

WHAT SHALL WE WANT TO HAVE CALLED A “BOOK”?

By Sharon Helgason Gallagher

ART BOOK PUBLISHERS inhabit a no-man’s-land bordered by the commercial publishing industry, the art world, and the vibrant archipelago of the artists’ books community. The artists’ books natives generally regard us as distant relatives who emigrated to the richer climes of the mainstream economy and who can sometimes be counted on to send monies back “home.” The “art worlders” turn to us as trusted outside professional experts who can be of assistance by publishing scholarship and documentation for the historical record. Our largest neighbor, the trade-publishing industry, is largely baffled by our business model, for the art book is never completely at home in the world of mainstream publishing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Helgason Gallagher is the President and Executive Director of ARTBOOK and of D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., in New York, a publishing and distribution company she co-founded in 1990. Sharon is a graduate of Yale University, summa cum laude, and holds a masters degree in philosophy from Columbia where she was a University Fellow.

Visual, expensive, laden with something called “production values,” and often physically indescribable in the data language of the industry, the art book is always the exception in the bestseller-driven publishing marketplace. As mainstream trade publishing adopts and adapts to digital platforms, the outsider status of the art book has been even further amplified: the industry marginalizes books that are so, well, “bookish” in their sheer physicality. To speak knowledgeably about the art book—about its content, design, production, and distribution—is to speak a language foreign to the one spoken by my friends in the trade-publishing world.

However, when the publishing parties are over and the day is done, as we take off our respective academic caps, conference badges, and industry hard hats, we find that we all share dumb amazement at the historical moment in which, by strange biographical accident of birthdate, we happen to find ourselves: a once-in-a-half-millennium tectonic shift in how culture reproduces itself, in how ideas are not only communicated across space but also—and more importantly, I suggest—transmitted over time. We are in the midst of a mediological change, to use Régis Debray’s term: one that is huge in itself and more enormous still in its aftershocks. The change of the book.

A FEW NOTES ON THE PREHISTORY OF THE DIGITAL BOOK

It's important to understand both the scale of the changes brought on by digital publishing and the extraordinary speed with which they are taking place. Since the United States tends to do things bigger and quicker—and, one could add, with less care and forethought—a brief history of the American publishing industry will tell us about how digital publishing happened to us, and happened so fast.

Amazon's Kindle e-reader was launched for the US public on November 19, 2007. Five years later that was ancient history in digital time. In the spring of 2012, the Pew survey looked at e-readership before and immediately after the 2011 Christmas holiday—a mere four years after the introduction of the Kindle. Over the twelve months prior to the Christmas holiday, 17 percent of Americans had read an e-book. During the holiday weeks, both e-reader and tablet ownership essentially doubled. Immediately after the holiday, that 17 percent of respondents who said they had read an e-book jumped to 21 percent—nearly a 25 percent increase in the space of a month. Meanwhile, many trade publishers were reporting that e-books now made up 20 percent of their sales volume, not simply in one or two categories, but across the board.

The speed of this adoption of the digital was arguably made possible by earlier changes in the book industry that were more pronounced in the United States than elsewhere: the economic rationalization of the bookselling business and the accompanying commodification of the book. These changes began much earlier than many digital doomsayers today seem to realize. According to Jon Bekken's 1997 study of economic concentration in the retail book industry: "In 1958, one-store book firms accounted for nearly 80 percent of book sales; by 1982 that figure had fallen to 26 percent, even though single-store retailers continue[d] to account for a majority of all bookstore outlets."¹ Note the terminus date of the study: 1982, well before the so-called bookstore wars of the 1990s. Looking at other studies of reading behavior, we also find statistically remarkable changes that precede the hyperexpansion of bookstore chains in the 1990s. Two dramatic shifts that took place in the 1980s are documented by Gallup polls: first, a doubling of the percentage of respondents who said they'd read no books at all over the last twelve months, from 8 percent of the population in 1978 to 16 percent of the population in 1990; and, second, a drop of almost 50 percent at the other side of the bell curve, the heavy readers, from 13 percent of respondents in 1978 who said they'd read more than fifty books over the last twelve months to just 7 percent in 1990.

These changes were already "history," as it were, by the time of the chain-versus-independent bookstore wars that occupied so much of the publishing discourse in the United States in the 1990s. In 2005 the American Booksellers Association testified to the Antitrust Modernization Commission: "The American Booksellers Association . . . has gone from a membership high of 5,200 in 1991 to 1,791 members today, a 65 percent decline in less than fifteen years. The decline in ABA's membership is indicative of a general decline in the number of independent bookstores, whose share of the market has dwindled from a third of the entire consumer book market in 1991 to approximately nine percent today."² Meanwhile, the dynamics of logarithmic e-commerce growth were afoot: by that very same year, 2005, Amazon's annual media sales in North America (including books, music, and DVDs) had reached \$3 billion, though Barnes & Noble, the dominant

chain, still led at roughly \$4.5 billion. But by 2010, Amazon’s media sales had ballooned to just under \$7 billion, while Barnes & Noble was stagnant and dipping below the \$4.5 billion mark.

In other words, digital publishing was born into an already changed and changing world, one that had already had a lot of the “friction” bred out of it—the friction of the hard-to-categorize, the local, the personal, the odd, the quirky, the difficult, and the simply different. The friction that slows things down and gives you time to think and reflect. These changes in bookselling and reading went hand in hand with Big Six bestsellerdom and the growth of genre fiction: in a rationalized “modern” retailing and logistics environment, books could now be conceived, marketed, distributed, sold, and consumed as commodities.

The gold standard of the book qua commodity is, of course, the so-called page-turner. It’s the book that “hooks” you, that you “just can’t put down,” and, importantly, that makes you want to read another one pretty much just like it. We consume books of this ilk the way we do episodes in a long-running TV series. Whole swaths of the publishing industry have become “content farms” designed to output the words for each category of commodity publishing: the summer beach book, the bodice ripper, the post-cold war thriller, etc., etc., etc.

Fast-forwarding to the digital present, it turns out that it is precisely these page-turners that fare best as e-books read on e-reader screens. The drill-down statistics on what genres people are reading as e-books are revealing. E-books have captured the largest share of sales in the following genres: romance, crime, thriller, mystery, science fiction, and fantasy. Notably, in the romance category many publishers report that a full 60 percent of their sales are in e-book (as opposed to print-book) form. Furthermore, according to the February 2012 Harris poll, many e-book readers read more titles than comparable print readers. Why? Because it’s easier and cheaper to get your next fix. Perhaps the truth was there all along: that the pages in page-turners just get in the way. Maybe page-turners are better without pages. Maybe they are better off not being books at all.

More generally, maybe there are many kinds of content that we tend to think of as books but are in fact better suited to publication as e-books, as apps, as web pages, as databases. We know this, for example, about encyclopedias. But sometimes we know something abstractly and it doesn’t truly hit home until we have a personal experience. Let me share a story. I live in one of the very last unrenovated lofts in SoHo, in New York City. We don’t have what you’d call a lobby, but we do have an entrance area with mailboxes and a “give-a-book / take-a-book” shelf. One day a complete set of the 1992 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* materialized in the nook next to the mailboxes. Stacked vertically, it was just a little taller than I am. The stack sat there for several weeks, untouched. Then one evening, while helping my eleven-year-old daughter with her science report on capuchin monkeys, I said, “Remember that big stack of books downstairs? Let’s see what the encyclopedia has to say.” I went downstairs and brought up volume two, *Bayeu to Ceanothus*. “This,” I said, with a degree of awe, “is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I’m sure it will have an excellent long article on the capuchin monkey.” I placed the august volume on the coffee table and carefully paged to the entry. What we found were three short paragraphs. My daughter

had already read much more thorough and up-to-date information on Wikipedia and had followed the Wiki hyperlinks to more detailed research. The encyclopedia, with its gold stamping, held no authority for her, no luster. A few days later, the stack disappeared, missing, unfortunately for its new owner, the volume covering Bayeu to ceanothus, which remains upstairs in our loft as a strange memento—more of my own childhood than of my daughter’s. Several months later, in March 2012, the Encyclopaedia Britannica company announced that, after 244 years of continuous publication, no new editions would be printed. Jorge Cauz, president of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., noted in the press release: “I understand that for some the end of the Britannica print set may be perceived as an unwelcome goodbye to a dear, reliable and trustworthy friend that brought them the joy of discovery in the quest for knowledge, [but] today our digital database is much larger than what we can fit in the print set. And it is up to date because we can revise it within minutes anytime we need to, and we do it many times each day.”

Encyclopedias and bodice rippers—as editors used to call romance novels, back in the day—two very different kinds of publishing, but both without a doubt what we once called “books.” When they become digital publications, whether as online databases or as e-books, are they still books? Should we keep calling them that? What do we miss about their “bookishness” when they become, in their different ways, digital? Not much at all when it comes to content. Indeed, in many cases there is more in the digital editions. But we do lose connotation and context. For the encyclopedia, the connotations of a library, of seals of authority. For the romance novel, past summers at the beach; a book hidden under the bed, perhaps. But my daughter learned more from Wikipedia online, and, as for the romance reader, the statistics show that most reading on e-readers happens in bed and most new purchases of e-books are made after 9:00 p.m.

Digital forms (e-book, web, apps, and emerging hybrids) do some things—many things, in fact—that we used to associate with the book just as well and in some cases better: search, update, transport, archive, reference other material and encode data about its reading and use. But digital publications are radically new in the way they provide, for instance, geolocation, video and audio enhancement, dictionary definitions, hyperlinked citations, social reading platforms, accessibility for the visually impaired, and the ability to zoom in on images to see greater levels of detail. From an economic perspective, they offer zero marginal production cost, near-zero marginal transaction cost, immediacy of delivery, and a far greater selection of titles available to individual readers, regardless of location.

With DRM-free digital publications, readers can also anthologize, excerpt, comment, and even bowdlerize their own editions. Indeed, readers can now move the production process backward, as it were, to create their own custom print editions of books originally purchased digitally.

In some sense, the digital form gives the reader more control over the experience of reading. With the emerging digital forms, the reader takes on—or is technologically enabled to take on—many functions that, until very recently, were the exclusive province of the publisher, who alone had the authority and tools to fix and embed his or her editorial decisions into the print form.

IS IT JUST SEMANTICS?

If it turns out that certain kinds of content can survive just fine and, indeed, might even thrive in digital incarnations, then what shall we want, now, at this juncture in our cultural history, to have called a “book”? What, looking back from the future at our present as the past, shall we want to have defined as a book, in order to create a legacy upon which that future can build? What we insist upon now as the defining qualities of the book will determine the Wittgensteinian “riverbed” guiding the flow of meaning that continues as “book,” while other kinds of content will fork off and create their own riverbeds of digital forms.

Is there a kind of meaning conveyed uniquely in the book form? And if so, how are we in the publishing community doing at articulating what is special, distinctive, and unique about the book form? When I listen to talks and read blogs by publishing colleagues who have either embraced the digital with enthusiasm or accepted it as a dreadful but inevitable reality, I am not satisfied by their answers to this question. Instead, I am struck by how often the “smell” of the printed book is what they say they’ll miss and find so distinctive. Given that the olfactory is the sense most strongly identified with memory, this strikes me as a kind of preemptive nostalgia, an anticipatory mourning that only barely masks defeatist cynicism, especially when followed by the predictable coda professing great personal “fondness” for bookshops, bookshops that, filled with the thus-noted smell of musty books, are now rendered, in the mind’s eye, in digitally enhanced sepia tones.

Even the skeuomorphic visual design of the e-book space is musty. The “virtual” bookshelf that houses the icons for e-books on the iPad and other devices calls to mind a school library shelf circa 1965. This skeuomorphic digital design might mirror more truth than we’d like to admit—perhaps the book is over and done with—while at the same time contributing as visual meme to this historicizing of the book as “ye olde book.”

When did the aesthetic of the book become so rearguard? When did the book take on the patina of “vintage”? Was it perhaps in that period I mentioned earlier, when the commodification of books got underway? Isn’t the hunter-green color scheme of Barnes & Noble just a Disneyfication of the Ivy League library? Is an ersatz musty tome in a dusty Victorian bookshop what our generation will bequeath to the future as the exemplar of the book?

I think we can do better. Surely we shall want the book to evoke more than mustiness and nostalgia. Won’t we also want to have left to the future a more vibrant image of the bookstore than that of Flourish & Blotts in the Harry Potter stories?

What, then, are the kinds of bookish books we ought to be publishing today as exemplars of the book for the future? What is the enduring legacy of bookishness that we want to transmit to the future? What kinds of meaning are transmitted uniquely in the book form? What is the bookishness of the book that does not survive conversion, translation, adaptation, or reformatting as a digital publication? And what kinds of books even possess this quality?

The field of artists’ books is notable for its obsessive reflection on self-definition: an outsider to the world of artists’ books can’t help but be struck by the intensity of the debate within the field about just what an artist’s book is and isn’t, about what does and doesn’t

merit the name “artist’s book.” At a time when the mainstream publishing community is struggling to define what the book might be in the digital future, I reckon all of us can learn, not only from the inventiveness of artists’ books themselves, but also from the very structure of this debate about definition and naming. Why the field of artists’ books takes its own naming so seriously is not, I think, just semantics but a genuinely political struggle for a “just semantics,” motivated by a fierce desire to create and articulate kinds of meaning and experience that have been rendered mute by the commodification of the book over the course of that very same twentieth century in which the artist’s book has developed. This is one way of understanding Johanna Drucker’s ambitious dual claims that (1) the artist’s book is the quintessential twentieth-century art form, and (2) that “what is unique about artists’ books is that, with very few exceptions, they really did not exist in their current form before the twentieth century.”³ The artist’s book is by definition other to the commodified book that came into existence in the last century. It plays itself out in an ongoing dialectic and agon against its dark commercial twin. And by that logic the artist’s book is necessarily, like philosophy, a latecomer—Hegel’s owl of Minerva, which begins its flight only at the dusk of an era. Or perhaps the owl of Terpsichore who dances at night in Ulises Carrión’s space-time.

I speak of dance because I believe it is the reader’s distinctive somatic experience of the physical book that most resists translation into digital form. Indeed, I question whether there is any equivalence, any translation whatsoever, of the somatic experience of the book into the digital, and whether it would be a category mistake even to try. In the process of grappling with the digital form, I find that what I miss most is not, in fact, the smell of the printed book but rather the extraordinary symphony of movement that is a great art book, photo book, or, of course, artist’s book. By somatic, I don’t just mean the movement of the arms and hands and head and neck and shoulders and eyes as I page through a book, or even the beauty of the evolved scale and proportion of the book page to the human face and hand. What I insist upon is a somatic experience far more powerful: I mean the awesome, truly distinctive choreography of movement in my brain from left to right, from right back to left, from spatial to temporal processing, from visual to verbal and back again; the thick temporal symmetries of the dance steps my brain takes as it progresses through the book. I was fortunate once to spend uninterrupted time with one of Dieter Roth’s two-handed sketchbooks in Ira Wool’s collection—I can only describe my experience of it as brain dance.

The simple feature of bound and sequenced pages with fronts and backs and openings and closings turns out to be not simply a tool but a remarkable space-time forum, in which one of the most distinctive features of the human brain—its bilateralism—can experience itself. To those who liken the printed book to the horse and buggy (and there are many, I’m afraid), I say, no, the book is more like the bicycle. And as enduring. The bicycle: a simple but ingenious design harmoniously suited to the bipedal structure of our human body. The book: a simple but ingenious design harmoniously suited to the bilateral structure of our human brain. When, in the future, we speak of the book, I want us to think of this object that so effortlessly affords the reader a structured self-experience of the bilateralism of the brain.

We are at a truly unprecedented moment in cultural history. I believe an important question at a time of such vast change is how to have agency. By “agency” I mean something

old-fashioned and humanist: an action founded on the belief that the outcome of that action matters, that acting makes a difference in the sense of rendering the future different than it would otherwise have been, that action can have effect not just as communication across space but also as legacy transmitted, over time, to the future. Agency makes a difference by making a new past for someone else’s future. And therein lies the responsibility.

More important perhaps than our initial forays into the realm of digital publishing are what we are making now as exemplars of the book to transmit to the future. Let us not leave the future with the smelly nostalgia of musty books. What shall we want to have called a “book”? With the books we make today, we have a historic opportunity to define the book as a muscular, energetic, distinctive form of meaning transmission, dancing into the future, beautifully scaled to the human body and the human brain.

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NOTES

1. Jon Bekken, “Feeding the Dinosaurs: Economic Concentration in the Retail Book Industry,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 13, 4 (1997): 3–26.
2. Bruce Spiva, “Comments of the American Booksellers Association to the Antitrust Modernization Commission Robinson-Patman Act Panel” (2005), online at http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/amc/commission_hearings/pdf/Spiva_Revised%20.pdf.
3. Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 2004), 1.