



Bookwork and Bookishness: An interview with Doug Beube and Brian Dettmer by Jessica Pressman

in *Book Presence in a Digital Age*

eds. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, and Jessica Pressman (Bloomsbury Press, 2018)

This is a conversation between friends.

Doug, Brian, and I met in 2012 in Utrecht, The Netherlands at a symposium organized by the incomparable Kiene Brillenburg Wurth titled “Book Presence in a Digital Age,” an event that became the backbone for this volume. But I was a fan of both Doug and Brian’s art years before I actually met them.

I first saw their altered book sculptures in 2009 at the groundbreaking exhibit “Slash: Paper Under the Knife” at the Museum of Art and Design in New York City.¹ That astonishing collection of paper-based art, some of which was displayed in cases or on

¹ “Slash: Paper Under the Knife,” Dave McFadden curator, Museum of Art and Design (MAD) New York City, October 14, 2009-April 4, 2010.

walls while other pieces dripped like white water from the ceiling, exposed a cultural zeitgeist: artists exploring and exploiting a fascination with paper and with books in the moment of the supposed disappearance of the media due to the increase in digital technologies and reading devices. The artists exhibiting works in the gallery space of MAD, as artists always do, defamiliarized and illuminated the artifactuality of paper and books in ways that made me see anew. “Slash” lived up to its name; it was an epiphany. I started a new book project that very day. Its title: “Bookishness.”

For the past seven years I have been writing about a cultural phenomenon that I call “bookishness,” wherein, in the moment of the book’s supposed obsolescence due to digital technologies, we see the proliferation of creative acts that fetishize and aestheticize the book as artifact. From laptop and iPhone covers that simulate the appearance of books to bedsheets and decorative pillows printed with the covers of classic books, from stop-animation short films that depict books coming to life to bookwork sculpture such as Doug and Brian make.

Both Doug and Brian are internationally respected artists, and they have been interviewed many times and in different venues, but they are usually asked about their artistic practices or the larger genre of altered book sculpture. I want this interview to do something different. Here, I give them space to speak as scholars of books, book art, and bookwork. The following interview is also a selfish act, a way of getting these brilliant minds to consider questions central to my own research on bookishness and of collectively discussing the changing state of books in our contemporary digital culture.

JP: Doug and Brian, you both create book-based art that turns our attention to “Book Presence in a Digital Age,” to crib the title of the conference where we all met. Your work defamiliarizes the book as object: you tear it apart, cut into it, provide provocative and conceptual titles to frame it, and render it artifactual and sculptural in ways that make us see it anew. Literary scholar Garrett Stewart (who also participated in the 2012 conference) argues that bookwork, the genre of altered-book sculpture that your art so poignantly represents, “demediates” the book medium by taking away its use as a reading machine. Stewart writes: “Readymade or constructed, such book shapes are canceled as text when deposited as gallery objects” (2011: xiii). Yet I see a connection between your sculptures and bookbound literature, especially to visually-designed novels like Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010) that exploit the affordances of the codex for literary—and, indeed, textual—purposes. Do you see your art as connected to literature?

BD: I think our work operates in an area between literature and art. Doug and I are both participating in a cultural zeitgeist that includes several authors, many of whom you examine in your own research. *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes* are types of published books that ask questions about the form and format of the book. They dismantle the “fourth wall,” if you will, not always through the voice of the characters within the narrative but in order to experiment with the conceptual underpinning of the book, in a formal and structural way. This has a strong connection to what I do. I’m not using narrative as a primary tool, though I do use language in my work, I am interested in the

limitations of narrative and experimenting with what books can do and with what the boundaries of the format do to the content and the way we ingest it. My work, and some of these experimental novels, can both be read in a literary and visual or conceptual ways. The texture becomes as important as the text.

DB: Just as Foer selected one of his favorite books to alter, Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, I select books written by another author and transform their content. The book as an object is generic in a sense. All books basically look the same: they're rectangular, have a front and back cover, etc., so its form and format is almost (and I emphasize *almost*) immaterial to its content. I see the literary aspect of my art as a collaboration between me and the other creators involved in making the book; this includes the writer, designer and publisher. I'm judicious in choosing the title of a book, and I spend days, if not weeks, altering it. I use various power tools to do this alteration, and I consider these acts of engaging in conjunction with literary criticism—a way of building my own critique. Ninety-nine percent of the time, my work is content-based and is transformed through visual and physical means. So, despite what Garrett Stewart says, some of my bookwork can be read. I want my work to fluctuate between abstraction and narrative, which often interacts with one another.

JP: Were you surprised to hear literary scholars, like Stewart and myself, so taken with your work?

BD: I was enlightened during the conference by the presentation of several literary experiments, including *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes*, which seem to question and consider the possibilities of working *within* the format of a traditional book. This type of work provides a strong connection between traditional literature and the type of book interventions or sculpture that I do. I can see experimental literature providing a bridge between the literary and the visual or tactile, and by hearing the literary scholars, I got a chance to consider and compare the use of the book in both genres. It just goes to show the many different directions and ways that the book can be used and read. That was particularly interesting for me to see.

DB: I greatly appreciate the dialogue with literary scholarship and hearing their insights into my work. Writers and critics focus on areas I did not always consider, approaching my work from a literary point of view that draws out the details and content of what I'm exploring in my sculpture. The visual presentation is a primary mode of entering my work, but there are different ways of reading the content of my bookwork: visual, conceptual, formal, and in context with other art forms and contemporary events.

BD: My work is about reading books in new ways and about teaching us to think differently about the media we use. The book is often an uncomfortable format for certain kinds of texts and modes of reading. This is especially true when we think of accessing nonfiction information in a nonlinear manner, as with encyclopedias; the internet is much more adequate medium for this type of reading practice. This is why most physical encyclopedias are no longer published. The position reference books are in today has made them an interesting material to explore in my own work.

JP: Do you both see yourselves as media scholars and your art as a form of media studies?

DB: That's a great question. I hadn't thought about it before in the way you're asking. "Demediation" is Garrett Stewart's term for how bookwork operates, and there is a demediation or deconstruction of the medium in my art. I'm interested in seeing how far I can push the book before it falls apart. The book is a technology that is not meant to be malleable or flexible in the ways I use it, and I'm trying to force a fluidity onto the book that isn't intended. Designers of books don't create these objects to be chopped, folded, gouged, sliced, or twisted, which is what I do to them. Publishers and authors use the book medium as a convenient container to present ideas. But, in the contemporary moment, the utilitarian use of the book as a container for perpetuating human thought has become obsolete. Artists like myself pull the book apart to show that it is no longer the only way to present knowledge and information, especially not in a digital age.

BD: The media we use has a large impact on how we digest content; it shapes our minds and influences the way we think. This is a strong consideration in my work. I do think that what both Doug and I do is a form of media study. The philosophers that I am interested in (Vilém Flusser and Friedrich Kittler, to name a couple) are traditionally placed more in media studies than in visual art worlds. I think a lot about the architecture of the book and the confines of the structure. The book is a mini world, both because it contains its own, self-supporting structure and also because many books contain fictional worlds in their content. So, much of my work is about the connection between books and buildings, between designed space and imagined space and how those spaces inform our actions. My work attempts to raise these issues in relation to the book because I am interested in how this medium that we grew up with, the book, is changing along with the ways we learned to use to and think about it. This is the media studies component of my work.

JP: Your work is often seen in relation to artist books, both in connection to and in opposition to that book-based genre of art. Would you say that this reflective, even reflexive, media studies aspect of your work is what serves to distinguish bookwork from artist books?

DB: I don't like the term "book artist." I consider myself a mixed media artist.

BD: I see our work as being very different from the tradition of artists' books. Artists' books use the book as a canvas and the work exists and operates within the context of a book. They usually don't push the structure of the book medium or question the context of the book itself. In my art I ask, "how is this [the book] an interesting medium to use and to comment upon?" I am more interested in the book as a found object or cultural artifact to explore. Take an analogy to Nam June Paik's sculptures employing television and video. He did not write TV shows within the medium but rather used the medium, the hardware of the TV, to create sculpture about the medium. A farmer who grows trees is in a different field than a sculptor who makes wooden carvings. When put in the same genre as book makers I like to joke that I don't do book-making; I do book-breaking.

DB: An important distinction between bookwork and artists' books is that artists' books still function as books; you open them and interact with them by flipping pages, there are exceptions but for the most part they function like a book. In contrast, in my work, I challenge the way we interact with and think of these objects. My work is not about binding but about context and how the book sits in space.

JP: What do you mean by "context"?

DB: I make art to be seen in a 360 degree context. I say that bookwork is about context because it is about viewing an object—the book—in the context of space and time. My art creates a moment of meditation.

BD: There's also the context of the gallery, where the bookwork is viewed. We are calling attention to the contexts in which we view, read, and use books... and how these elements are rapidly changing.

DB: These contexts changed for artist books too. When Ed Ruscha conceived artists' books back in the 1960s, he envisioned them as a way to circumvent galleries and to present alternative types of art in a democratic way. Today, artists' books are exhibited in galleries, museums and special collections of universities; their purpose and intended audience has flipped.

BD: With artists' books, the intentions of accessibility have followed a similar trajectory as modern architecture and furniture. Eames and others originally intended to create a clean, functional and accessible product but the market has valued the work and put modern design "out of reach" of most consumers. Artists' books began, as Doug pointed out, as a way of making work accessible and more democratic outside of the gallery system. Many artists' books are now created to operate within a gallery or rarified situation. I think there can be an inherent dishonesty in this relationship. The signifiers of the form are inconsistent with the intended context for display. It's very awkward to try to view an artists' book in a gallery context.

JP: In my current book project, which is deeply inspired by both of your work, I argue that bookishness is a response to the digital age. Do you see bookwork as indebted to digital technologies and culture?

DB: Yes. Bookwork is certainly of its time—a digital moment. Prior to the digital age, books were considered passages for ideas and theories to move into future generations, in both metaphorical and literal ways. A book was a medium for information and message. But, in this contemporary moment, everything's exploding. Every aspect of the physical world is being deconstructed and challenged: music, architecture, philosophy, art—everything's changing. It's very exciting to see.

BD: I noticed that recently in an article on artists working with books that most of us we're about a year or two apart in age- born in the mid 1970's. I thought that was poignant. We all had a childhood and school life with books as the only method for teaching and

learning, and then we graduated into a world with the proliferation of digital media. Books suddenly lost their primary role. Our growth and development as artists ran parallel to this shift in media and I think this cultural shift played a large role in how we see books.

I personally started working with books around 2001, and I had no idea that things would change with books and e-readers so quickly. I couldn't have imagined that in just a decade we would stop printing encyclopedias and stop using textbooks in many classrooms. The way we receive information is changing, as are the ways our attention spans are fed and trained through the constant information gratification of the iPhone, Facebook, and Twitter. Because of the digital age, we now see books in different ways, both as material objects and with an air of instant nostalgia about the way things used to be.

JP: You mention nostalgia. Do you consider bookwork an expression of nostalgia?

BD: I take something from the past, which was used in a particular way, and I alter it. This is not necessarily nostalgia. This type of art addresses that fact of material supply and surplus. In a physical sense, there is all this material that people aren't using anymore: books. We are not currently saturated with rare wood and slabs of marble, but people donate encyclopedias to me in bulk. Making art out of books is an act of recycling or upcycling. It becomes a recycling of the material and also of the content or ideas within. The latter, a conceptual recycling, is much more important. Art is always about derivation, but when it becomes so consciously illustrated, as in the type of work we do, that mode of cycling can be confused for nostalgia. But approaching this art from just a physical perspective, we see that have a surplus of relevant material from the recent past to work with. We also have many questions and concerns about the loss of information's physicality that we need to work through.

JP: If bookwork helps us to "work through" the loss of the book, then does it have a connection to melancholy? I think that it does, and I see bookishness as reflecting and even supporting the transition from a certain type of relationship to books (as reading devices) to new ways of keeping books around (as aesthetic or fetish objects) even if we aren't reading them. What do you see as the relationship between bookwork and the death of the book?

BD: The idea of death is always lingering in my work. I carve into books to make fragments—ruins and remnants are left over and become art. I also use material that we all acknowledge has died, or at least has become primarily functionless, especially the types of nonfiction books that I usually work with: textbooks, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. So there is some kind of mourning at play in my art, a kind of tribute to how this existing material served a recent past. Beyond melancholy and mourning, I think my work questions how fast we're moving by rediscovering and re-exposing the book in new contexts.

DB: The death of the book is very real for me. In my art, I am participating in writing the obituary for the book. But, why lament a dying technology? I don't have a melancholic

view of the book because I'm not particularly fond of a technology when it is limited. That being said, I love reading books with covers and physical pages. My frustration is with the linearity of the book and its constraints. I want the book to be like a computer, and I depict this desire in my art. I can cut and paste elements on the computer and also in my art. I can move pieces and parts around seamlessly, and I can create hyperlinks in the codex. Just consider my pieces entitled, "Fallen Borders," "Border Crossing: In the War Room," and "Dis/connecting the Reality of Old Glory" [Figures 1-1-3]. You can see many pages simultaneously and read through and across them in different ways.

When it comes down to it, the experience of being human is one of multimodality and synchronicity. We are conscious beings, capable of writing and talking simultaneously; we have different biological systems that all work together at the same time. The brain works in multidimensional ways, but the book does not. You can't integrate audio, video, or dreams into the codex. The book medium is not representative of what's possible in our life and in our contemporary times. We are moving from something familiar towards new uses for this medium, uses for which it was never intended. My art helps move us along this path.

JP: I, for one, feel better about moving along this path with you two as our guides. Ezra Pound, the poet and literary critic who preoccupied me in my first book, famously wrote, "Artists are the antennae of the race" (1934: 73). You are antennae, archivists, and analyzers of a culture moving away from reading books but one that is not ready to let them go. Your art helps us mourn our losses and appreciate an evolving relationship to books. I thank you both for that, and I also thank you for your insightful conversation.

Works Cited

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