(On Xerox Book

Nav Haq: James, I thought we could discuss *Xerox Book* (1968) that Seth Siegelaub produced in 1968. I picked up a bootleg copy of it when I visited the exhibition *Book Show* that you organized with Gavin Wade at Eastside Projects in Birmingham back in 2010. It was surprising and gratifying to find it. I think this was because it is one of those books that is considered a pioneering work in the era of Conceptual art—a book produced entirely through xeroxed or photocopied pages made by artists. How did you come across it, and why did you decide to include it in the exhibition?

James Langdon: I first saw a copy of *Xerox Book* (in a vitrine) at an extraordinary exhibition of artists' books called *Concrete Poetry, Fluxus and Conceptual Art: A Book Friction*, organized by Marc Goethals at Witte Zaal in Ghent in 2008. After that, Urs Lehni, the publisher of Rollo Press gave me a copy of a bootleg that he had printed of another book from the same era, Lawrence

Weiner's *Causality Affected and/or Effected* (1971). I invited Urs to make the *Xerox Book* bootleg for *Book Show* simply as a way of accessing it—to be able to handle it, and understand it as a book.

Book Show was following through a way of thinking about books outlined in the work of Mexican artist and writer Ulises Carrión. I can exemplify Carrión's proposition with his statement "A novel is a book where nothing happens." It appears in his polemic text *The New Art of Making Books*, published in 1975. Nothing happens in a novel in the sense that a sequence of pages presenting typeset prose all essentially look the same, and have no active relation to the structure of the book as a sequence of openings. They don't belong in a book. Carrión thought of the book in structural terms—to make something "happen," there needed to be an active relation between what was printed and the form of the book itself, as a support. In the context of *Book Show*, *Xerox Book* fit very well—it has become an icon of that treatment of the book as a site for display.

> NH: I like the fact that there is a play between ideas of original and copy in *Xerox Book*. Firstly, as there would have been originals produced by each of the contributing artists before each was quite explicitly made into copies, xeroxed in an edition of 1000, I believe. It is made using a technological means that is normally prohibited for reproduction of copyrighted material even. And in the instance of your exhibition, someone—Rollo Press—had the audacity to bootleg further copies. When working with print media today, there seems to be a deep fascination with mechanical reproduction, particularly with the variations in material qualities. Do you agree?

JL: That tension around establishing an original exists even in the 1968 edition of *Xerox Book*, which was actually offset-printed, because Seth Siegelaub had determined that to photocopy 1000 copies of the book would be more expensive than conventional offset printing. Siegelaub later referred to *Xerox Book* as "photocopy book," because he apparently regretted identifying it with a particular manufacturer. Perversely, Urs's bootleg has a greater fidelity to its title, as it was xerox-printed, in Birmingham, in an edition of 100.

Carrión suggested that to appreciate a book as an object, one had to consider its entire edition and not only one copy. Distinctions between production processes matter, from a bibliographic point of view, in that they influence the material character of the book and its distribution. For example, many significant examples of artists' books from the period that we are discussing have disintegrated because they were bound with cheap glue that has turned brittle. This makes pristine copies of these publications strangely precious, and subverts the impulse toward inexpensive form and mass distribution that they once represented. The pages in the bootleg *Xerox Book* had originally been photocopies, photographed and transferred to printing plates, offset-printed—comprising the 1968 edition—a single, scarce, copy of which was then scanned, corrected, and finally xerox-printed from a digital file. This convoluted remediation is ironic given that *Xerox Book* has come

to represent the idea of the printed page as an original artwork, rather than a reproduction of an artwork.

> NH: The list of artists' names on the spine of *Xerox Book* is quite formidable—Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, and Lawrence Weiner—all male heavyweights of Conceptual art in the US. In this instance, brought together by pioneering curator Seth Siegelaub. They're all people that have been influential for subsequent generations of artists and curators alike. Do you think this era of Conceptual art informs design practice today too?

JL: There have certainly been moments in recent graphic design history (speaking in relation to the art world) when the reductive aesthetics of Conceptual art have been used as a foil for excessive tendencies in digital graphics. But I don't suppose *Xerox Book* is ultimately an aesthetic proposition. It expresses an urge toward liberation from the restrictions of the exhibition format, and from workings of the gallery system more generally, and a simplicity and directness in terms of production that is anti-institutional. That spirit has endured in graphic design, or at least has recently been revived. A comparable culture of independent publishing with photocopiers and other outmoded machines is very evident. Urs Lehni's Rollo Press would be a good example of course.

> NH: I think your point in relation to Carrión is super interesting—about the differentiation between form and content needing to be collapsed,

> in a certain sense. These two elements should ultimately act as supports for each other: medium and message. I think this does come through in much of the artistic content of *Xerox Book*. They all in different ways take into consideration the sequential pages, but also the aesthetics of the xerox, even though from what you describe, they were in the end not actually physically produced that way. I find Huebler's contribution particularly succinct here because of this, more than most of the others, as it takes into account the sequential nature of book pages, and you have the sense of something unfolding or snaking around in a really funny way. It makes you want to follow it page by page. Do you think some of the artists' contributions are more successful than others?

JL: My perspective on these works is likely quite distorted. After my encounter with Carrión I thought a lot about assimilating his structural appraisal of the book form into my own practice as a designer. Because of that I feel sensitive to the possibilities and limitations of the book as an elementary display format, in a way predisposed to simple, binary relationships—the facing pages of an opening, divided by the binding.

Carrión was drawing on the explosion of interest in the book coming from Conceptual art, but many of the basic formulations of the book had already been established, for example in the work of photojournalist Stefan Lorant, whose juxtaposition of images on the facing pages of *Lilliput* magazine were witty, direct and yet complex. In this regard, *Xerox Book* has one

structurally unsatisfactory characteristic: it is a stack of pages printed on one side and then bound. The cover, unprinted on its front, fits this unassuming aesthetic of a ream of paper. But since there are no printed versos, the book lacks the tension between its facing pages and its binding that seems so essential to Carrión.

Andre, Lewitt, and Weiner I am inclined to dismiss, as I think the works included are not among the most interesting produced by these artists in response to the book format.

Morris's work is formally fully realized. It uses the photocopier as an image-processing device with the potential for endless imperfections that become unexpectedly painterly. The work has a performative element, recording each pass of light over an image as an unrepeatable event. It is the work that is most conceptually displaced by the translation to offset printing.

Barry's work is interesting in that it produces layers of optical effects. Its dense matrix of dots confuse the eye, and in Urs's bootleg edition, confuse the scanner, producing moiré effects that are probably unintended, but seem to enrich the work.

The Kosuth work is actually the most suggestive, despite the sobriety of its presentation. The way in which it implicates a network of producers (Siegelaub, the other artists in the book, the workers at Xerox) and technical conditions (the specifications of the reprographic, printing, and binding machines used in the making of the book) is something that has become increasingly important in the developing situation of print media. I think of Laurent Benner's work for the *Most Beautiful Swiss Books* award, remaking sections of numerous books according to

their specific production and distribution conditions, or Maximage and their manual interventions in the mechanics of offset printing, applying painterly mark-making and chemical treatments directly onto printing plates.

> NH: I do see what you mean about the anti-institutionalism. There was a desire to redefine the boundaries, or to rethink the terms of engagement with art. I see that as a gesture that is more and more difficult to make now, because of the systematic way the art system thrives on recuperating radical gestures back into the mainstream. Or often, gestures adopt the aesthetics of the radical, when in fact at their core they are traditional, cynical, or empty. Or sometimes there is a certain fetishism toward old media formats. I get the sense this is the case with some of the kinds of design practices you are referring to. Do you also think this the case?

JL: I'm very interested in what to "do" with canonical works such as *Xerox Book*. They do seem to exert contrary forces—I feel that even in my own practice. They are at once exemplary (in an inspiring sense), and somehow haunting. As you say, canons tend to tighten matters, there is hardly space now to make a gesture such as *Xerox Book*. For me that is not a concern, novelty is not particularly important in my outlook. But to embed the self-conscious consideration of the book as a platform, the site-specifics as you call them, that *Xerox Book* represents and continue them is productive in my view.

NH: I find this also takes us into a range of other questions, including site-specificity: the book as a site for artistic responses to its format and its means of communicating. So, these responses are not just in terms of aesthetics, but also in terms of the social or economical. I see the idea of this in *Xerox Book* too. It embodies the notion that anybody can create their own book through the technology of the day. It seems a gesture that is equally as valid now, when we think of the digital realm for example.

JL: The printed book has one essential relation with the world and that is decay. Printed paper discolors, decomposes, and becomes covetable over time. It acquires that archival aesthetic, which I suppose is another culturally conditioned response to the graphic language of Conceptual art that you asked about initially. Digital media do present further complications—there can be no binary relation between the message and the support, since both remain mutable—the content can be re-edited after its initial distribution, and the support becomes obsolete and subject to reformatting.

But ultimately I feel blocked in trying to compare the conditions of book production amongst conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s with the present digital moment. I can't see an intelligent approach. The book existed for 500 years before Conceptual art, and that brief alignment of its formal characteristics with a particular, elementary aesthetic, and mode of enquiry common to a small group of artists. It seems unlikely that there will be such a moment to unite the messy array of contemporary publishing formats.

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