoven with the musical score by Benjamin Britten for the operatic interpretation of Mann's novel. The work is made from paper partially soaked in water and mud dredged from the lagoon surrounding Venice. These water stains seeping upwards through the crisp, white paper parallel the unique predicament of Venice as it gradually returns to the water, and reference the contamination that spread the water-born cholera through the city.

www.matthewpicton.com
<http://store.blurb.com/ebooks/395736-of-urban-history>



Venice, 2012. Text from *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann and the music score from Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice* opera. Photo: Rob Jaffe.



Detail from *Venice*. Photo: Rob Jaffe.



Treasure Island. Photo: Jodi Harvey-Brown.



Pandora's Box. Book altered is *A Book of Myths and Legends* (1947). Photo: Jodi Harvey-Brown.



Olga the Little Owl. Photo: Jodi Harvey-Brown. All images courtesy of the artist.

Bookwork #3 Jodi Harvey-Brown

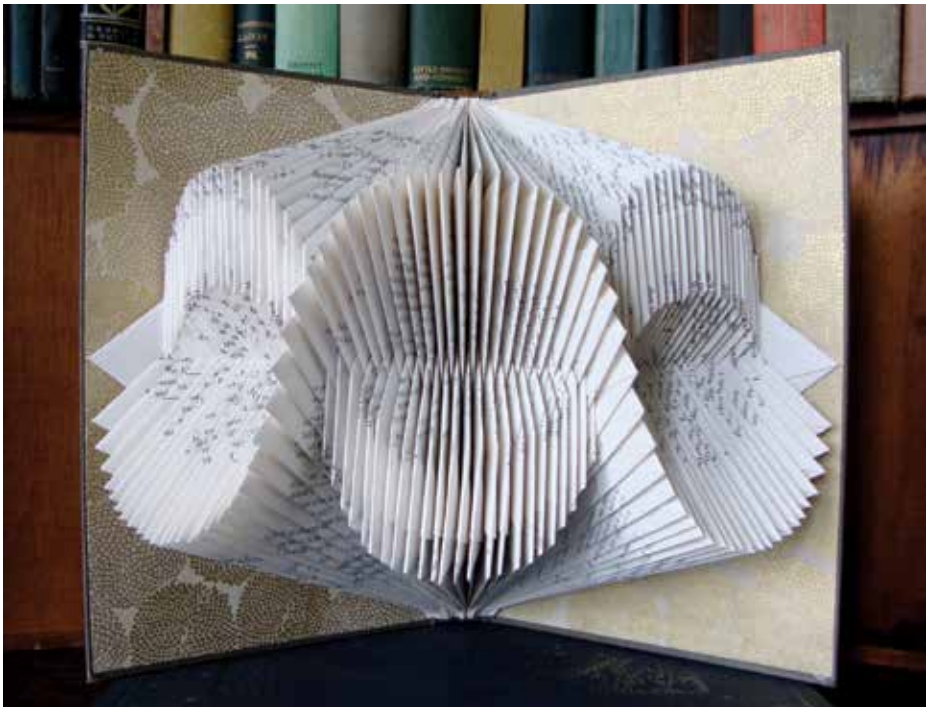
‘For as long as I can remember, I’ve been making art. When I was eight, my grandfather gave me a set of artist’s pencils. That was the beginning of my obsession with art. I haven’t stopped since. I grew up in a small town in South Eastern PA. After high school I studied art at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. It was there that I discovered a love for 3D media. I have always enjoyed reading. Books pull you into a new world. Art lets you see that world. It made sense to me that these two mediums should come together. The books that we love to read should be made to come to life. Characters, for which we care so much, should come out of the pages to show us their stories. What we see in our imaginations as we read should be there for the world to see. My book sculptures are my way of making stories come to life.’

www.jodiharvey-brown.com

Bookwork #4 Betsy Birkey

'Few objects could seem more familiar than books. By folding the pages of a book, however, it changes into something new, perhaps something unexpected. For me, this is the inspiration and the excitement: starting with basically the same template each time and challenging myself to manipulate it into something new. As with origami, the paper is not cut or glued; every design is fashioned by folding alone. While cutting the paper would increase the range of design possibilities for a book, I've continued this self-imposed limitation as a way to push myself to think in new ways. Additionally, I like the fact that, were one to unfold the pages, the book would still be readable, and essentially unchanged. I look for books to fold everywhere I go—library sales, garage sales, second hand stores, estate sales and used bookstores. I am careful not to use anything antique or valuable. They are generally books that have become outdated and have fallen out of use. There is a glut of old, unwanted books; quite literally millions of them are pulped each year. The rest are doomed to a life sitting on a dusty bottom shelf or in a box. By folding a book, I like to hope that I'm giving it a new life, and another chance to be appreciated.'

www.explodedlibrary.com



Untitled. Photo: Betsy Birkey. All images courtesy of the artist.



Untitled (Exploded Library #198). Photo: Betsy Birkey.



Untitled (Exploded Library #201). Vintage World Book atlas. Photo: Betsy Birkey.



Idiom, 1994. 22 Biennial of São Paulo, Brasil.



Idiom, 2013, Museo Marca, Catanzaro, Italy.
Photo: A. Renda.

Bookwork #5 Matej Krén

Matej Krén's work is remarkable for its exceptional scope. In recent years his distinctive approach to sculpture, object, installation, drawing, print, painting, action art, film, music, sound and word has attracted attention at many prestigious international art shows. His work not only touches on very contemporary problems, such as erasing the boundaries between reality and fiction, memory and the present, but also on classic themes in art—the relation between inner and outer, the part and the whole. Typical of his work is a searching for a complexity of content expressed in a monumental and comprehensible language. In 1998 he installed a “tower of books” entitled *Idiom* in the entrance hall of the Prague Municipal Library. His rotunda made of books, *Gravity Mixer*, became a key part of the Czech pavilion at EXPO 2000 in Hanover.

www.matejkren.cz



Idiom - interior, 1998. Prague Municipal Library, Czech Republic. Photo: G. Urbánek.



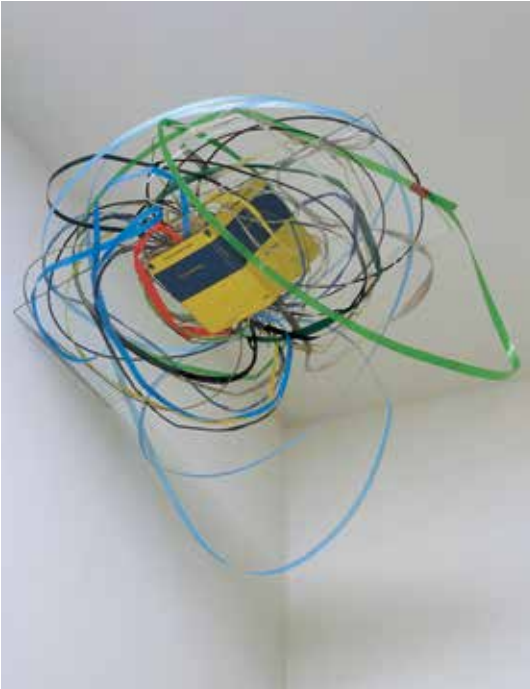
False ceiling, 1995. Books and steel cabling. Photos courtesy of Richard Wentworth and the Lisson Gallery.

Bookwork #6 **Richard Wentworth**

Richard Wentworth's work, encircling the notion of objects and their use as part of our day-to-day experiences, has altered the traditional definition of sculpture as well as photography. By transforming and manipulating industrial and/or found objects into works of art, Wentworth subverts their original function and extends our understanding of them by breaking the conventional system of classification. The sculptural arrangements play with the notion of "ready-made" and juxtaposition of objects that bear no relation to each other.

Whereas in photography, as in the ongoing series *Making Do and Getting By*, Wentworth documents the everyday, paying attention to objects, occasional and involuntary geometries as well as uncanny situations that often go unnoticed.

www.lissongallery.com/artists/richard-wentworth



The Loops, 1999. Books, assorted plastics and metals on glass.



Plume, 2012. Book, soldered steel cable, mirror.

Bookwork #7

Wim Botha

Wim Botha lives in Cape Town. His work has been featured in major international group exhibitions of the work of African and South African artists, including *Africa Remix* and *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*. Other group shows include *The Rainbow Nation*, Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Hague, the Göteborg Biennial in Sweden, and the 11th Triennale für Kleinplastik in Fellbach, Germany.

www.stevenson.info/artists/botha.html



Study for the Epic Mundane, 2013. Books (encyclopedias, bibles, dictionaries, historical documents, etc.), wood, stainless steel. Installation view, *Imaginary Fact: South African art and the archive*, South African Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, 2013. Photo: Mario Todeschini. Courtesy of the artist and the Stevenson Gallery (Cape Town and Johannesburg).



Generic Self-Portrait as an Exile, 2008. Learner's Dictionaries (Afrikaans, English, isiZulu, Sesotho), stainless steel.

Photo: Mario Todeschini. Courtesy of the artist and the Stevenson Gallery (Cape Town and Johannesburg).



The Other's Library, 2009. Cut-out letters installation; mixed media, vinyl.

Bookwork #8 Pablo Lehmann

Pablo Lehmann likes to transcribe texts and to cut book pages in order to reconstruct them, creating different net forms. Cutting paper was for him always a way to write, to create spaces, to transfigure texts in single objects. Each page, each dismantled book enables him to argue a personal point of view, but is ultimately the place where the reader is committed to invent new paths of comprehension of the cut texts. In this sense, words are not only meaning-vehicles, but also shapes: rare webs that everybody is able to interpret using their most intimate code, their most secret desires.

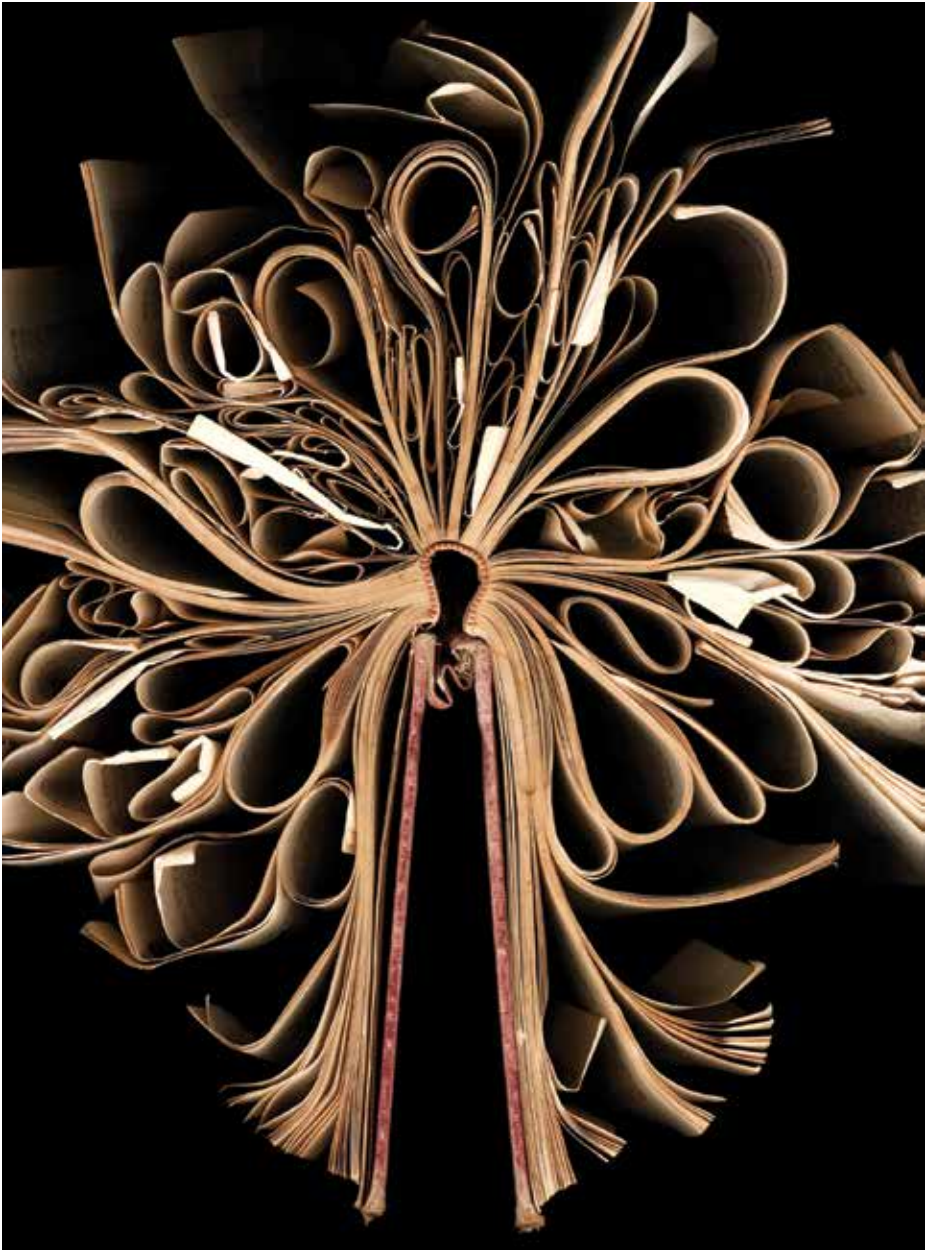
www.pablolehmann.com.ar



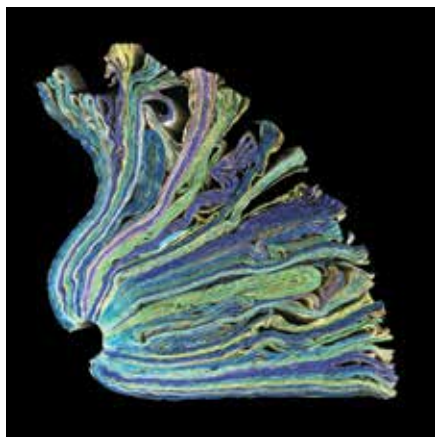
Scribe's House - The library, 2010.
Photos courtesy of the artist.



Scribe's House - The desk, 2011.



New Century, 2006. Photos courtesy of Cara Barer.



Ocean, 2013.



Sunset, 2013.



Anthology, 2004.

Bookwork #9 Cara Barer

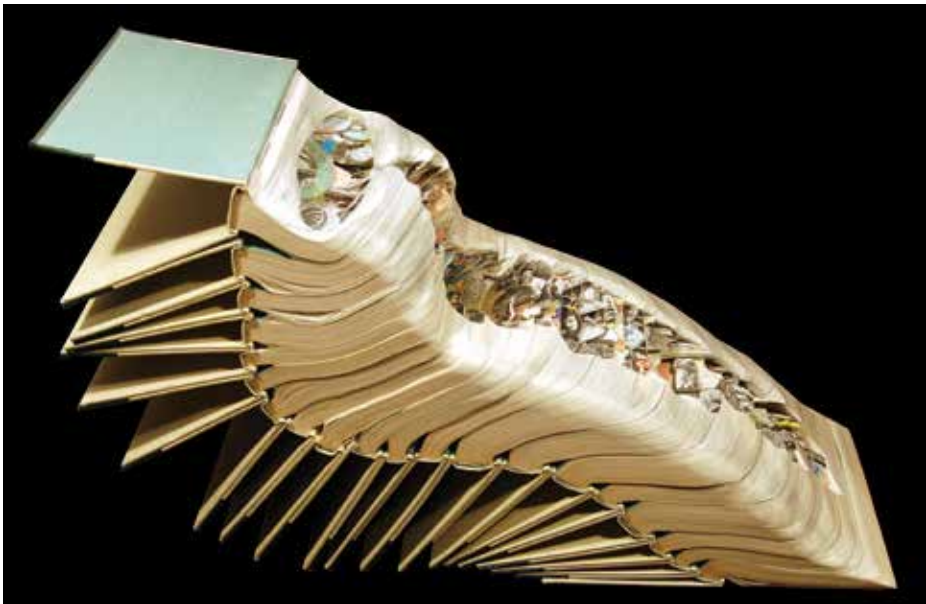
Cara Barer's photographs are primarily a documentation of a physical evolution. By changing common objects into sculptures in a state of flux, she hopes to raise questions about these changes, the ephemeral and fragile nature in which we now obtain knowledge, and the future of books. With the discarded books that she has acquired, she attempts to blur the line between objects, sculpture, and photography. This project is a journey that continues to evolve.

www.carabarar.com

Bookwork #10 Brian Dettmer

'The age of information in physical form is waning. As intangible routes thrive with quicker fluidity, material and history are being lost, slipping and eroding into the ether. Newer media swiftly flips forms, unrestricted by the weight of material and the responsibility of history. In the tangible world we are left with a frozen material but in the intangible world we may be left with nothing. History is lost as formats change from physical stability to digital distress. The richness and depth of the book is universally respected yet often undiscovered as the monopoly of the form and relevance of the information fades over time. The book's intended function has decreased and the form remains linear in a non-linear world. By altering physical forms of information and shifting preconceived functions, new and unexpected roles emerge. This is the area I currently operate in. Through meticulous excavation or concise alteration I edit or dissect communicative objects or systems such as books, maps, tapes and other media. The medium's role transforms. Its content is recontextualized and new meanings or interpretations emerge.'

www.briandettmer.com



World Books, 2009. *Altered Books*. Photos courtesy of Brian Dettmer.



Consumption Drains Dreams, 2009. Altered Book.



Consumption Drains Dreams, 2009. Altered Book.



Bent Onyx, 2012. Digital offset printing, Mohawk superfine paper, Japanese tissue, hand painted edges. Binding construction by Daniel Kelm. Photos courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Bookwork #11 **Tauba Auerbach**

Tauba Auerbach created this set of three 8 x 8 x 8 inch cubic books, which illustrate the colour spectrum through digital offset printing in a page-by-page format. A digital offset print on paper with airbrushed cloth cover and book edges creates a colourful reference volume of all the colours in existence. The special binding was co-designed by the artist herself in collaboration with Daniel E. Kelm, and were bound at Wide Awake Garage by Kelm with the help of Leah Hughes.

www.taubaauerbach.com



RGB Colorspace Atlas, 2011.
Digital offset print on paper, case bound book,
airbrushed cloth cover and page edges. Binding
co-designed by Daniel E. Kelm.

Bookwork #12

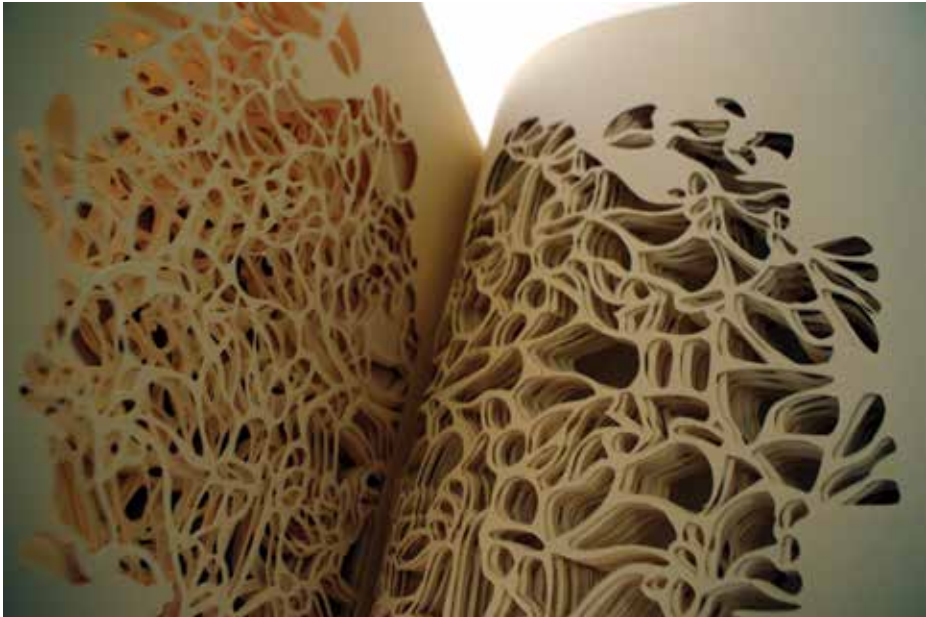
Evj Jokhova

Evj Jokhova is a multidisciplinary artist and bookmaker. Her work explores space and the form it takes for us: the space within architecture, the notion of home and loss, the construction of dwellings and the fear of the unknown, worlds both real and fictional. Her work is an attempt to realize the need for inventions of unrestrained fantasy in our society; it defines the moment when the boundary between the real and the imaginary blurs. *The Spider's Book* is, in a sense, a metaphorical representation of "weaving a story". However, instead of adding to weave a form, she takes away, telling the story through spaces and gaps.

www.evjokhova.co.uk



The Spider's Book, 2008. Hand bound book cut pages. Photos courtesy of the artist.



The Spider's Book, 2008.



Kader Abdolah Portrait, 2011. 1500 pages of paper.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Bookwork #13 Nicholas Galanin

‘Culture cannot be contained as it unfolds. My art enters this stream at many different points, looking backwards, looking forwards, generating its own sound and motion. I am inspired by generations of Tlingit creativity and contribute to this wealthy conversation through active curiosity. There is no room in this exploration for the tired prescriptions of the “Indian Art World” and its institutions. Through creating I assert my freedom. Concepts drive my medium. I draw upon a wide range of indigenous technologies and global materials when exploring an idea. Adaptation and resistance, lies and exaggeration, dreams, memories and poetic views of daily life—these themes recur in my work, taking form through sound, texture, and image. Inert objects spring back to life; kitsch is reclaimed as cultural renewal; dancers merge ritual and rap. I am most comfortable not knowing what form my next idea will take, a boundless creative path of concept-based motion.’

silverjackson.tumblr.com