

LECTOR / SPECTOR: BORGES AND THE *BIBLIOBJET*

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This paper was written in response to the conceptual book art on display at the 2007 Borges Conference at the University of Iowa, "The Place of Letters: the World in Borges," and in anticipation of remarks by book sculptor Buzz Spector that introduced the exhibition, under the title "One More Thing Added to the World": the Borges Effect on Contemporary Artists' Books."

The time of the book is inner and outer both, cognitively inhabited and implacably historical. That inner or textual time, of literary writing especially, is a process of variable tempo, of starts and stops, leaps and repeats, shifting intensities and continually readjusted levels of affect. By contrast, outer time may simply pass, the book as cultural object with it—as other arts besides literary writing have increasingly foreseen. Both frames of temporal reference necessarily concern this conference. For the force of time—as both an inherent medium and an extrinsic nemesis of the book—tends, even when addressed outside of literature by conceptual book art, to be decidedly Borgesian in the flavor of its anxiety or its nostalgia, or both.

Such concerted exceptions as we find inspired by Borges's anomalous plots—and their reflexive plotting (often by parable) of the reading experience—only prove the normative rule of reading. For one thing, books by convention serve to distribute time, materializing it according to cultural norms of consumption. They do more than what Einstein saw as the essential work of time:

to keep everything from happening all at once. Books also make their time “searchable” — and with or without an index. Such is their special — pronounced for book artists (as well as book users) “spatial” — advantage: the alphabetic dispensation of spaced time, facilitating legibility’s own spacetime ratios.

That’s, so to say, the whole idea of the book. But it is an idea awaiting local (before final) violation — aesthetic intercession before historical supersession — by the purposeful estrangement of biblio-graphic reinvention. For when the basic idea of the bound text is intercepted by the “concept” of another medium — graphic, plastic, sculptural — the comfortably accepted manner of reading is complicated by the rethought spatial matter of, for want of a better word, booking. Received textual formats no longer yield so immediately their content: no longer, that is, yield to reading. They indeed may shield its possibility, wield the weight of its demise, deflect the register of apprehension altogether from spaced words to the word-burdened (or text-effaced) space itself of volumetric density rather than a so-called volume. Or they may allow the two-dimensionality of the single page to usurp their entire manifestation. When West Coast conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg used to caption delicate line drawings of well-known books with an indication of their “reading time,” his gesture was the equivalent of Magritte’s *This is Not a Pipe*. A picture of a book refuses the materiality — and hence the engaged temporality — of the thing itself. It goes dead to reading while we look, look anew, think again.

BOOKING THE WORD

That’s what Buzz Spector’s work has always made us do too, whether or not directly alluding (as often it is) to Borges: think again. Thanks to his splendid convening of book objects in our conference exhibition, and under the sponsoring aegis and pervasive influence of Borges’s book fables, we confront today — as every day, and more and more often, in museums and galleries worldwide — the provocative and variable spectrum of a biblio-graphic aesthetic. This results in a textual practice where

in fact “text” can refer either to worded matter or to its material form, usually in the bound format of a codex-style volume. The gamut runs from the typographic or scriptive texture of conceptual wordworks through so-called artists’ books to explicit book art — or what one can distinguish, respectively, as words alongside (or entirely comprising) artworks on the museum wall, versus bound artifactual pages, versus the book itself as altered artifact — or bookwork.

The Borges effect is most prominent at the poles of this spectrum, his complementary fantasies offering, so to speak, its book-ends. Nothing anticipates what I have elsewhere called the “lexigraph” of conceptual art, the scriptive increment as graphic cipher on the former picture plane, more clearly than Borges’s numbering among the 25 letters of the universal alphabet in “The Library of Babel” the strictly graphic rather than morphophonemic codes of adjacency and juncture: that is, the comma, the period, and the blank.¹ Writing is differential and inscriptive even before it is alphabetic, paced by spacing before meaning. In our conference gallery, however, we investigate for the most part the corollary proposition at the other end of the logoaesthetic spectrum, or in other words at the pole of the art text rather than text art: namely, the proposition that a book is a spatial thing even before it is a linguistic instrument of scriptive seriality. To stress this priority, this primacy, is to denature the social function of the book into its material condition as what I am calling a *bibliobjet*, though by no means robbing it thereby of its cultural aura. Quite the contrary. This denaturalization of the book is part of a broader aesthetic process we might designate, over against the remediation and hypermediation of communications theory, as a case of demediation. It happens everywhere, as I’ll try economically to suggest.

¹ See “The Library of Babel” in Borges, *Labyrinths* (from which all his stories are hereafter cited), 53. The “lexigraph” is my term in *The Look of Reading* (chapter 7, 329-74) for the scrawled or geometric iteration in conceptual art that caps a dual line of descent from the “imaginary alphabets” of Picasso through the faux script of Saul Steinberg, the quasi-calligraphic gestural drips of certain early works by Jackson Pollack down through the scriptive simulacra of Cy Twombly (and many artists thereafter) — in any and all cases bringing the material brushwork of painting into graphic and conceptual alignment with the strokes of script.

It happens, for instance, in a case (on exhibit today) like Buzz Spector's own venture in text art (via citation and allusion) called *Borges / Funes*, whose wordplay is isolated and enlarged as a kind of *retitle page* for a Borges story. The standard author/title dyad of literary nomination and commodification becomes no longer a double naming, in the service of copyright and transmission, but a strictly linguistic game. It operates by a kind of domino effect, with the building blocks of wording undoing each other in a lexical chain reaction. Above the work's own identifying title we get the respaced entitling it constitutes: "Borg es Fun es." This dislodged toppling of the morpheme is quite fully Borgesian in its allusion to the story "Funes the Memorious" and the fusion there of authorial with characterological aptitudes. Given his insinuated role as alter ego of the sparse and scrupulously selective stylist who narrates, the agony of the protagonist is that his unceasing memory amounts to a book without page separations, a continuous palimpsest of synchronic event. This is Einstein's view of time turned inside out, where everything does indeed happen all at once—and this because time as duration has been replaced by pure furious memory. It is, one might say, "searchability" gone mad as random abject simultaneity. The providential stylist finds his nightmare obverse in the character who, in effect, is always reading and rereading everything at once.

Spector's work on the rhyming names conjures perfectly the story's tacit parallel between the elegiac sriptor and the mneumoniac. The vicious circle—the vicious mental recycling—of all this finds its lexical equivalent in Spector's ingenious page of reciprocal entitlement, where the typographic play reveals that each name shares the cascading suffix of "being" in the Spanish phantom syntax "Borg es Fun es." Here is a potentially infinite spiral of self-imbricated predication and indeed of alphabetic short term memory. For compounding all the other removed differences and distances, all the other punishing equivalences that bedevil the hero, is the vanished temporal and ontological gap between writer and character. Sprung by Spector's wordplay, this lost breathing room is figured as the elided gap between the lingering nondisappearance of one syllable and the new predication into

whose latency it gravitates as catalyst. Such is the longstanding poetry of the stray grapheme dear to conceptual art, the act of wording itself unbound. And though highlighted in Spector's nameplay by its evocation of a title page, this facet of conceptualism finds its close but noticeably different counterpart in those three-dimensional bookworks where, by a related interart logic, we encounter a more or less drastic resculpting of the bound word.

It would be almost impossible to overstate, and Spector didn't even begin doing so in his remarks, the impact of Borgesian paradox on the prevalent inside/out inversions of conceptual book sculpture, which can be taken as summoning (and, in fact, often sending up) the inside-doubt ontology of much classic three-dimensional artwork. But of course the debt to Borges in such conceptual practice is usually far more specifically bibliophilic—or, failing that, and in the absence of the housing volume, at least text-invested. In such circuits of inference, Borges is evoked as at once a fantastical apologist of logocentrism and a prophet of worldwide textual webworking. whose best known translation software is called, in fact, "Babelfish." Borges's infinite library and its magic indices have become our spidery network of cross-referenced linkages.

Then, too, regardless of whether we feel the death of the book under electronic dominance to be a premature rumor or an inevitable prognosis, the discourse of the book is permanently inscribed in the language of its own informatic remediation. It appears in the computer lingo of browsers, scrolling, paging—and in turn the discourse of the archive itself, as hypermediated in the form of files, subfiles, folders to be opened and closed, and the rest. Not least, there is even Amazon.com's gimmicky click, "Search Inside," a trademarked (!) function whose arrow is itself torqued to the turning of a page. In this unintentionally ironic twist of web graphics, even the material or somatic motion of reading per se has been copyrighted. But if print culture and its instrumentations have a residual discourse in the age of the digital, the material book has a discourse of its own, only in part phenomenological—a kind of mystic's discourse, half magical, half absurd—that can either be rewritten or just subtly rephrased in the fashion-

ing of three-dimensional objects. Just think of it this way among others: the book as container whose own contents are paradoxically taken in by the reader, even as the book's inner dimensions are colonized and inhabited in the process.

Yet that's just the kind of metaphoric (and potentially obscurantist) knot that bookworks, by literalizing it, intrigue us into rethinking. In the honorific literary terms associated with a catch phrase like the "world of the book," the codex doesn't simply derive from the paired, hinged tablet, or later the folded scroll. Its flanged structure provides, moreover, a swinging door into imagined space, page by turned page. Bookworks tend to work this trope, and others like it, harder than is polite, overwork it until the mystique of *inner* volume gives out—or, better, gives in, implodes. Whatever universal or mythic topography books in their content might aspire to, well before that they have a spatial architectonics entirely their own—as repositories rather than, say, stories. Volumetric first and foremost, books delimit a space of activity before any represented action, let alone its deep-seated cultural patterns or mythic forms.

To pitch the difference to extreme and echoing poles, whatever *arche-type* may be released by their symbolic language, books in their iconic form are at base a composite—and composed site—of *set type*. If the book's days are numbered in this respect, it is no surprise that it is the book's status as rectangular solid that conceptual bookworks often seek first to address or distress. If, ousting the biblos, the screen's time has come instead (as reigning plane of legibility in the instantaneous collage of e-text), then it is the three-dimensional *architexture* of the book that is the inevitable first victim—and residual aesthetic provocation—of the desk-top revolution. Any architectonic form emptied of practice or habitation tends toward sculpture, its surface then prey to extrinsic wear—or even tear. And the sculpture of a tool becomes, in turn, an ironic simulacrum at the very horizon of its obsolescence.

Conceptual bookworks offer in this way the funeral monuments of their own cultural heyday, as the several editions of Tom Phillips's overpainted Victorian novel *A Human Document* would suggest with the etymology of burial in its retitling as *A Humu-*

ment as well as with its Borgesian fantasia of an accidental hero born in the recurrent alphabetic debris of lexical obliteration, one "Toge" sheared off from every half-effaced instance of "together."² Stripped of immediate utility or pertinence, defaced by the very brush of its own outmoding, the book form subsists, self-designated still, in *A Humument*—subsists as the rectangular coffin of its own hegemony, from which shards and relics of textuality are intermittently exhumed. Think of the irony across a long historical arc. The painted book that preceded Gutenberg, and that turned the architectural decoration of the frescoed wall both miniature and portable in manuscript illumination, has returned with a vengeance not as the painting in a book but the painting out of one. Even as such, this is among the more benign, or as least cross-medial and aestheticized, of sacrifices: of page to pigment. In book sculpture, the "altered book" (in its surface distress) often seems like more of a euphemism yet, with its pages, when not just locked down between covers or overpainted, instead patiently charred, scarred, rasped, rubbed, scrubbed, frayed, or just ham-fistedly erased.

INSIDE DOUBT: THE VOLUMETRICS OF READING

As so often in his own bookworks, Buzz Spector certainly gets Borges right in recognizing that every first draft—like, say, every burst daffodil—is one more thing added to the world. One might add in turn to this thought that art is precisely an adding to the world of things the world doesn't need, and thus must wonder at.

² In some later versions of this often reprinted art text, when its sporadic spoilage by paint deletes whole paragraphs at a time, the ravages of demediation stop short at the letters "toge" in "together," so that every appearance of this word, in adverbial or prepositional use, materializes arbitrarily the nominated hero of the story, one "Toge," with the pages thus emerging more like erratically captioned paintings in an illustrated volume of nonsense than like a residual narrative. Even the sustained farce of partial eradication seems electronically savvy, for this is the kind of dislodged false morpheme one finds buried inconsequently in longer lexemes in the arbitrary process of e-text word-searching, where—right there, for instance—the alphabetic triad "ear" might be tossed up as a phonetically inactive component of "searching" in a find-and-replace scan, or "ere" in "where" and "there." For Phillips's inhumation of the Victorian book, the final nail in the coffin might well be implied by just this digital intertext.

Or things whose use is in the very process of being overthrown by the worldly wise—attached instead to a new format, a new medium. Not always avant-garde, art can find itself churned up in the wake and backwash of the emergent. Apart from its own efforts at radical invention, that is, art can also remake the vestigial as the newly urgent. In any event, and whether assumed as inevitable or merely speculative, books as objects must be denuded of immediate use to become *objets d'art*. Just as words had to be stripped of message in the early phase of conceptual art to become wall-worthy units of image, books are now depurposed, their allure no longer functional but mysteriously seductive in its clefts and curves, even voyeuristic in its primal appeal to the eye, more as palpable form than as appliance: more the beast with two backs than a storehouse of information between covers. Conceptual book artists add to the objecthood of the world by making the book over into one more thing to think about as thing.

In his very different (and largely phenomenological) version of “thing theory,” literary scholar Bill Brown leans productively at one point on the important distinction, in the pragmatist writing of William James, between the thing and the intentional object—as for instance between the shiny silver-gray metal oblong and its all too immediate recognition as a table knife. This is James’s example of the way habitual use “ploughs deep grooves in the nervous system.”³ The observation could just as well be made about the routinization of books themselves as objects of consciousness, where the grooves of recognition—and here line by line on the printed page—tend to numb response to the physical object itself, as impressed surface as well as coded transmission. With its words in place of expected pictures on the museum wall, conceptual text art rises up, in part, to block any such inert familiarization of language in its normal conveyance as communicative syntax. Pictures may always conjure words in the head, in the mind’s eye—that’s certainly part of the point—but words are themselves things first of all to be seen before being heard in subvocal decod-

³ Cited in Brown, 4, where he quotes James exemplifying the thing/object difference—a cluster of material attributes versus a concept—with “grayness and thinness and length” over against “the apperception of a knife” (4).

ing. Conceptual bookworks propose a similar estrangement for that binding up of words we recognize as a book.

A book is a book is a book. Its cultural objecthood has indeed plowed deep furrows in our consciousness. Bookworks would retill that cognitive soil entirely, uproot assumptions, plant new associations concerning exactly the bipartite object we know all too well as an accessible volume. But the lesson of Borges, one of them at least, is that the circumscription of the book as object is only a synecdoche for the circumnavigations of the world it facilitates, each bound sheet a potential magic carpet of transport. Part of what results as premise of the text—in all its spatial premises—is an abiding fractal logic to Borges’s work that seems inherited by much book sculpture, where the event of the increment replicates the whole, each book an inscape of its own, even as it collects by multiplication into larger architectonic or even megalphabetic forms. Take the Giant C that Buzz Spector has built at Cornell out of books lent or written by Cornell authors, including the many by Culler alone (Jonathan), with the tacit suggestion (one supposes) that “books only begin to spell the Cornell experience”—which will involve many a private venture in such a vast and punning C-scape of reading. In any case, fractal logic, inevitable visual puns and rebus-like associations: these are the stuff, and sometimes the gutted stuffing, of bookworks in their suddenly fetishized illegibility.

Such a C-scape of the closed book, sans the ABCs of reading, is under ongoing execution by the same Buzz Spector who, as long as twenty years ago, flashed his Borgesian credentials by piling up books in a vaguely ziggurat-like shape against the wall of Chicago’s Art Institute under the title “The Library of Babel,” invoking also (at a scale of fractal enlargement again, with books where before there were only words extricated from them) the similar mounded shape of Robert Smithson’s 1966 conceptual work *A Heap of Language*, with the idiomatic spin of its own title. This was Smithson’s word-art before his dirt-art phase: a dense triangular form made of lexemes scribbled or dumped over each other on graph paper—and thus admitting the common graphic basis of word and image. Put the words back into books, and heap up the books in a compa-

rable shape, as Buzz did, and your homage to Borges has roped in one of his own conceptualist inheritors as well.

Fractal, synecdochic, recursive: such characterizations leap to mind in reading “The Library of Babel,” one of whose myths—or quest romances—involves seeking out the holy grail of precis or compendium. This is the search for that volume of volumes rumored to digest and index all the others. I’m assuming this is a clear inspiration for the work in the conference exhibit by Daniel Olson, his reconstituted *The Outline of History*, where each page contains, recursively, only the index entry that would locate it in the first place. His is a wry short-out in the logic of the book as informational hierarchy or “outline,” mocking the very claim of text to reach past its own lineation to anything like history in the first place.

According to Borges, of course, any such infinite index would have to be printed on infinitely-thin silky pages, thus confirming in a footnote (by the story’s editorial pedant) the seventeenth-century theory by Cavalieri according to which all solid bodies are merely a superimposition of infinitely thin planes. Book as body of knowledge: another cliché running deep in cultural history and submitted to various dismemberments by conceptualism. Dismemberments, occlusions, and even silky-thin attenuations. For in imagining this infinitely thin and thus ultimately translucent text, one might well be reminded of Abelardo Morell’s backlit photograph in *The Book of Books* of a twinned page from Dickens’s insistently twin-themed novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, where recto and verso appear together in an illegible graphic melange. And since each page in “The Library of Babel” offers only the indecipherable yet interchangeable transliteration (even when not the slivered overlay) of another such page somewhere in the endless backlog of text, comparison is invited with the conceptualist artist Marcel Broodthaers (as adduced by Spector in connection with another of his more site-specific works) when he turns the radical print layout of Mallarmé’s founding modernist text, *Un coup de dés*, into demediated word forms, mere black bars of quasi-lexical bandwidth. Broodthaer’s occlusion of the poetic—or his rediscovery of it in a purely graphic rhythm—comes at once from his

generating too few words and too many word forms: this because the latter are painted at variable width on onion-skin paper so that they are blurred further into each other in the murky depth of superimposition.⁴

BIBLIOTICLASM AS ICONOMETRICS

In the denaturing or repurposing of the book, its conversion from object through thing to *objet d’art*, what is involved is often, as in Broodthaers, a quite aggressive assault on legibility itself. And at times even more aggressive. Ann Hamilton has a performance piece called *tropos* that involves the singeing out of every word, as read in sequence, of a number of open, untitled books, in a suggestive parody of linear consumption. Books whose chains of signification disappear as you read them: Funes in reverse. Elsewhere, Hamilton lines the floors and walls of a performance space with lead type as a play on the pervasive discursive space of the word we inhabit. For a commission at the San Francisco Public Library in the early 1990s, Hamilton produced, with Ann Chamberlain, her own self-indexed, labeled library by lining the walls with 50,000 user-annotated (and of course electronically outmoded) shelf-list cards. The 3x5 paper index cards previously filed to indicate the absent (because elsewhere stored) paper text called the book are a remnant of imprint culture left in the dust, well before the book itself, by the regime of the screen browse. Thus does the so-called “search engine” become one last vestige, and terminological irony, of the superseded Machine Age.

Hamilton may seem to be alluding to another Borges story with her title *aleph* (1992) when she constructs—in a kind of archival metatropé—the material equivalent of that impossible point in time, in “The Aleph,” where all time, all knowledge, converges. In Hamilton’s installation, a vast stack of books, uncontained by shelving, has partly collapsed upon stray mannequin limbs (from a stuffed wrestler’s dummy) that are visible only as extruded from the overweaning library’s caved but still precariously vertical wall

⁴ See the reproduction of Broodthaer’s work, in its wider lexigraphic context, in Stewart, 346.

of text. Performed there is the crushing out of individual life by the weight of received knowledge, of overloaded reception per se.⁵ And where such various works by Hamilton efface or elide the contents of books to foreground their objecthood and the spatiotemporal event (or sheer weight) of their consumption, Buzz Spector makes a further bookwork out of photographing—with their backs turned from us, entirely effaced and unreadable—(*All the Books in my Library*) by or about Ann Hamilton.

In the wit and ingenuity of all such work, there seems to be no escaping Borges, at least not for long: Borges, whose clean-edged classicism of phrase is so precise that it must appeal to the sculptural imagination in gravitating to the book as foursquare object as well as conceptual provocation, even when that canonical objecthood is dismantled, hacked up, or otherwise defaced. In this unabashed manhandling of the text, however, the book as icon is not desecrated so much as resacralized as object, in full view—because immanent and palpable—of its own residual cultural status. Yet the means often get in the way, at least at first blush, of the mostly celebratory end. I can't be the only one who feels the sting in all this textual wreckage, sometimes the outright shock. It's hard to escape entirely the shadow of vandalism in some of the more audacious of these works. Part of their charge comes from the specter (no pun intended) of outrage raised and staved off at once: the radical outage of reading by the neutralization of the book as instrument. The eye-opening power of book sculpture often derives in this way from the violence of the book's violated purpose. For many such x-ed out texts, even when not castrated at knifepoint (as of course they often are in other hands), do nonetheless get rendered impotent, because inaccessible, under the

⁵ See Joan Simon's commentary on Hamilton, where stress is laid from the first on Hamilton's practice as that of "a reader" (2), and where the materiality and thematics of the book are analyzed throughout, including reproductions of *aleph* and the library installation on pp. 7 and 17 respectively, as well as a discussion of the recent pinhole photographs of books, in a camera obscura mode, whose exposure time is determined by the duration of silent or oral reading (3, 262-63): the photograph as the veritable upgrade of the cubist reading pose distended over dovetailed, layered, incremental time. See also the illustrations of 1994's *lineament*, as discussed below, on 122-25.

pressure of their multiplication, as in Spector's own Cornell C or his Chicago "Tower"—or as in Chicago sculptor H.C. Westerman's stack of books slathered with paint and skewered into place on a barrel by a giant three-foot bolt. (Where is it that I once saw the conceptual piece constructed of a large-format book lying flat on another fanned open to support it, identified by the punning title "Coffee-table books"?)

Things can get rougher yet. When at times Buzz Spector hand-unmakes his bookworks by meticulous incremental tearing of found pages, making the sewn stack over into an angled cascade, whole new geometries of the foursquare object emerge. One result is that such handiwork may convert a rectangular solid into a pentahedron. Instead of the six-sided book form, we encounter an opaque triangular prism—into (or through) which, in its deligitimizing of the legible, we can no longer see, no longer make out the means to meaning. Or say that the sculpted form has become an object in which we can see only the refracted (because refaceted) geometry of the book itself as cultural icon. In such sculptural reassemblages, aesthetic power issues from the book's depotentialization as text—and hence from the scandal of biblioclasm that these works at once enact, invert, and transcend.

This is one of two main points I find most worth stressing, at least speculatively, in surveying the spread (in both sense)—the scope and escalation—of bookworks lately: two seemingly contradictory points, having to do at once with anxiety and its overcompensation, with fear *for* the book and with a certain fear of its unexamined (even while loosening) grip on us. I think this double valence of response may get us closer to grasping why the book artist seems at once fetishist and slasher, graphomaniac and graffiti assault artist, in a kind of sadomasochism of arrested reading. Such is the aesthetic oscillation—in so much experimental bookwork—between, to put it bluntly, mutilation and reliquary, shredding and threnody, abusive treatment as perhaps a cure for anticipated depletion and grieving. Ours is a Janus-faced cultural moment in which the maiming of the book (or its neutering by sheer simulation), in any case its functional deformation, seems a therapeutic adjunct to a widespread mourning for that same

book form. The traditional iconoclast breaks down the idols of the tribe, smashes its valorized images. As a specialist provocateur, the new biblioclast moves instead to break the tie between text and its reading, to smash or gash or otherwise score through (and against) the book's use as communication tool. The effort is to aggravate the book's disclosure as negated medium—and thereby to take the full measure of the cultural object, the verbal composite, that is thus shut up, shut down, scissored out. Just this ironic measure is what I am thinking of as the iconometrics of the book form.

Even as the computer revolution saw the rise of dozens of books with titles like *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Birkerts), book artists began in greater numbers yet to select, however indiscriminately, single volumes as scapegoats: flaying them alive to expose their anatomy, their pulpy viscera. Or nailing them to the wall or each other—sometimes almost with a tacit pun on crucifixion. As it happens, the recent Jeff Wall retrospective at MOMA represents his latest work with the backlit photo of an art book in the hand of a lifesized reader: a book visible to us over her shoulder thanks in part (so the medium of display would seem to imply) to the same artificial library light that radiates from behind the Cibachrome enlargement in Wall's fluorescent lightbox. Entering never more obviously than in this case upon the long tradition of pictured reading as a moment of overseen absorption (with Michael Fried's work so often and so explicitly on his mind), Wall has elsewhere, in connection with the bookworks of another artist, written in anatomical metaphor about the everyday armature of reading. With an implied wordplay on the catachresis *spine* in connection with standard textual formats—that structural metaphor for which we have no literal term—Wall calls the book an “ectoskeletal clamp into which the machine of culture forces words.”⁶ The truth of this—the book as the force-fed frame of acculturation—can be exposed, so many a book artist would seem to agree, only when that skeleton is broken on the rack of some concerted aesthetic attack, the text disemboweled, eviscerated of its legibility. Or al-

⁶ This remark appears in his 1983 essay on Rodney Graham, as reprinted in Wall (2007).

ternately—to evoke, for instance, the magic of its disembodied phenomenological hold on us in the most benign and jokey yet still shocking form—when book photographer Abelardo Morell saws out a rabbit hole in an antique leatherbound edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. We murder to vivisect—and to refigure. To alienate and reclaim. Book art estranges the legible in order to elegize its vanishing material basis. The book becomes the sacrificial victim of its own retirement party. As with so much in the history of art, formal violence arrives sublimated as fresh revelation. On the eve of digital ubiquity, we dismember the better to memorialize.

Against the forecast death of the book, and the anxieties over new mediation, even Danish-made “You-Tube” video called “Medieval Help Desk,” where a canny scribe explains to a luddite monk still clinging to his fondness for the scroll the beauty of the new codex format, with its advanced mechanics of page-turning, opening and closing, and the rest—even this video protests too much. It is obviously meant to burst the bubble of technophobia under the sign of *plus ça change*, and thus to trigger a last laugh at foot-dragging media conservatism. Yet in the process it may actually feed one's paranoia about the eventual dematerialization of the codex itself—a cultural touchstone to be swept aside, perhaps, with as merciless an historical inevitability as the ludicrous vestige of some unadventurous Dark Age and its culture of the scroll, replaced entirely by electronic data streams. To which bookworks might respond: better to sear or immolate a book or two than let the memory of their cultural power go up in smoke.

Conceptual text art often begins in an allergy to the barrage of verbal formulation invading all perception—and thus subsuming all looking to discursivity. It meets the enemy, so as to mock it, on its own vertical ground. Rather by contrast, conceptual bookwork, especially book sculpture, manifests just as often an exacerbated—because page-mangling—nostalgia for the regime of print. So we get this odd phenomenon, in the latter practice, of desecration and last rights at once, strategic damage as homage and memorial. One hews to the aura of the book only by hacking and hewing it. Borges's “Library of Babel” deplores the zealots who condemn to “senseless perdition” (56) millions of books—

though reminding us at the same time that there are plenty left. These include hundreds of thousands of near-identical duplications: an allegory of mass-print capitalism, to be sure, as well as a cabalistic fantasy, but written just at the birth of computers – and so with a weird prescient sense of proliferated text in a global network. Map the macrologic of “The Library of Babel” onto the internet, as suggested at the start, and you would neither be the first to do so nor far at all from the spirit of the story: a world thick to ontological priority with discursive links, a world that preexists in text its own three-dimensional manifestation.

Rather than the “perdition” of the book, most book sculpture, even when tongue in cheek, is about the fuller reclamation of its felt cultural force, however dubious that prospect may seem. But encountering a book sliced, severed, nailed to a support, glued tight, bolted to others unopenable like it, or otherwise derealized as reading site always has the aura of the censor and the incendiary about it, the stench of fascism and disempowerment. It can’t help remind us of bookburning, from Nurnberg to *Fahrenheit 451*. Indeed there are more word artists than Ann Hamilton who use fire to ignite the word. A French conceptualist, Jean-Paul Marcheschi, has bound thousands of diary pages in hundreds of red bindings, shut tight in one work, and then in another has torn out scores of their pages, arrayed them randomly on his studio floor, and streaked them with the so-called “brush of fire” – so that their words bleed into the melting tallow and pitch of his torch: drip-painting as fire-bombing (Stewart, 352-53).

And in the most haunting “incendiary” elegy to the book I’ve ever seen, another French conceptual artist, whose name (as in some plangent Borges story) I’ve now sadly lost, working in a kind of radically negative space of absent sculptural form, removed, about a decade ago, all the books and shelving from a vast library slated for reconstruction, adjacent to the Musée Fabré in Montpellier – but only after filling the room with a light dusting of soot from rubber tires burned slowly for hours in the middle of the floor, leaving only the ashen outlines of the book profiles along the pale painted wall. Library as mausoleum, tome as empty tomb: Borges couldn’t have gone farther with this trope. A library’s worst fear,

as in Umberto Eco – the arsonist’s fire – becomes it most luminous, because shadowy and spectral, testament.

It is just such a negative impress of the book – of the material space it displaces as much as of the referential space it “opens” – that occupies the (emptied) core of so many contemporary book-works. This is where even vandalism can be redeemed, to use Borges’s biggest word in “The Library of Babel,” by a capitalized “Vindication” (55). Such is exactly that fate never possible for the individual reader: you who will only find the “true story of your death” (54) if you read long enough. Yet it is just this elevating fate that is always possible for the fact of literacy itself and its vessels, the works of Borges included. So, in book art, vandalism becomes Vindication after all, dismemberment memorial, mutilation a new conceptual utility beyond instrumentation. One may well have noticed this cultural gesture at work long before the exhibit mounted for this conference. Let me give just two more far-flung examples before taking a spotty and all too brief tour of those at hand.

When, awhile back, I tried contacting Buzz Spector by searching on-line for his Cornell University address, the Art department site fell open to an interesting page – excuse me, triggered an interesting pop-up – of the MFA thesis recently submitted by one of his students, Honna Austin. Exhibit #1. Carved deep into an open copy of Gaston Bachelard’s groundbreaking phenomenological study *The Poetics of Space* – as negative cut-out and mutilation – was the silhouetted profile of an armchair, seen mostly from the back. Though absent the reader, its comfortable iconic shape was angled, as it were, toward the page, and visible only by the shadows cast by the ravine of sliced pages: the titular poetics of space thus reduced to the raw space of poetics itself in this recast phenomenology of the book’s paginally zoned and suddenly three-dimensionalized (because gouged-out) plane of reception – a space now strictly materialist, fibrous and fragile, demediated.

The influence from Ann Hamilton’s negative sculpture of the book, if I may call it that, would seem obvious. In a work of hers called *lineament* – exhibit # 2 on the way to our own gallery – she scissors out, line by line from the inner print rectangle of an open

book, countless thin strips of print, row by row of text turned into ribbons, most of which are then reassembled next to the gutted book in a rewound ball of text. The lineated narrative of the quadrilateral text has become a ball not of spun but of punning “yarn.”

And something else as well: a suggestion more metaphysical, more logocentric. Continuous rows of wording, enjambed and compacted now to slips of useless imprint, are wrapped around each other until that spherical node of textual production, that bookish re-englobement, answers volumetrically to the sliced and hollowed out grave of text near it, suggesting an entire world of words as it might once have been entered upon by the reader.⁷ This from Hamilton, that past-mistress not of book burning, but of word burning.

The Death of the Book, ritually replayed as its murder, becomes its resurrection not as text but, again, as *bibliobjet*, not demeaned but rather, in some palpable sense, redeemed by materialist demediation. This is a process whose radical and fascinating new geometries, whose stacks and hacking, whose multiplication and mirroring, owe much, as already suggested, to the fractal logic of Borges’s “Library of Babel,” whose cosmically horizoned

⁷ According to Simon’s account of Hamilton’s creative process, the piece was inspired by lines of Wallace Stevens from “The Planet on the Table,” about the desire for poetic speech acts to bear “Some lineament or character / . . . of the planet of which they were part” (123). And as if to compensate for the voiding out of the serial by the spherical, there is a median — and remediated — third term. For in this counterpoint of rectangular absence in the carved-up linear book versus the adjacent ball of de-lineated text, Hamilton’s composite sculptural object per se is accompanied by the looped scroll of a film reel projected on the gallery wall behind. This optical footage has recorded what was at first merely the shadow thrown by the projector’s beam: in the original installation as performance piece, that is, the moving silhouette of a female figure, a kind of reverse vandalizing Ariadne, unraveling the very texture of the text, one shredded sector after another. Thrown up for contemplation thereafter in photomechanical shadow play, time and again, is the very fact of textual defacement given a faceless shape in process. We might say that the film strip offers the return from repression of partial “legibility” itself, of documented event, from within the desecrated codex and its mock reassemblage as a planetary microcosm. Between the tomb as empty tomb and the world as an impenetrable discursive sphere, the spool of another medium intercedes to make the world of representation still go round. Film’s temporal trace, in short, renders the deformative textual performance more fully readable.

“universe,” as that word in the first line might well imply, is all recto and verso. In any case, given the fractal logic of so much in Borges, as with the book sculptors after him, how can it be an accident, in “The Library,” that the six apexes of the hexagons that define the outer walls of each endlessly replicated cubicle also define by architectonic allusion the spines of six open, overlapping book shapes in the obtuse angled corners of these incremental rooms? Six walls of shelves in the form, that is, of six dovetailed open books. That’s the microcosm of the whole library right there, synecdoche and mise en abyme of its vast cosmic structure: and a readymade conceptual bookwork to boot. Must exist somewhere, I’d lay money on it: hexagon as textagon.

I had written that last paragraph before seeing, not quite assembled yesterday afternoon, the remarkable upshot of this logic by Heather Weston in her work “The Library of Babel.” Her invention trumps my fantasy even while confirming my intuition. For she contrives the hinge for each apex of her plexiglass hexagons out of spiral metal bindings familiar to users worldwide of pliable softback manuals. Hexagons have become explicit instrumental textagons. Nor is that Borges story’s opening play on *uni/verso* lost on Isabel Barbuza’s bookwork nearby, under the title *universo/universe*, with its multiplied threefold crests of sliced, tucked, encrusted pages, like cartoon waves, evoking a seascape of fluency itself — though each knot of text only readable on the outer face of its curved surfaces, most of it “submerged” irretrievably in the glued density of its formal mutation. Both of these bookworks, by Weston and Barbuza, seem a close realization of Borges’s magic tropes, as also with Meredith Lyon’s altered text, or let’s call it a supplemented metatext, *The Aleph and Other Stories*. Via her interpolations, the book’s serial chapter openings include *en abyme* a loosely affixed polaroid photo of their same spread pages as if it might have been developed in the very time taken to turn these pages, to finish the last paragraph of the preceding chapter and the first of the next. By this recursive iconometrics of the page as “diptych” (more in closing on this intermedial term), the time of reading — of each and every reading — seems mirrored back by the book in internal regress.

DISUTILITY

Besides the closed-back mounding of disused books, always with the overtone of textual detritus in the circulations of mass-print capitalism, there are many other ways in which disuse can stop short of rank abuse. And it can do so without falling short of its heuristic purpose—without failing, that is, to void out the book's instrumental force in order to lend it reconception. The work of an Slovak artist, Matej Kren, very close in spirit to Buzz Spector, deploys gallery-high book towers (with infinitely reduplicating mirrored interiors) that seem to draw on Borges as well. Beyond this, however, there are Kren's more extreme projects, as for instance the *Imaginary Rock Garden*. This is a garden not of Borgesian "forking paths," of the sort that might be found only in books of literary narrative. Its anomaly is founded instead on the pulped and compressed pages of innumerable denatured volumes—whose mottled new shapes look like decorative stones and boulders in the postlapsarian garden of a macerated Logos: the compost heap of former compositions.

Or, in other hands, a book can be rendered more delicately dysfunctional. Just before returning for this conference from a research trip to New York City, I discovered a bookwork in a Chelsea gallery by Peter Coffin, a conceptual artist featured, along with many others, in the 2007 "Learn to Read" exhibit at the Tate Modern. The lightly altered and deutilized book in question was *Goethe's Color Theory*, the 1840 London edition, with a dozen pages at a time folded inward upon each other until the whole opened text, resting like sculpture on a pedestal in the center of the gallery, resembled at a distance nothing so much as the NBC peacock logo. On closer approach, one saw that the top two loops further exposed to the eye certain theoretical diagrams from a color insert at the book's center. Chapter headings, truncated and folded under themselves, ran into each other in a heady set of new meaningless propositions. In this functional unmaking of *Goethe's Color Theory*, in respect to illustrations and text alike, perceptual theory was in fact forestalled—or perhaps refigured—by the material objectification of a conceptual *practice* so-titled.

Among contemporary artists whose work in other ways forestalls the act of reading, none is more prominent, or certainly more monumental, than Rachel Whiteread, renowned sculptor of negative space, whose voided bookworks reach their epitome in the commissioned Holocaust memorial in Vienna for "the people of the book," a foursquare library turned inside out to cenotaphic illegibility in the form of unappeasable absence itself. More recently, as I discovered on that same Manhattan research trip, there is the room-sized installation at MOMA by this artist of absence in colorless plaster, whose surname, Whiteread, seems almost to overdetermine her obsession with the missing book. Here is a library of silent babble under the perfect reflexive name "Untitled (paperbacks)," where those books go without titles precisely because they are long gone. You walk unsuspecting, that is, into a three-walled hollowed out space where what has been molded in plaster (by inverted casting) is only the anti-matter that takes up the ordinarily empty airspace above the crenellated upper surfaces of spines and pages on a normal library shelf, with the undergirding books removed: a gaping vacancy. Where there should be the repletion of a text, there is a only a continuous horizontal gulch; and in this dead space alone, reduced as if by structural pun to sheer volume, do we find the silent negative armatures of this new mode of art. It would have taken the ekphrastic powers of a Borges to depict this paradoxical "space" of reading with anything like the cool exactitude of Whiteread's textual white-outs.

At smaller scales of cancellation and voidance, and thus more readily shipped in from New York to be part of our bookwork gallery, are two arresting works by Doug Beube. In one, *The Silent Question*, we see an elegantly folded and angled spreadsheet of some imaginary text, with its pages themselves uncut but with each of the words punched or scraped out (rather than, as in Hamilton's *tropos*, burnt out). What results is that any graphophonemic production of the read text, a text with the mystery of muteness in its very title, is cancelled, excised inch by discontinuous inch of erstwhile lexical shapes. The paper sculpture comes across less like a book, or even an accorded scroll, than like the negative

image of a continuous perforated piano roll, soundless forever to the silenced eye of the excluded reader.

Or turn (just aside) to the same artist's punning *Volume* in our gallery. This is a short tower (babelized again by illegibility) of supine books topped by a prostrate one, thus closing off the stack—except for the hole that is carved through the entire pile. Its metafictional tunnel is entered only via a magnifying glass, abetted by an internal reflector, that produces inside the illegible space of access an infinite regress of inscription like the one Borges suggests with those mirrored panels in the hallways—or call them textual passage-ways—between hexagonal shelvings in “The Library of Babel.” And compounding the wordplay of Beube's title, *Volume*, is its latent optical pun on print duplication. Resulting in this case not from mirroring but from industrial impress is the fact that, although the title of the upper book has been sawed through, we can still read the publisher's logo on the spine: none other than Doubleday.

And speaking of spines, ektoskeletons, and the like: Experimental French novelist Michel Butor long ago, in his materialist thinking about the book form, proposed that the one thing all books had in common with visual art is that all books, illustrated or not, are (as alluded to above) “diptychs,” two-paneled displays (55). One of the most rigorously immediate realizations of this insight I know comes from Buzz Spector's work. In the photo diptych called *Art History (spine)*, the artist, having mildly mistreated a dozen or more art history books by piling them, open wide, one on top of the other, then further builds—or leans, or presses on—the art-historical tradition by dividing his actual-size photograph of them along their vertically aligned gullies and spines. The split photo offers a two-paneled spread of its own, but bringing no words or annotated pictures with it—only, if you will, and yet again, the intermedial discourse of the book as object. Another Tower (or at least stack) of Babel, by any other name. In this selective and inaccessible sample, the very Library of the visual, when reproduced as visual precis, is then ripped right down the middle, cloven open. Even with the quasi-organic evocation of bilateral balance around a central spinal column, symmetry translates to

the eye as chiasm. Books of images become the codex-like image of books. In the discourse of the visual as textual, and vice versa, Spector has produced a Babel of iconicity itself—or at least its graphic echo chamber.

But then there is, in Borges's own “Library” thereof, the most remarkable of all his Babelian imaginings—even though it too is given, as is the writer's wont, in an equally lucid if ludic exposition. I have in impossible mind's-eye-view that rumored central chamber in “The Library of Babel,” circular rather than hexagonal, that has been long dreamed by the mystics—even though “their evidence was suspect, their words obscure” (52). This is the circular room that is all one book. In the library's volume of volumes, the circumferential replaces the cubicular. This magic book's paradoxical spine wraps entirely around the space that houses it, encircling it, coterminous with it. By a fractal logic once more—in this infinite archive whose farthest imagined reaches share in all directions the same radial distance from an unknown center—the ultimate inner sanctum amounts to a single synecdochic volume bound not just on three sides, as is the norm, but on all sides, closed wholly to access by its own ektoskeleton, impenetrable, hence ineffable.

Think about it. That's what the passage is there for, what is “conceptual” about it. Each page would be touching every other at their central edge, intolerably compressed at that unleafable pressure point, bursting not just the seams of their own binding but the very space of their coexistence, like a mad inside-out rolodex with no possible room, no legible space whatever, for consultation. Even the longtime Borgesian Buzz Spector would have a hard time building that. Yet his own altered volumes and photographic diptychs encourage us to think this inconceivable space of text—and think again, following out Borges's own lambent wording to its flamboyant architextural ends. Like that of the other book artists culled and curated by him for our conference, Spector's career-long venture in the intermedial valence of the book helps us not just bear in mind but submit to tangible iconic measure the weft and density, the heft and lift, the fiber and pliability of the sewn page. Such work installs, yet again,

an iconometrics of the booked word in its status not as cultural prescript but as materialized *bibliobjet*.

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