



Reading Through The Bookworks Exhibition

Interview with

Dina Deitsch, Tufts University Art Galleries

&

**Darin Murphy, W. Van Alan Clark, Jr. Library,
School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston**

KENNEALLY: William Blake – author, artist, printmaker, and prophetic visionary observed that the imagination is not a state, it is the human existence, itself. At the opening of the 19th century, Blake employed his own fevered and fertile imagination to expand the boundaries of poetry and publishing. Two centuries later, artists continue to push against what we mean by what we call a book.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series, I’m Christopher Kenneally for *Beyond the Book*. Bookworks, an exhibition at Tufts University Art Galleries in Medford, Massachusetts considers bookmaking as a distinctive art form and questions the structure, function and value of printed matter in the digitally marked 21st century.

Dina Deitsch, Director and Chief Curator of the Tufts University Art Galleries in Medford and at the School of the Museum of Fine arts at Tufts University in Boston, organized the show, together with Chiara Pidotella, Research Curator, and graduate fellows, Emily Chun and Kevin Vogelaar. Dina Deitsch joins me now in her office on the Tufts campus. Welcome to *Beyond the Book* Dina.

DEITSCH: Hi, thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: We appreciate the chance to come in and view the exhibit with you. It was a tour that was remarkable because so much is there to begin to think about the book in new and different ways. You organized this exhibition, and I want to ask you, in what way did you think about it and how did you intend for the visitor to progress from section to section?

DEITSCH: That’s a great question. Well, the impetus for artist book show – there were many inspiration points, one of which is coming to Tufts University two years ago and seeing the collections that we had on campus, most notably in our libraries.



We'll talk about that soon. And then also looking at the resurgence of self-publishing and artist-made books that are happening all around today. I see a lot of artists doing that.

But the term bookworks actually comes from – it's a play on the word artworks, of course, but it comes from one of the early pioneers of the conceptual artist book from the '60s and '70s, an artist Ulises Carrión. He wrote a manifesto or essay called "The New Art of Making Books" in 1975. So the manifesto, itself, is organized in almost a list format, and it's great. We actually have copies of it in the gallery for people to read. Or, as I've noticed, many people have taken them home with them, which is fine. It's available online for free. But we use these categories pulled partially from his manifesto, but also thinking of what is the baseline operations of book?

And so we kind of came to collective discussions about, you know, starting with the very basic functions, which is how he begins his essay with what a book is. And so we have a first section where we think about the materiality of a book, and this is the art that begins both from the Medieval codex, and we look at scrolls and codex and parchment books, sort of the early what a book used to be, I would say. And then we look at how artists – contemporary artists thinking about an artist book have used everything from cheese, gum, liquid silk, soap, fabric panels to create what is still notably a book. Or is it? And so thinking about what is the book actually physically made of?

The second category we came up with was sequencing in a time-based practice, thinking a book is something that happens over the course of time, you turn a page, you read it, it does not happen at once, it's not a singular plane of vision let's say even a painting is. And so that was a great way to look at artists from the '60s and '70s who looked at nonsequential forms like cards as a format for making a book to people who use performance, we even brought the famed feminist Carolee Schneemann, who did a very famous feminist performance in 1975, where she used her own body, but she pulled out a scroll and used that as a form of a book practice as a performance.

And then we look at artists who use the landscape, like Carolina Caycedo, who's a Los Angeles based activist who uses a book to recreate a river in South America where she does a lot activism around dams. And then we even look at artists who use the game as a way to understand the time based sort of operations of a book. Then we looked at language and communication, a book is there to communicate. That's a baseline idea, I guess. That's a wonderful section where artist who uses acts of translation and mistranslation as a way to think about the book practice. That's a section that I like to talk about where we have our little Bible wall,



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because the Bible in Western Culture is considered the book, and so that's a great foil for a lot of artists to work from. So we have artists like Paul Chan, who translate the New Testament into Internet images, things like that. So that creates a whole other section.

And then the final section of the exhibition, which I think is actually the larger section, and for us it's a lot of the culminating portions, is looking at the book as a space of gathering, and we call that space the gathering community space because in its very basic structure, the book is a gathering of ideas, a gathering of pages, words, idea, concepts. But then not only that, but the book's great contribution to human knowledge is that's the way to circulate information. So not only does a book sort of gather ideas together, but also develops a community in and of itself of shared readers. So that's sort of a space where we look at things. From 1968 we have an early Xerox book where conceptual artists were invited to add Xerox projects so that as you turned their pages over time, you would have a new shape and form, and that was considered an exhibition in a book. We have a pieces from a facsimile of Duchamp's "Boite-en-valise," which was from the late '60s, his own self recreated retrospective, miniatures of all of his artwork in a box. And so we look at artists journals from everything from the '60s to today that look at the journal as a collection of community and spaces and ideas with nonconventional forms such as knitted gloves to edible chocolates to just having records and sounds and films. And the culminating project is by Steffani Jemison and Jamal Cyrus, "Alpha's Bet Is Not Over Yet," where it's actually a whole reading room library of historic black journals from United States from 1919. And they're full facsimiles where people are welcome to read and use, flip through, and add notes about it, as well, and out of which we run a reading room, as well.

So a wide range of projects that really look at the book. I would say the arc is from the book as a singular object into the book as a collective entity.

KENNEALLY: The book that most of us think about is an object for consumption. We go to the book to get our information or our entertainment, relaxation, all those kinds of things. It's something we consume. But for these artists, the book is platform for expression, for creation. It's really remarkable.

DEITSCH: It is, and actually I like that you say consumption because we have a whole swath of projects that contend with food, where the notion of the book – and actually there's a young artist group all about food and books, actually. So the idea that the book is a consumer object is something that has not gone unnoticed by anybody. But the book is also – one thing, it becomes a highly metaphoric object. The book is the core object of ideas, of knowledge, of information. Right now we're at a point where we have questionable information coming at all ends. And



so if one is to think about how information is understood, processed, realized, developed, if you're looking for a singular image, the book is actually a pretty good close one to go for.

So the book becomes a wonderful platform for a lot of different artists for actually a lot of different reasons. I can say we have over 90 singular objects within the show, or bookworks, I should say, within the show, and I can't say there's any unifying reason why each of those artists go for the book. I think everybody addresses the book for a very specific and very different reason. But the book becomes – it's the basis of our education, our knowledge, and our understanding as a community since the press. So it becomes a very charged object, so it's not a hard one to use to address, basically, anything you're thinking of. So it could be consumption of food, it could be time, duration, it could be knowledge, it could be something very specific. It could be about the Bible itself, it could be about the notion of reading, the act of reading. How do you think about the act of reading as a material process? How do you slow yourself down in a very fast-paced world?

KENNEALLY: The relationship of books and food is very clear, as you say. In the exhibit you've got books that are printed on chewing gum. But there was one that we might think of as quite unusual. We expect to find this in a supermarket, but here it's a book. It's a book of cheese slices.

DEITSCH: It is. It is. And it's a book of cheese slices that's meeting its natural cycle as it molds over slowly but surely in our cases. It is. I'll actually let my colleague Darin Murphy talk a little bit more about it. But that actually is a book by an artist, Ben Denzer, a young artist who bounds and finds everything from cheese to dollar bills to think about well, what is the bare minimum of a book? What makes something – constitutes a book. So it's bound. It's bound in a nice fabric binding, but the pages are cheese. So on the outside it looks like a book, but then you flip the pages, there's no text, there's no image, just material. But it brings this question of well, what is reading? Is reading a purely visual act? Is it a purely mental act? Is there something about the tactility of moving a page from side to side? Is it about understanding the weights? And so with a couple of other of the projects that we have on view which really ask you to move and touch and sort of play with the object itself, I think a lot of them are looking at different forms of knowledge, or how do we understand the world through sense – what other senses do we understand the world? Do we touch things, do we smell things, do we feel things? So having sort of a multisensory notion of information and knowledge is this bigger question that a lot of these projects get at, as well.

KENNEALLY: And Darin Murphy, Dina Deitsch has just teed you up there, we want to introduce you to our listeners, as well. Darin Murphy is a librarian and artist who



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currently serves as the head of the W. Van Alan Clark, Jr. Library at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston. He specializes in developing library collections on contemporary art with an emphasis on artist books. So this is an exhibit, a collection that really is something near and close to your heart. Tell us about that particular book that we were just hearing about, and why it fits in so well with this entire exhibit.

MURPHY: Well, Ben Denzer's *20 Slices* is a provocation. It challenges the form of a book and the content of a book, as Dina was saying. But it's also a teaching tool. All of our artist books and rare books here at the university are meant to be used as teaching tools. This one challenges people, and it challenges people in a very interesting way. While it looks like just a book of 20 slices of American cheese, the conversations that are built around that can deal with processed foods, food sustainability, food scarcity, what constitutes food in the United States. Why is this cheese that's not a cheese called American cheese? So students just will dive into this, and it goes from a one-liner to a very complex conversation very quickly. But you have to build a stage and allow people to get there.

But yes, the *20 Slices* is certainly – it stands out as an interesting example of artist books. But I would say that even the term, artist books, in itself is imperfect. As Dina was alluding to earlier, it's difficult to put a definition on when and where. And yes, there are some folks who view it as a scholarly genre that started in the late '50s and 1960s, but then we have zines in the exhibit. And zines were really born out of the self-replicating printing material that was easily available after World War II in surplus stores. So you could buy a mimeograph machine and take it down to your basement and become your publisher – your own publisher. And then before that there was the (inaudible) *des Artistes* where poets and visual artists were combining an image and a poem for collectors, and that was a very popular form of – an early form of an artist book. And then we have William Blake, and pretty soon you're just – you're looking at any sequential storytelling. Is the Bayeux tapestry, perhaps, an artist book? Where does it end? And where is the artist's hand in telling these various stories. So some bas relief on temple walls might also be within the continuum of an artist book and the conversation that's around what artists are doing with books. So from Bayeux tapestry to *20 Slices* by Ben Denzer, it's just like it's not unreasonable to consider that there is a connection.

KENNEALLY: And it sounds to me, Darin Murphy, that you're asking us to do more than just read a book. You're asking us to think about the book. Expand on that notion that reading is a part of some of these books. Sometimes it's not. But we are looking at things – we are reading these books in a different way than we typically do.



MURPHY: I think an excellent example in the show is Mimi Cabell's and Jason Huff's version of *American Psycho*.

KENNEALLY: That's the novel by Bret Easton Ellis.

MURPHY: Correct. So they took each page of the novel and e-mailed it back and forth to each other through Gmail, and then gathered all the relational ads that appeared through their e-mail searches and basically redacted the entire novel and just left the relational ads. So it speaks to how the algorithms that we may take for granted, but it's our obligation to question them, how the algorithms feed us another story. So there are relational ads on how to – for laundry detergent because of course the lead character in *American Psycho* is a murderer and trying to get blood out of the sheets after he's murdered his lovers. And so these relational ads are selling us the products that – without any sensitivity towards the crime and the horror that was actually taking place in the novel. But you got blood in your sheets, you must need a good laundry detergent, so the ads show up.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's fascinating, it's a kind of amoral reading of text, particularly appropriate to our own age.

Let me ask you both, finally, to close out our really interesting discussion about the place of artist books in this digital age. These books that are on display at Bookworks are all physical objects, and yet the book is transitioning away from its physicality into a non-existence. Will artists continue to interact with books, do you think, in the future?

MURPHY: Absolutely. I think we're living in a print Renaissance right now. What artists are doing with the book, beyond just artist books, is they're so heavily involved in the artistic direction of their publications. Adobe Suite affords us the ability to design and – well, exactly that, design our publications and represent our art in a more meaningful way. And so the artists' hand and their thinking and development and craftsmanship is from conception of the art to conception of the publication that is going to serve as a surrogate for their art. And as a democratic object that can circulate in libraries or be purchased for individual collections, the artists are participating in how that is designed and how their work is represented in really unprecedented levels right now. So I think print remains the ruling entity in the various art worlds, and artists will most certainly continue to make interesting vibrant publications similar to the work that are on exhibit at Bookworks.



KENNEALLY: And Dina Deitsch, your thoughts on that notion, that the book as object is one that will remain something that artists respond to, even in our increasingly digital age.

DEITSCH: Oh, definitely. I will say there is one or two projects that are not physical books. There is a PDF project by Seth Price, *Dispersion*, which is about the notion of the idea that the book is a – conceptual art is about circulation. And so in the early 2000s, that was circulated as a PDF, which was the word – the material of the office, not of an artist.

No, no, no, book – the material book, digital material, or paper material, whatever you're thinking about is actually really important. And one of the – I think through these notions of self-publishing, as Darin talked about, being so easy now, but also that the power of a physical book has a different, to use a old or historical term, an aura that – a newsfeed in Facebook, for instance, is sort of slowing down impatience of something holding a book now has a difference sense of value that I think people are increasingly interested in as an object. And who is better equipped to think about and rethink an object than an artist?

So I think more and more I feel like we'll see a lot more inventive uses of the notion of a book as an idea, as a thing, as an object. And how we can think about getting our voices out, outside of the mainstream means of operations out no lo – you can't say that social media is going to be the way, the voice of the individual already, that's already been long corrupted. So how else can we think about finding voices for people who don't have access or capacity to have those voices. And self-publishing and activist groups are using all sorts of posters, printmaking, and sort of other techniques to sort of get that out there. So no, I think this is an ongoing, as long as there's communication, there should be books, as far as I can imagine.

KENNEALLY: Well, Dina Deitsch is Director and Chief Curator of the Tufts University Art Galleries in Medford. Thank you for speaking with me, today.

DEITSCH: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: And Darin Murphy is a librarian and artist who currently serves as the head of the WVL and Clark – let me try it one more time. Three, two, one.

And Darin Murphy is a librarian and artist who currently serves as head of the W. Van Alan Clark, Jr. Library at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston. Darin Murphy, thank you for joining me.



MURPHY: It's been a pleasure.

KENNEALLY: Bookworks is open at the Tufts University Art Gallery through December 15th. More information about the show is online at artgalleries.tufts.edu.

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