

## *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*

BY GARRETT STEWART  
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AT THE ALCUIN SOCIETY'S wayzgoose in Vancouver this past fall, I contemplated Emma Lehto's creative abuse of a novel by Danielle Steel. Returning home, I found Garrett Stewart's new book, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*, serendipitously waiting in my mailbox.

Applying Stewart's criteria, I realized that Lehto differed from other exhibitors who demonstrated examples of the "book arts"—typesetting, binding, illustrating and variations thereof—in that she presented not "book art" but what Stewart describes as "bookwork"—"something done to a book" that transforms it into a "book-work."

The book's body, the codex, has been "discarded or tampered with . . . detexted," rendered unreadable, turned into a non-book. The textual *system* of the book is untouched: you can still read Steel's narrative, if you want to, but not this cut-up copy, which has become an object without words yet which paradoxically raises questions and concepts.

In another book-work I have known, a 16-minute video called "this is the story of..." (<http://bit.ly/tuSloz>), Judith Williams hangs a pretty book titled *Salmon: Our Heritage* from a pulley in an abandoned cannery and smashes the codex into a metaphor more powerful than the original text. Micah Lexier's medium in *Things Exist*, exhibited in Toronto in the fall of 2011, is a pair of distressed vintage volumes of *A Field Guide to Western Birds*.

Bookwork is conceptual labour; book-works are material objects; book-works do bookwork. Book-works can be monumental—such as the cover image for Stewart's book by Matel Kren,

*Passage*, two parallel walls of books and mirrors; Anselm Kiefer's ominous sepulchral installations; Claes Oldenburg's massive *Torn Notebook*; and Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial, which uses negative space to build a cenotaph for the so-called people of the book.

Book-works can also be miniature, because all miniature books contain "whole worlds within their small compass" and therefore "all miniatures are thus conceptual pieces." Less extreme in size though not necessarily in ideas, Idris Khan's time-lapse prints open a book to all its pages at once. Robert Thé renders a first edition of McLuhan as a handgun and braids a noose from shredded pages of *The American Heritage Dictionary*. His *Reader's Digest (cake book)*, a wedge of frosted layer cake sawed from a two-volume compendium of *Reader's Digest*—a cake made from a book—recalled for me a book made from a cake, of which I partook at the launch of a biography by James Hawkins, an author with a past as a pastry chef—both works to be "inwardly digested" (to crib from the famous Anglican collect for the Second Sunday in Advent).

Before we recoil from the flagrant vandalism in book sculptures, Stewart reminds us that we are witnessing a sort of reincarnation, a poetics of the remaindered. As library discards, the books could suffer a worse fate: "assigned to scrap heap or dumpster rather than gallery floor." As book-works they become something rich and strange. While Prospero is not mentioned, *The Library at Elsinore* is, a *trompe l'oeil* sculptural bookcase by Tom Phillips displaying the titles of all the real books named for lines from a Shakespeare play, including a shelf "singling out works whose titles mine the To Be or Not to Be speech" (including *This Mortal Coil* by Cynthia Asquith, *The Name of Action* by Graham Greene, and *Perchance to Dream* by Ivor Novello).

As Stewart's subtitle warns, bookwork partakes of conceptual art, and this book is an "art book" as well as a prime example of the "book arts," beautifully bound and printed, and illustrated with 12 colour plates, 68 halftones and a line drawing. But the author, as a professor in a Department of English, is primarily a book and word man rather than an art critic. Like all of us who love the look and feel of

books, he straddles the borderline where words and ideas take on physical form. He derives his pre-eminent historical influences, Marcel Duchamp and Jorge Luis Borges, from both visual and literary arts, and plays throughout with the concept of “demediation,” which he explains by juxtaposition with its opposite: “To mediate is to convey, to bridge, to define, to transmit. To demediate is to block, to put signals and signs into remission.”

Puns, conceits, neologisms, and generally irrepressible wit temper occasional daunting passages of post-post-modern artspeak, challenging us to consider such concepts as obstructed decipherment, book sculpture versus word painting, beaux versus *faux livres*, *bibiobjets*, mute books, workbooks versus bookworks, extreme books, optical allusions, speaking volumes, anagrammar, paralinguistic material ironies, graphic versus bibliographic, the bibliographic unconscious—in short, books “found, foresworn, fabricated or defaced.” Stewart reminds us that a book is the only assembly-line product for which we ask “a copy of” and that writing in book form was Western culture’s first interactive medium—the bodily investment of page-turned reading, anticipating the Xbox by centuries.

Although Stewart says little about e-books, arguing that much of the bookwork discussed predated “the digital turn in social interchange,” he acknowledges the digital presence and “the waning empire of the book[,]” which “seems part of the point in this remodelling of an extraneous backlog.” Long ago, former UBC head librarian (and Alcuin Society founding member) Basil Stuart-Stubbs, with tongue firmly in cheek, addressed assembled B.C. librarians on the importance of maintaining the backlog; I suspect a conceptual connection.

Consider also this solution to another late-20th-century library dilemma: the disposal of the card catalogue. At the University of Iowa, where Stewart is based, the library atrium “is permanently graced by a huge overhead stable that has turned the former card catalogue index of the library’s holdings to a delirious anarchic space: hundreds of former shelf cards with call

numbers are seen still clinging to an intricate, mangled nest of the metal rods that used to fix them in their catalogue drawers but that now expose them along arbitrary bends and loops to the slow weathering air of a new day.”

Stewart devotes most of a chapter to a Tate Modern exhibition *Learn to Read* (2007), which included handmade text-works and altered book-works, but no catalogue because such art is primarily in the head to begin with, and what you think is what you get. Nor can you be sure you are thinking what the artist was thinking. For instance, does the Belgian artist Kris Martin’s *End-Point of ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ (O. Wilde)* work if one pronounces the place name “Redding”? Or is that part of the point [pun intended], since Martin removes from the poem everything except its final punctuation mark: a visual point and no words at all?

A book-work may assume a life of its own. Stewart alludes to Stephane Mallarmé’s 1914 poem “Un coup de dés jamais n’aboiera le hazard,” which the poet intended to be dependent on its graphic layout, and to its reduction in 1968 by the surrealist Marcel Broodthaers to black lines over the words, leaving only the layout. But he overlooks Michael Maranda’s 2010 removal of the black-out to restore a white ghost of the text.

A concept cannot be completely finalized, and of the making of bookwork there is no end.

~ REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS REEVE

