BOOK



Ulises Carrión
'Self-portrait.'
1979.

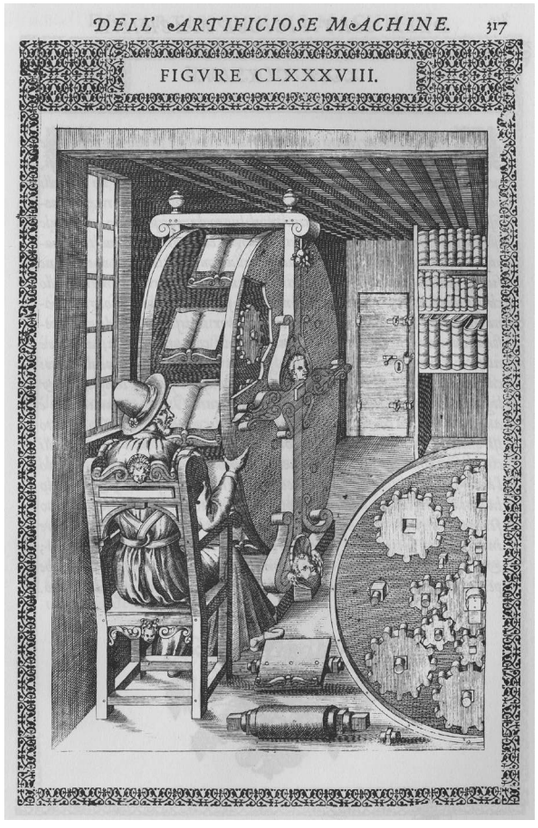
Object Books
Books as Platforms
Binary Books
Blank Books
Multiple Books
Books as Symbols
Last Book

by James Langdon

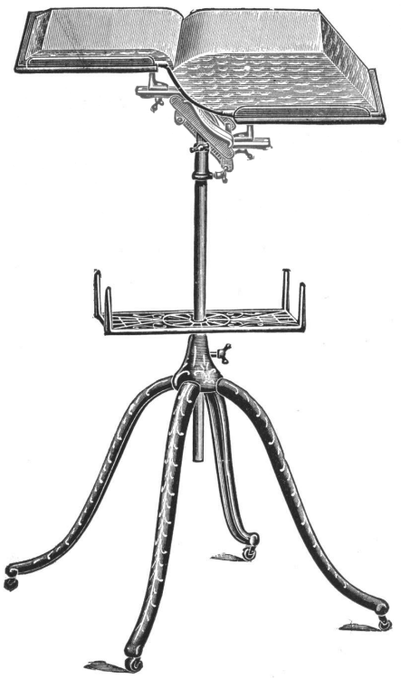
In 1975 the Mexican artist, writer, publisher and collector Ulises Carrión established in Amsterdam one of the first international centres dedicated to the exhibition and distribution of artists' books. Other Books and So operated as a gallery and bookshop from Herengracht 227, later moving to Herengracht 257, and finally to Bloemgracht 121 where in 1980 its collection became an archive. Two texts written by Carrión during this period, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975) and *Bookworks Revisited* (1979) [both reprinted in facsimile in this present volume], constitute the enduring expression of his idiosyncratic structuralist perspective on the book.

Carrión exhibited and published in an art-world context and his writing is primarily concerned with books made by artists. For Carrión, artists' books exemplify a conflation of the processes of conceiving, designing, printing, binding and distributing books, thus creating a more complete engagement with their structure than is encouraged by conventional publishing methodology, characterised by its division of these processes. Despite this emphasis on artists' books, Carrión's commentary is also informed by 'ordinary' books: volumes of poetry, novels, newspapers, comic books and directories and the various patterns of designing and reading that they typically exhibit.

Carrión's account of the book remains relevant in large part due to the fact that the disciplines it draws upon are notably disparate. His work touches on literary criticism, bibliography, graphic design and art theory, and through its disregard for their boundaries suggests the need for a comprehensive critical essay on the book as a space for display, including both a material history of the physical forms of books, and an exploration of the possibilities of the book as a graphic space. Carrión's texts typically appeared in small circulation art journals, and as such the discourse they share with more academic areas of study is in need of consolidation. Conversely, in the areas of curatorial and museum studies, the past two decades have produced revealing and comprehensive critical histories of display: the devices and effects of exhibitions have been more thoroughly decoded than have those of books. What follows is an outline of this reconciliatory project — potentially a manual for making and using books — structured by a reading of Carrión's central concepts.

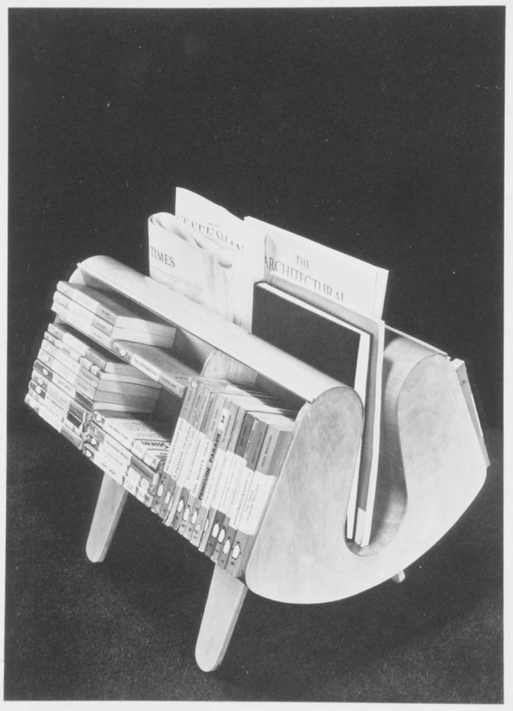


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Object Books

A book is a three-dimensional structure, a message sent through a sequential support.
Ulises Carrión, *Bookworks Revisited* (1979)

Carrión's writing asserts the book as an object. Importantly, his analysis focusses resolutely on the codex form, less concerned with what might be termed 'book-objects': the typically fetishistic appropriations of the book form made by artists, that might treat it superficially either as a sculptural device or to invoke the complex visual iconography of books. This emphasis expresses Carrión's attention to the idea of the book as a container, not an autonomous or purely concrete object. In Carrión's practice the codex is a given, but as an archetype to be responded to rather than ignored.

In situating Carrión's commentary in a broader context of writing on the form of the book, it is arguably the field of bibliography that offers the most compatible framework with which to begin. It is a field presently rich with discourse stimulated by the continuing preoccupation with the perceived decline of the printed book in the wake of new media. The scholar G. Thomas Tanselle has written several essays asserting the importance of books as original artifacts, often motivated by a defence of the value of preserving printed matter. Tanselle argues for the inseparability of texts from the physical books that contain them: "There can be no books in which the format and other physical features are unrelated to the process of reading and understanding the texts in them." (*Literature and Artifacts*, 1998)

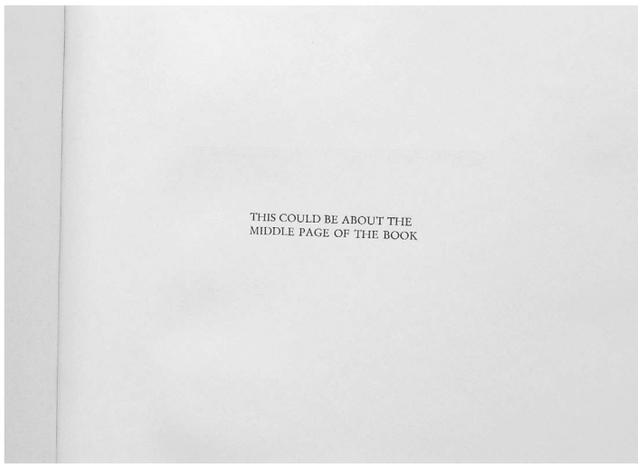
D. F. McKenzie's work in bibliography also considers the connections between the conditions of the book as object and an interpretation of its text: "In the pursuit of historical meanings, we move from the most minute feature of the material form of the book to questions of authorial, literary, and social context." (*Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, 1999) McKenzie exemplifies this point by producing a bibliographical analysis of a hypothetical blank book, suggesting the meanings that could be inferred by studying its format, binding and materials alone.

This sensitivity to the object form of the book is the point of connection between the vocabularies of academic bibliography and Carrión's texts. In bibliographic terms the union between a text and its container is what allows the fullest meaning of that work to be deduced. Carrión's proposition, further, is that the relation between a text and its container must be integral to the original conception of the book: the negotiation of this relationship must be of primary concern for both the makers and users of books.

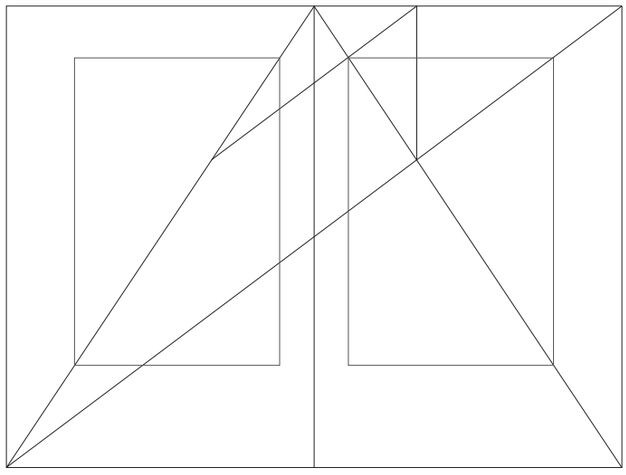
1
Sixteenth century illustration by Italian engineer Agostino Ramelli, showing a device enabling a scholar to view the open spreads of multiple books simultaneously. This image is also significant as an early depiction of the now prevalent practice of displaying books on shelves with their spines facing outwards: in medieval culture the binding of the book was considered purely structural and therefore unsightly.

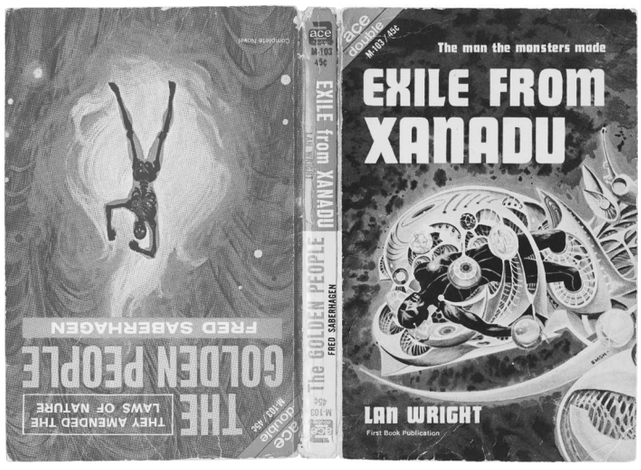
2
Dictionary holder from a late nineteenth century American catalogue of library fittings. A counterbalance mechanism responds to the position of the open book so that the pages always lie flat.

3
Penguin Donkey bookcase designed by Jack Pritchard and Egon Riss (1939), marketed as a case for the standard format Penguin paperback. *Courtesy Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia.*

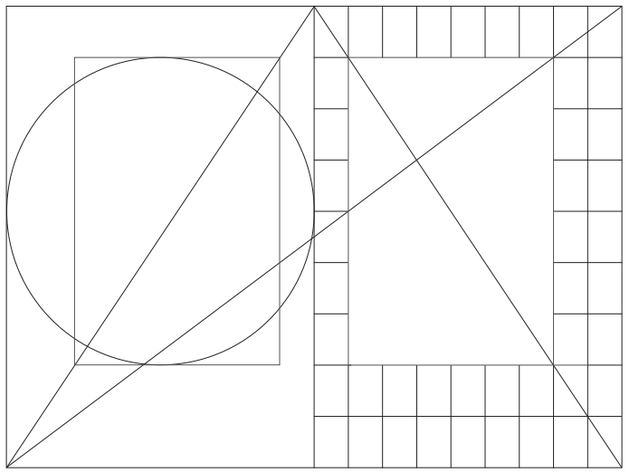


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Books as Platforms

What is more meaningful: the book or the text it contains?
Ulises Carrión, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975)

Carrión's most urgently expressed contention is twofold: that very few publications produce a union of the form of the book and its printed contents, and that in spite of this, books are passively consumed by readers as though their contents could not have been mediated in any other way. Carrión seeks to disrupt this apparently unthinking, habitual assumption and to reveal, unburdened by historical convention, what the qualities of books are as platforms for text and image.

One point of entry for this enquiry is the field of graphic design. In the context of book history, the existence of graphic design as a specialist area of production is relatively recent. As such, the literature of book design carries a strong bias towards the mechanics of arranging material on pages and a lack of consideration of the book in a more abstract and spatial sense. Nonetheless, the precedents of Carrión's structuralist approach are evident in important twentieth century texts. W. A. Dwiggins' *An Investigation into the Physical Properties of Books* (1919) and *The Structure of the Book* (1927) are conservative in comparison to Carrión's radical positions, yet they remain noteworthy for their imagery—"Say that we peel a book layer by layer, like an onion, and examine each coat." (*The Structure of the Book*)—and the capacity of their discussions to range seamlessly between material concerns: paper, binding, ink and the graphic possibilities of typography and layout.

Jost Hochuli's text *Designing Books* (1996) includes a brief but explicit description of the book as an axial form: "When opened, a book shows mirror symmetry. Its axis is the spine, around which the pages are turned. Thus any typographic approach, including an asymmetric one, has always to take account of the symmetry that is inherent in the physical object of a book." The reference to symmetry here is more closely connected with debate on the stylings and pragmatics of typographic form than it is an acknowledgement of the meaningful potential of the spine's axis, but Hochuli's impetus to unify the physical and graphic spaces of the book echoes Carrión's approach.

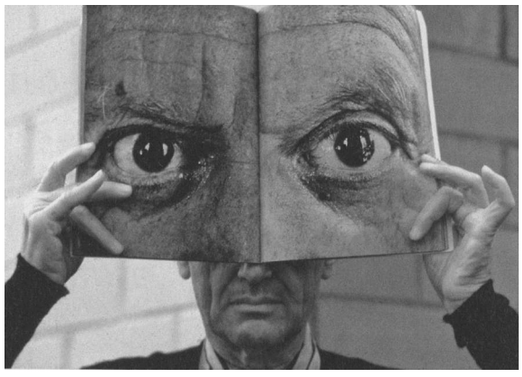
Discussion of the book as a space for text and image also exists outside the literature of graphic design. Jay David Bolter's text *Writing Space* (1991) is an essay on digital platforms for writing that considers the the book as a graphic space from an oppositional point of view: describing the sense in which the physical limitations of the book form might historically be seen to have conditioned writing, favoring linear and sequential presentation of texts. Bolter points to several significant examples in the work of philosophers Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein, suggesting Derrida's *Glas* (1974) as an attempt to escape the linearity of the book for a more 'networked' textual space—an anticipation of hypertext and the conditions of text displayed on computer screens. Carrión's work rejects this characterisation of books as linear, but Carrión would perhaps have shared Bolter's assertion that writing and designing are in one sense so closely related that writing can be considered a process which already constitutes an anticipation of designing.

4
George Brecht's *Book* (1972) contains no text or image material other than basic textual descriptions of the elements of its constitution.

5
The Ace Doubles series of science fiction paperbacks were issued in a 'tête-bêche' format: two novels appear in one volume, each with its cover and text pages rotated 180° relative to the other.

6
Drawings for archetypal grids for page construction based on those included in Jan Tschichold's *The Form of the Book* (original German text 1975). Tschichold's grids were informed by—amongst other sources—J. A. van de Graaf's 'secret canon': a method of determining the 'ideal' proportions of a text block observed by Van de Graaf in early manuscripts. Much twentieth century writing on the page as a space is concerned with dogmatic conceits of 'rightness' in the proportions and divisions of pages.

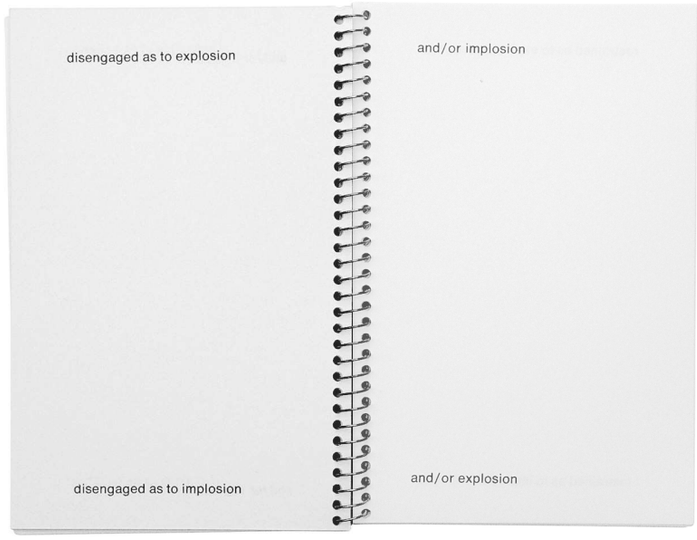
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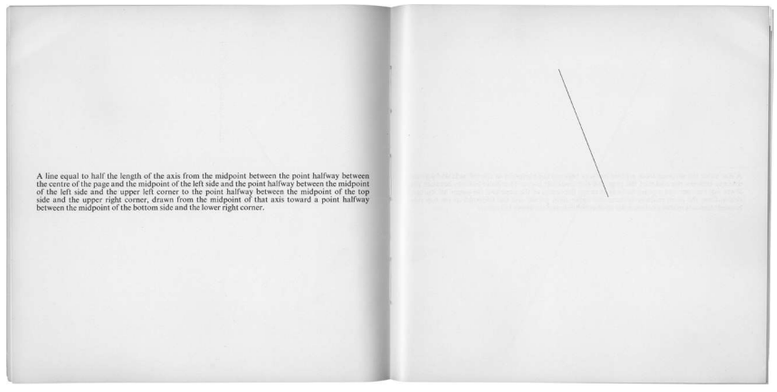
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Binary Books

A book may be the accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book.
Ulises Carrión, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975)

The savant Kim Peak, whose life was the subject of the Hollywood film *Rain Man* (1988), was said to be able to read a pair of facing pages simultaneously; his left eye reading the verso, his right the recto. Peak's ability was exceptional, yet it suggests the book as a peculiarly humanist form, comfortably negotiated by two eyes and two hands. "The symmetrical appearance of a human being is reflected in the symmetrical shape of a book", wrote Jan Tschichold, one of the preeminent voices on book design in the twentieth century. Swiss artist Thomas Huber's eulogy to the codex, *Different Libraries* (2006), describes the formal pairing of facing pages as recommending books in particular for "reporting on good and evil, the two sides of the world."

Conventional books open to reveal pairs of facing pages, always visually separated by the structure of their binding. Carrión stresses that, contrary to archetypal patterns of designing and reading, there is no inherent unity in the form of the book and the form of a text for continuous reading. This idea is evident on every pair of facing pages in a novel or text book: the reader habitually ignores the obvious formal division that the binding imposes, both across the facing pages, and in the turning of the pages to a different opening. It follows that the sequence of spaces contained by a book might most naturally be considered distinct and discontinuous. Indeed in a section sewn binding the majority of openings do not consist of a single, unbroken surface of paper: each section of the binding produces only one 'true spread', as book designers term the pages in the centre of a section.

There are few examples of books that acknowledge and exploit the binary nature of facing pages. Some parallel texts such as translations and annotated texts use facing pages to sort their contents. Polyglot bibles present a pattern of reading in which a particular area of space on each pair of facing pages contains the text in a particular translation, the reader repeatedly reading only from that area on each spread. Photobooks such as the typological studies of Bernd and Hilla Becher treat the book as a readymade, serial display space: sometimes reproductions are arranged at one format, one photograph per page, or in other configurations mirrored grids of reproductions are presented on facing pages, suggesting the focus of the Bechers' practice on the subtle differences in form of their subjects.

However, in the 1960s and 1970s a number of artists, whom Carrión would have been very aware of, were producing works in the form of books addressing this binary concept of facing pages directly and self-consciously. For example, works such as Sol LeWitt's *The Location of Lines* (1974), Yves De Smet's *Eight Works* (1974) and Lawrence Weiner's *Affected and/or Effected* (1971) exploit the receptive support that the book offers for their considerations of the dualistic properties of language and representation, exemplifying Carrión's assertion that the content of a book's text ought to incorporate and assimilate the book's form into itself.

7
The designer Charles Eames holds a spread of facing pages bearing a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's eyes. From the publication *Connections, the Work of Charles and Ray Eames*.

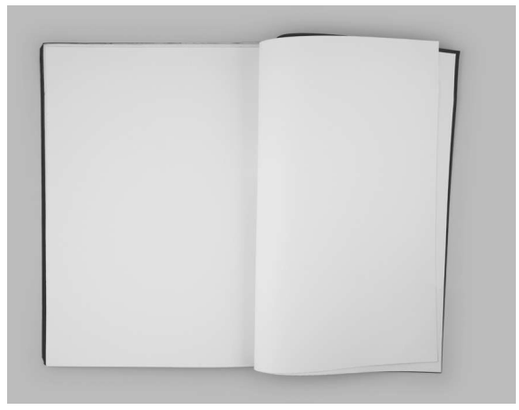
8
Cover of *Trophies* (1979) an artist's book by Dieter Roth comprised of reproductions of his two-handed drawings.

9
Spread of facing pages from *Affected and/or Effected* (1971) by Lawrence Weiner.

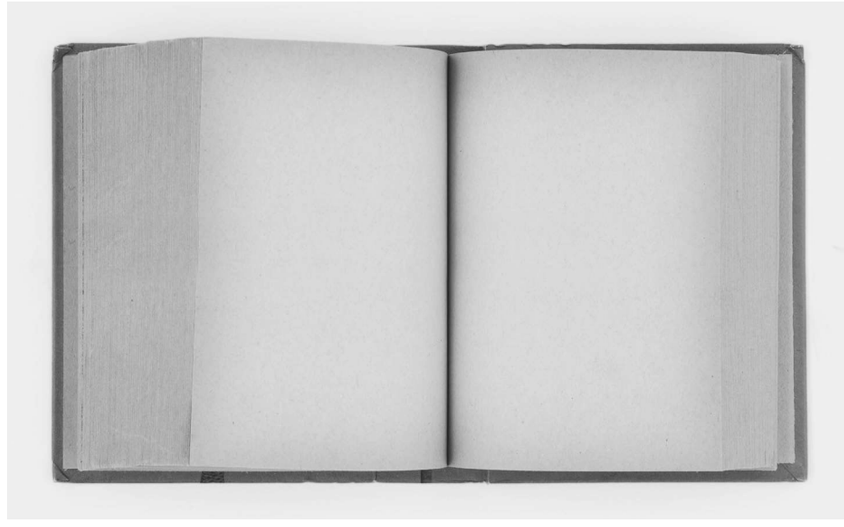
10
Spread of facing pages from *The Location of Lines* (1974) by Sol LeWitt.

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Blank Books

The most beautiful and perfect book in the world is a book with only blank pages.
Ulises Carrión, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975)

Carrión implies the unprinted book as an unfettered form, relieved of bearing the marks of a graphic language beyond itself, and limited to expressing its own extraordinarily expansive spatial qualities. This 'medium specificity' is reminiscent of much modernist art criticism, but, while Carrión's writing is sometimes excessively concerned with classification, his work is neither reductive nor dogmatic. For him the image of the blank book is employed as a suggestive one, offered as a source of clarity for book makers and readers.

Brian O'Doherty's canonical text on display, *Inside the White Cube* (1976), describes the empty gallery as the definitive image of twentieth century art. Such emptiness might now be read as emblematic of early works by Hans Haacke, Michael Asher and Daniel Buren, amongst others, now collectively referred to by the term Institutional Critique. Theirs was not a purely formal proposition, it was a questioning of the implications of the context in which a work was presented, sensitive both to the fine grain of physical details in an exhibition space, and to the ambient politics inherent in the support systems of the art-world. Transposing this sensibility to books, the proliferation of artists' books in the second half of the twentieth century can be seen to be coincident with this shift of attention towards the mechanics of display, perhaps evidence of the vital conflation of production processes typical of artists' books that Carrión's texts describe. Contemporaneously, the unprinted book is a marginal but not insignificant chapter of the history of artists' books, its primary works outlined by Anne Mœglin-Delcroix in her text *Neither Word Nor Image: Blank Books* (2009).

Simon Starling's work *Les Maquettes en Blanc (1995–2009)* (2009) is comprised of blank 'dummy' books of the kind routinely produced by book binders to establish what the final dimensions of a book made to a particular specification of materials and processes will be. Collectively, these different formats begin to speak about the material for which they might be considered appropriate. Generally, different formats of page and binding tend to become associated with particular types of publications — directories, comic books, pocket diaries and so on — but what does a more material appraisal of them reveal? Sewn bindings bear the most evidence of their construction, their gatherings of sections evidence of the way in which their pages were organised on the printing sheets. Spiral or ring bindings isolate pages and emphasise their discontinuity. Perfect bindings grind off the gatherings at the edge to be bound, leaving just the single leaves to be glued with no evidence of the constitution of the sections that they were made in. Large pages, even made from the same weight of paper, behave very differently to small pages in the reader's hand. Coated papers bear photographic reproductions sharply and precisely, uncoated papers soften text and images, and themselves discolour quickly. Such qualities are sometimes perceived almost subconsciously: Carrión's practice is concerned with revealing and activating them.

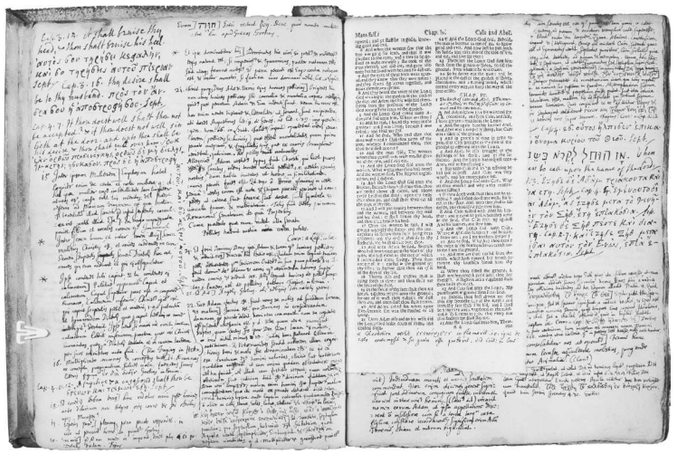
11
Issue nine (1967) of the serial publication *Revue Integration*, edited by Herman de Vries. Contains unprinted sheets of black, gold and white paper, which constitute original monochrome artworks by, respectively, Ad Reinhardt, Mathias Goeritz and the editor himself.

12
Simon Starling *Les Maquettes en Blanc (1995–2009)* (2009). Dummy books, vitrine.

13
Spread of unprinted pages from *Ed-werd-Rew-shay* (1972) by Ed Ruscha. Ruscha typically left blank pages in his early books and catalogues. This publication ends with 150 unprinted pages, possibly with the purpose of broadening the spine of the book so that it could accommodate an illustration of a palm tree.

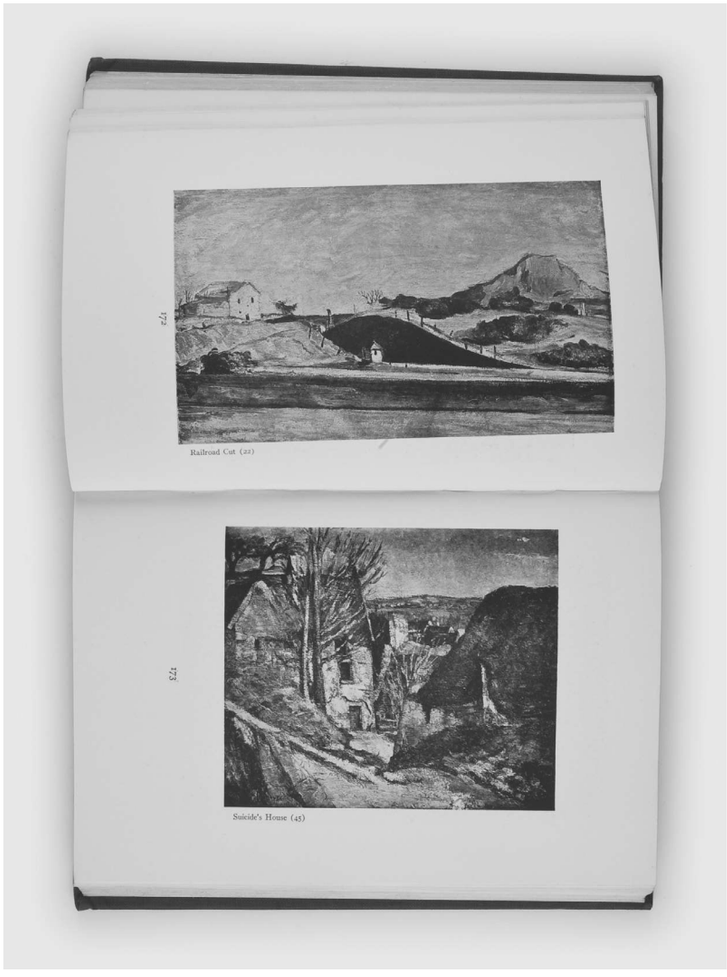


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16



Multiple Books

One copy of the book is not the book. The book is the whole edition.
Ulises Carrión, *Bookworks Revisited* (1979)

An essential characteristic of the modern book is its dissemination. Before the printing press, manuscript books were precious and immobile artifacts, often chained directly to the book cases in libraries whose social spaces more closely resembled those of a museum. Industrial production has changed the function of the book decisively. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press was a catalyst for the characteristics of the ordinary books familiar to us in the twenty first century: multiplicity and mobility. Industrial production has also quickened the process of standardisation of books: common formats for books are related to the economics of standard printing presses.

Each copy of a book in an edition acquires a different history and exists in a different context. This effect is amplified over time and space: the material forms of books reveal much about their production and distribution of meaning, both in the time of their making and in their rediscovery by subsequent generations of readers. The means of the descriptive bibliographer's analysis, from the direct traces of readers in marginalia and other annotations or personalisations, to the implicit meanings evident in the printer's and designer's decisions about how to present the contents of their books, constitute a holistic appraisal of the book that Carrión would likely have embraced. The scholar Owen Gingerich spent almost three decades pursuing all of the extant first and second edition copies of Nicolaus Copernicus' sixteenth century book *De Revolutionibus*. Gingerich uses the evidence of their condition, marginalia and other signs of ownership and provenance to record the geographical and temporal advance and scholarly reception of Copernicus' canonical heliocentric thesis. This exhaustive documentation has been published as *An Annotated Census of Copernicus' De Revolutionibus (Nuremberg, 1543 and Basel, 1566)*. In Gingerich's practice the book's status as an artifact and its representation of the ideas it contains are indivisible—his work provides as complete an account as is practically possible of this one book in its widest and most diffuse sense.

Andre Malraux's text *Museum Without Walls* (1965) examines the effects of the proliferation of books more generally. Following Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Malraux considers the notion of an intertextual cloud of reproductions of artworks, and the consequent idea that more people are familiar with works of art through reproductions than through direct contact with the originals. This phenomenon already implies the reevaluation of the book as a space for the display of art that was simultaneously being taken up independently by artists in the 1960s. The assertion of the page as a space for presentation of original works—typified by books such as Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox Book* (1968)—might be seen as a reaction to the critique of the page as a secondary, purely representational platform, which asserts an alternative conception of the page as a direct, portable, mobile space in itself.

14
Dieter Roth's *Bok 3b und 3d* (1974) is composed of found printed sheets from comic books and children's colouring books, with formations of circular holes die cut from them. Each copy of the edition of 1,000 is different.

15
The practice of edition binding (the identical binding of an entire edition of books by the publisher) became common only in the late eighteenth century. This sixteenth century bible would have been bought as unbound sections and bound to its owner's 'interleaved' specification to provide additional pages to be used for annotations. *Courtesy The British Library.*

16
The Art of Cézanne by Albert Barnes and Violette de Mazia (1967). Barnes would only allow photographs of his exceptional collection of twentieth century art to be reproduced in black and white. He believed reproductions of paintings were an inadequate substitute for experiencing the original work of art, and that their secondary nature should be made abundantly evident.

18





17

Books as Symbols

John Latham's work *Art and Culture* (1966–1969) presents the collected documentation of a process in which a single copy of art critic Clement Greenberg's book *Art and Culture* (1961) was withdrawn from the library at St. Martin's School of Art (where Latham was teaching), ritually chewed and digested by Latham and a group of his associates, and returned to the library as a distilled mass. Latham's gesture is typical of his irreverent appropriation of the form of the book as an arbiter of knowledge and cultural value. More recently, Yann Sérandour's use of multiple copies of books such as Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974) and O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube* directly in the production of new works acknowledges these books both as physical objects and as representations of certain iconic conceptions of display. Sérandour's is a subtler sensibility, more sympathetic to the iconography of its source material.

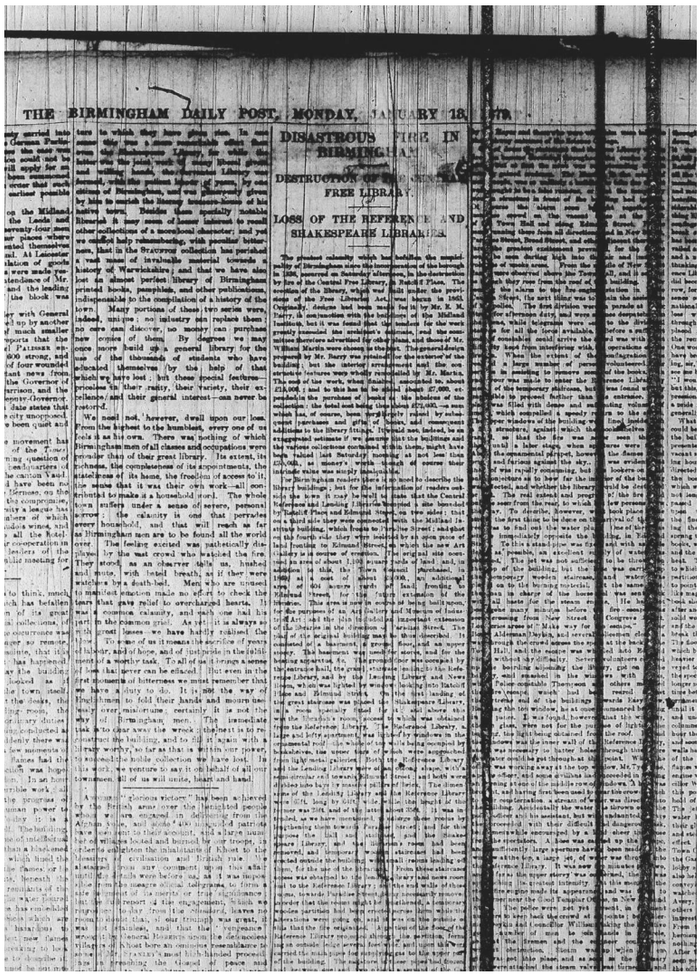
Books have been an important subject in Western painting for centuries, as is evidenced in Garrett Stewart's book *The Look of Reading* (2006). In this context books are typically symbols of learning or the primacy of the church. Paintings such as Georges de la Tour's *Saint Jerome Reading* (c. 1635–1638), and Francisco de Zurbarán's *Saint Romanus of Antioch* (1638) even explicitly depict the symmetry of the codex form.

Carrión's writing hardly touches on this secondary dimension of the concept of the book as a non-textual, representational object. Where a connection can be made is with the idea that, rather than focusing on the symbolism of specific books, a more general notion of what the book represents exists in the scene that grew up around the production of artists' books, particularly in the United States in the early 1960s. A short text by Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, *The Page as an Alternative Space, 1950 to 1969* (1980) describes how, emerging out of the literary small press scene, networks of artists such as George Brecht, George Maciunas and Dick Higgins began to adopt a model of publishing in which the book came to represent a circumvention of the established gallery system: a platform that spoke of autonomy and independence from the mediation of the art-world. When Bruce Nauman burned a copy of Ed Ruscha's 1965 book *Various Small Fires*, the implication was that such works as Ruscha's, made and distributed in the form of unlimited editions, lacked the pretentiousness and preciousness of unique artworks and exemplified a healthy disregard for the forces of the art market.

This process was facilitated by the increasing abundance and availability of affordable means for artists to produce books independently: the saturated colour and coarse halftones of the mimeograph are now inextricably bound up with the aesthetics of this period, which Carrión directly participated in through Other Books and So and his own production as an artist and editor.

17
Bookworm, a character drawn for the comic *Whoopee!* in the early 1980s by Sid Burgon. Each strip typically represents books as symbols of knowledge.

18
John Latham *Art and Culture* (1966–1969). Book, vials containing powders and liquids, documents in leather case.



THE BIRMINGHAM DAILY POST, MONDAY, JANUARY 18, 1879.

DISASTROUS FIRE IN BIRMINGHAM.

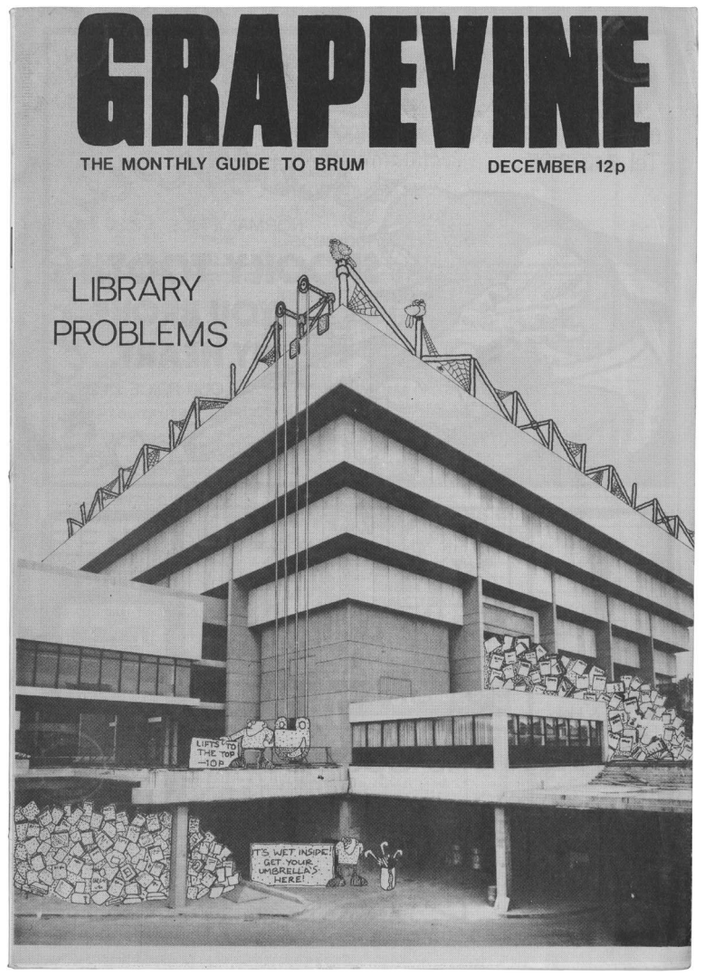
DESTRUCTION OF THE CENTRAL FREE LIBRARY.

LOSS OF THE REFERENCE AND SHAKESPEARE LIBRARIES.

The greatest calamity which has befallen the municipality of Birmingham since the incorporation of the borough in 1838, happened on Saturday afternoon, in the destruction by fire of the Central Free Library, in Ratcliff Place. The erection of the library, which was built under the provisions of the Free Libraries Act, first began in 1865. Originally, designs had been made for it by Mr. R. M. Tatty, in connection with the buildings of the Midland Institute, but it was found that the funds for the work greatly exceeded the architect's estimate, and the committee therefore advertised for other plans, and those of Mr. William Martin were chosen in the end. The general design was prepared by Mr. Barry (now president of the Institute), but the interior arrangements and the construction of the lectures were wholly remodelled by Mr. Martin. The cost of the work, when finished, amounted to about £18,000; and to this has to be added about £7,000, expended on the purchase of books for the reference department of the collection; the total cost being thus about £72,000—a sum which has, of course, been largely raised by subscriptions, entertainments, and bequests, and by numerous additions to the library itself. It would not, indeed, be an exaggerated estimate if we assumed that the buildings and the various collections contained within them, might have been valued last Saturday morning at not less than £70,000, as money's worth (which of course they include) value was simply inestimable.

In Birmingham modern ideas it is useless to describe the library buildings, but for the information of readers outside the town it may be briefly said that the Central Reference and Lending Libraries occupied a site bounded by Ratcliff Place and Edmund Street on two sides; that on a third side they were connected with the Midland Institute building, which fronts to Paradise Street; and that on the fourth side they were bounded by an open piece of land fronting to Edmund Street, on which the new Art Gallery is in course of erection. The original site occupied an area of about 1,200 square yards of land, in addition to this, the Town Council purchased, in 1860, at a cost of about £9,000, an additional area of 600 square yards of land, fronting to Paradise Street, for the purpose of an Art Gallery and Museum of Industrial Art; and the Institute has leased the extension of the theatre in the direction of Ratcliff Street. The whole of the original building and the new extension is constructed of a basement, a ground floor, and an upper story. The basement was used for stores, and for the heating apparatus, &c. The ground floor was occupied by the entrance hall, the great staircase leading to the Reference Library, and by the Lending Library and News Room, which was lighted by windows looking into Ratcliff Place and Edmund Street. On the first landing of the great staircase was placed the Shakspeare Library, in a room specially fitted for it; and above the Shakspeare Library, occupying the whole of which was obtained from the Reference Library. The Reference Library, a fine and lofty apartment, was lighted by windows in the ornamented roof; and above the Lending Library, which was lighted by windows in the same manner, was the Art Gallery, a noble room, 80 feet long by 40 feet wide, and 40 feet high, lighted from the roof. The Lending Library was at the top of the building, and was reached by a separate staircase. Attached to the Reference Library were a number of private rooms for the use of the librarian, the curator, and the assistants, and the basement contained the heating apparatus, and the strong room for the valuable books, &c. From these statements it will be seen that the Reference Library was the most important of the whole building, and to it was attached the Shakspeare Library, which contained the valuable collection of books and manuscripts bequeathed to the town by Mr. Robert Wilkinson, of Sparkhill, and which was considered by many to be the most valuable collection of Shakspeare literature in the world. The Reference Library occupied, as the position, the whole of the building. The Lending Library was reached by a separate staircase, and was in a separate room, and the Art Gallery was also reached by a separate staircase. The Lending Library contained about 10,000 volumes, and the Reference Library about 15,000 volumes, including the Shakspeare Library, which contained about 3,000 volumes. The Art Gallery contained a number of pictures, and a large collection of casts from the antique, and other works of art. The Lending Library was open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and the Reference Library from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Lending Library was open on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., and the Reference Library from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The Art Gallery was open on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The Lending Library was open on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., and the Reference Library from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The Art Gallery was open on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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Last Book

All books that now exist will disappear. Libraries and archives will be cemeteries.
Ulises Carrión, *Bookworks Revisited* (1979)

The mathematician William Goldbloom Bloch's text *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel* (2008) is an extraordinary analytical reading of Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Library of Babel* (1941). Bloch gives Borges' metaphor for the entirety of human textual production contained in books definitive quantification: the extent of Borges' seemingly infinite library is expressed simply with the equation $25^{1,312,000}$. The scale of the library extends beyond the limits of the known universe, its inhabitants ('librarians') struggling to negotiate its vastness and impenetrability.

Carrión writes of books as living organisms: he describes the process by which books grow old, change colour and ultimately die. Successive generations of writers have predicted the demise of print culture, catalysed both by this irreversible decay of the printed matter contained in the libraries and collections of the world, and the seemingly inexorable advance of the new media which will supposedly make the book obsolete. The librarian Fremont Rider's influential text *The Scholar and the Future of the Research Library* (1944) includes a calculation suggesting that the number of books in American research libraries doubled every sixteen years. In response, major international library projects of the twentieth century focussed on the idea of 'reformatting' fragile books: photographing or scanning (often disbinding and discarding the originals in the process) and retaining the resulting images on microfilm, microcards, and later digitally. The nature of this practice reveals the absence of a unified appraisal of the book as a material artifact: the implication that texts are all that ought to be saved from books supposes that the book form itself is neutral, colourless, meaningless. The reverberation of this rhetoric is prevalent today in the form of the various digital devices conceived as successors to the printed and bound book. During the 1990s Joseph Jacobson at MIT developed a practicable concept of the 'last book': an electronic device that would be able to store and display every text ever written. This concept has come to fruition in the form of curiously generic receptacles for text, such as the 'Kindle', whose object form is defined by its being unresponsive to the meanings and structures of texts.

These examples are indicative of a general trend of thought away from a recognition of the book as a meaningful space. Carrión's voice is important, then, for the striking and instructive emphasis it gives to the book, not as a neutral support, but as a specific set of conditions that each body of material to be adapted to its form should respond to. The nineteenth century British inventor Sir Humphry Davy was said to have torn out the pages of his books as he read them, in the belief that he would never have time in his life to read them again and could therefore save space on his shelves through this practice. Similarly, Ulises Carrión's video *A Book* (1980) shows pages being systematically torn from a book and discarded, simultaneously gathered and re-made as a loose stack of crumpled sheets. Carrión's video exemplifies both the serial nature of the book and its malleable material substance.

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In January 1879, around 40,000 volumes were destroyed in a disastrous fire at the Birmingham Library. Accounts of the fire from contemporary sources were photographed for microfilm during the twentieth century, and these are now partially illegible due to the cumulative effects of the decay of both the original printed matter and the subsequent microfilm.

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Cover of *Grapevine*—a Birmingham art scene publication—January 1975. John Madin's 1974 Central Library (illustrated) was infamously described by Charles, Prince of Wales, as "like a place where books are incinerated, not kept".

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