

Book Marks

Greg Thomas poses the question of what is lost when we lose books, and finds answers in the work of artists and ‘parabibliographers’ who recast our relationship to the book as an embodied encounter that leaves traces on both the object and the individual.

Speaking in Olympia, Washington in 1986, the conceptual artist and artist’s-book theorist Ulises Carrión declared that ‘every book that now exists will eventually disappear ... I see here no reason for lamentation. Like any other living organism, books will grow, multiply, change colour, and, eventually, die.’

Paraphrasing his comments in her 2018 historical primer *The Book*, the poet and critic Amaranth Borsuk notes that Carrión ‘professes a perspective common today’. She points out the vulnerability of the codex ‘to both political and market forces. As ideologies shift, as data is updated, and as libraries become more cluttered, books are deaccessioned, sold, and in some cases thrown away.’

We don’t need to look far for evidence to support Borsuk’s claim – certainly not in the case of publicly funded libraries. She cites an example from 2013, when the Libraries of Fisheries and Oceans Canada

underwent a massive digitisation process before closing seven of its branches to reduce overheads. The digitisation process was never completed, however, and stores of ecological research from the 19th century onwards were sold, given away or dumped in landfill. In the UK, meanwhile, the assumption that digitisation is rendering physical library stock obsolete has given additional legitimacy to austerity-era budget slashing. Research published in 2019 revealed that 800 public libraries had closed since the ConDem coalition government came to power in 2010. By 2023, according to Isobel Hunter, the head of charity Libraries Connected, libraries across the UK have suffered a funding cut of almost 50% over the past 13 years, despite evidence of a tiny recovery during the early 2020s. When we lose libraries, we are losing books. More specifically, we are losing codices, collections of paper sheets joined at the spine, a durable medium which, during the medieval era, replaced the handwritten scroll as the preferred mode of written information transmission (though the term carries connotations of historical usage, I use it here to apply to any book in that format). With the codex we are also losing what literary theorist Craig Dworkin, in an extended blurb for Michael Hampton’s 2022 book *Against Decorum* (Books *AM459*), referred to as the codex’s power to act as a ‘chronograph’: to record or index the passage of time, and in particular the histories of its own usage. In this article I am focusing partly on the work of Hampton, a London-based writer (and *AM* contributor), theorist and self-described ‘assembleur’ interested in ideas of writing as code, collage and assemblage. I also explore the practices of Joe Devlin, a Manchester-based artist and rare materials librarian who explores and aestheticises administrative and archival processes, including how random data and traces of readers’ usage can accrete over time on collectively ‘owned’ texts. These are two artists deeply concerned with the idea of the book as chronograph, and the ways in which the book’s function as a recorder can manifest the embodied, sensory, religious, erotic and even violent nature of our relationships with these objects.

Hampton’s *Against Decorum* is a collage of quotations either describing book damage or recording what writers and artists have said about the aesthetics of that damage. The first part consists of a kind of strung-out conceptual poem, a series of compressed excerpts from used-book-dealers’ catalogues detailing the degradation of their wares by time or by previous owners. In the tradition of ‘uncreative’ and ‘conceptual’ writing as defined by the US poet Kenneth Goldsmith, the sequence also partakes in the tradition of Objectivism as exemplified by the work of Charles Reznikoff (1894–1976), a legal scholar who worked with heavily edited court records to compose long poems detailing grand subjects in spare language, notably the emergence of the modern US state in his 1965 book-length work *Testimony*. Gathered under the Reznikoff-esque title ‘Register’ (‘suggestive of the archivist’s office’, an artist’s note records), Hampton’s poem strings together examples of the highly suggestive, specialist verbiage often used to describe the condition of preloved printed matter. A typical section reads as follows (and is worth quoting in full, to give a sense of the almost liturgical quality established through the repetition of certain nouns and adjectives, marked out in square brackets): ‘Some page [embrown- ing]; [scuffed] at spine; marginal [pencilling]; backstrip slightly [worn] at foot; [offsetting] onto free endpapers;



hand embroidered Victorian ecclesiastical bookmark (collection of Michael Hampton)

slightly [faded]; rather [spotted]; dw [price-clipped]; mildly [faded]; some [rusting]; from staples; [inscribed] by the author on the half-title; upper joint a little [shaky]; early pages very [foxed]; several marginal [markings]... This, the third piece in a cycle of 12 comprising 'Register A' ('Register B' consists of a single work for live performance by two voices) is entitled 'Fragments of James Fergusson's catalogue *Every Printed Page is a Swinging Door: books from the library of David and Judy Gascoyne*, 2011'. The sequence finds its form through erasure, the hewing away of extraneous material to allow the defining features of the original body of text to emerge.

'Body' is a suitable metaphor. Indeed, to digress briefly from chronography, one of the remarkable features of the resulting verse is just how *embodied* the used book comes to seem. After all, we share a lexicon of adjectives to describe how humans and books are faring against the ravages of time and over-exertion. We too can become worn, faded, shaky – even spotted or, as some poems put it more bluntly, 'damaged'. A footnote of Hampton's refers to an oblique sense of 'melancholy' established through repeated encounters with such terms, a displaced empathy with the degraded bodiliness of the book. In other sections of Hampton's poem, by contrast, we sense a near erotics of book-use and book-sharing, the suggestion of bodies in friction. As the literary historian Adam Smyth points out in his introduction to the text, "there is a lot of "rubbing", particularly at the "extremities"". Then again, in terms like 'embrowning', the reader can sense a Joycean scatology, an association between linguistic and bodily excretion (as per Leopold Bloom on the toilet). Do words, too, foully stain the paper that catches them? At other points, books, like humans and other animals, literally catch parasites: fall victim to 'worming'.

We are finding our way back here to Dworkin's idea of the book as chronograph. It is through its bodily markings that the codex records the stories of its use. 'The body keeps the score', to appropriate the contemporary wellness manifesto. Indeed, Smyth points out that Hampton's poetics of dissection align with several emerging concerns in contemporary book-culture scholarship. One of these is of books having 'onward lives'. Compared with an older model of bibliography fixated on the moment of production, recently there has been a 'surge of interest in books *moving through time*; of books as social, even gregarious objects, passing between readers, circulating within communities, traveling to new lands, living on across generation[s]'.

Another idea Smyth raises is that of 'copy specificity': that notion that rather than discussing a book at the level of an edition ... we should think about each copy of a book as a distinct object, with its own quirks..., stop-press corrections, or over-inking..., marginal annotations... book plates... the bumps and stains and rubbings that Hampton gathers'. According to Smyth, Hampton's book also speaks to the 'shift from histories of reading, to histories of book use. What do we do with books? We might use the margins for scribbling rows

of financial accounts or shopping lists or (if we're a 17th-century Puritan) prayers..., we might use books as drinks coasters, or to keep a door ajar, or to hide behind in a public place'. Several recent works of literary criticism have explored these aspects of book culture in specific eras and places, such as Abigail Williams's *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-century Home*, 2017, and Leah Price's *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, 2012. *Against Decorum*, by contrast, presents a kind of abstracted litany or hymn of praise to the used book as such, removing much of the detail that would make us picture a specific book to generate an amalgam or composite image, a sense of distilled *book-ness*. In so doing, his work both laments and in some curious sense sanctifies the damage done to this *ur-book* or archetypal book. Scars almost come to seem evidence of an abiding strength or grace. This again draws parallels between the book and the human body, perhaps even a holy body: many religious texts were in the past treated as sanctified or magical personages. In any case, *Against Decorum* reminds us that, like the human body, the codex can travel through time and space and carries the marks of its journey with it. Like us, it is unique yet related to a mass of similar individuals. The book as body as chronograph.

The collective nature of the histories that books and printed matter record – their interaction with multiple owners and borrowers – comes more to the fore when considering the art of Joe Devlin. Based at Manchester University's John Rylands Library, Devlin works as a 'metadata assistant', cataloguing rare material including the Methodist and Maps collections. 'The kind of cataloguing involved', he tells me by email, 'includes adding information about provenance and annotations into specific fields. You build up an empirical understanding of an object by going into that level of detail. There's an obvious connection to the marginalia drawings there.' He adds that 'the materiality of the collections influence much of the work, the quality of old paper, doodles found on endpapers, dog ears and other discoveries, the stuff on the edges and in the margins'. Devlin's *Marginalia Drawings*, 2022, is a set of images made up of superimposed marginalia notes found in old library books. Published by the Malmö-based visual poetry press Timglaset in 2022, it is presented in an A4 booklet contained in a mottled greyish brown, portfolio-style cover, with publication details on a plain white sticker attached to the front. The look was 'chosen to evoke an archival file', Devlin tells me, 'of the kind I sometimes stumble across working in the Rylands ... These modest, unfussy covers often conceal real treasures'. Each marginalia drawing consists of a teeming diptych made up of overlaid fragments of handwriting. What we are looking at in each case is created by overlaying marginal notes to heavily used books, sourced in the Rylands and Devlin's other workplaces. The printed text is erased from each picture, which is built up through a meticulous process of copying and tracing onto watercolour paper, without

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an Adobe program in sight. Indeed, it's interesting to note the artist's bodily investment in the composition process, which pays homage to the physical relationship each reader has established with the text by leaving their mark on it, engaging with it not just as a visible reading surface but also as a tactile writing surface.

Devlin's compositional process often leaves two rough rectangular hollows on each wing of the page. These are the ghosts of recto and verso. Around and across these spaces is gathered a tangled mass of stems, bowls, tails, ascenders and descenders, crossbars, beaks, arms and shoulders. The bodiliness of typographic language aside, the quality of almost-legibility is curiously reminiscent of abstract expressionism. Cy Twombly's 'written pictures' spring to mind, or the fevered repetitive strokes of Mark Tobey's paintings. There is also a connection to the phenomenon of asemic writing: Henri Michaux *et al.* Combined with the sense of an evacuated central space, and the altar-piece connotations of the diptych, there is almost an ascetic spiritual implication, as if these illegible scrawls sought to evoke some unknowable absolute represented by the blank areas.

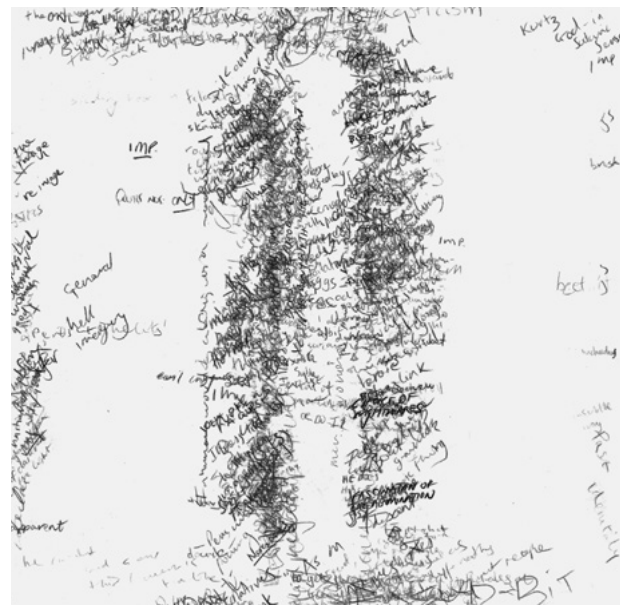
At the same time, words and phrases can sometimes be discerned. As Devlin points out, many of the marginalia drawings are composed from annotations found across single books, and the identity of those books 'can often be picked out from the overlaid text'. To the top-left of one image we read 'Kurtz God - in Satanic Sense', presumably a response to the anti-hero of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Another page bears the tags 'My name is Burroughs I am tragic', 'Edgar Rice Burroughs', 'Rich Bastard!', 'Mock Colonial', 'Please Beware, Dull Reading ahead' and 'shit'. There is a game of decoding to play with some of the pictures, as with some avant-garde poetry in the concrete or Lettrist tradition, a feeling that one might be able to crack the cipher, get to the source text, through meticulous scouring. Beyond their qualities as abstract painting and brain-teaser, however, the *Marginalia Drawings* appeal as chronographs of collective, spontaneously and unconsciously recorded thought, and coextensive physical gestures. They thus capture an arcane social history, compiled by a community of unwitting collaborators bound by their shared relationship with a single physical copy of this particular book. As the poet Derek Beaulieu puts it in his foreword to the text, '*Marginalia Drawings* gives space to the Greek Chorus of communal thought'.

If Devlin and Hampton's past projects have circled around the aesthetics of defacement, last year's collaborative text *Paleodrafts* brought that subject to the fore. A hand-bound colour-printed booklet, again in something approaching archival file-size, it contains zoomed-in images of scrawls, doodles, graffiti and other outrages against the person of the book. This found content is counterposed with a gnomic manifesto spread across the pages, a series of statements on the import of such gestures, what the writers call 'paleodrafts'. The authors connect them to ideas of excretion,

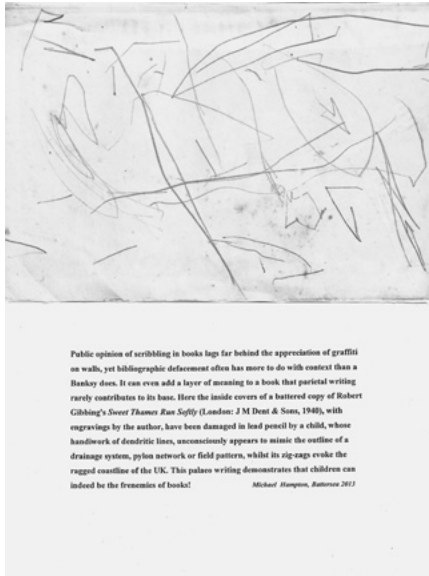
sexual congress, political subterfuge and more.

'The urge to deface is as strong and compulsive as the urge to defecate', announces one page, across from a marginal biro drawing of a landscape filled in with a blue and orange colour wash in sub-Blakean manner. Elsewhere, above the inked-out head of King Solomon, from the title page of a 17th-century religious tract, we read: 'Hypocrite lecteur gone rogue! A cigarette burn, a paper tear; adulteration', and below, 'an imaginary, masonic conversation, a throw down to authority'. *Marginalia Drawings* suggests a historical, documentary value to the reader-turned-writer's role. By contrast, *Paleodrafts* implies, amongst other things, a brutish violence to the act. That violence can be coded as both morally repugnant and politically insurrectionary, the latter idea relevant to the politics of literary poststructuralism: to Roland Barthes's assertion in 'The Death of The Author' that a text's meaning 'lies not in its origin but its destination'; that by co-opting the meaning of written texts foundational to our culture, we can co-opt the value systems of that culture itself. 'Adding value or offensive? Whatever your viewpoint the *paleodraft* begins at home, away from the prying eyes of parents or library police.' The May 1968 riots were awash with such thinking.

At the same time, there is a childish energy to these found interventions that Devlin and Hampton are also keen to capture. Literally childish in some cases: several of the scribbles are clearly the work of young hands, grasping crayons, felt-tips or coloured pencils. A reference to the 'art brut' nature of the paleodraft suggests a related interest in Jean Dubuffet's association of the child with an ideal, untutored creative instinct. The choice of images also favours a Dubuffet-esque crudeness of gesture, even where the anonymous artist might be an adult. On one page, a comically crass biro drawing of a bald, spectacled face appears below



Joe Devlin, *Marginalia Drawings*, 2022



Michael Hampton, *Dendritic drawing*, undated

the title words 'Fluid Flow for Chemical Engineer[ing]'. Is this abject offering that of a chemical engineer or of their offspring?

What *Paleodrafts* suggests is, in sum, a somatic, sensual (or at least sensory) dimension to our engagement with the printed text, whose baser side overlaps with a kind of taboo violence – again, this suggests a subconscious collective sense of the book as body or sanctified body. In all the texts explored, however, there is also a more nurturing side to the relationship implied between book and reader, a cathexis of the book as an object of emotional investment; its incorporation into the proprioceptive space of the reader such that it becomes almost an extension of the human body as well as an analogue to it. Adding these ideas to Smyth's regarding books becoming records of their own onward lives, as indices of varied human interactions, and as unique entities with features extending beyond those of run or edition, we might well ask again: what do we lose when we lose books?

There is not space to delve into ideas of the digital textual interface as itself one of sensory and embodied encounter but, for many of us, the physical book appears to remain unique in its capacity to afford such whole-body experiences. Certainly, recent sales figures for print books in the UK seem to confirm this. After dropping dramatically for two years in a row shortly after the advent of the e-reader (and the introduction of George Osborne's brutal austerity policies) from 344 million in 2011 to 184 million in 2013, numbers plateaued and have been rising slowly ever since, reaching 212 million during 2021, as Covid lockdown led to an increase in reading levels.

There are practical as well as psychological reasons not to embrace full digitisation. Of course, we are becoming familiar with newspaper exposés of the insecurity of physical storage systems in a state that has seen swingeing cuts to public arts funding. Earlier this year, a series of Freedom of Information requests found that hundreds of items were missing from museums in England, including a 155-year-old drawing of Queen Victoria, a navigational aircraft computer and a jaw fragment from a prehistoric reptile. What seems equally pertinent to debates around the future of archives, libraries and museums, however, is the insecurity of digital storage. This is a fact that has stoked fears ever since the dawn of the disembodied

data age, with the information theorist Terry Kuny coining the term 'digital dark ages' as far back as 1997, and there is plenty of evidence that we have already entered that era.

We have all encountered what is memorably called 'linkrot', when a URL leads to a dead end because the webpage has been removed, the servers have failed or been decommissioned, domain registration has lapsed or a myriad of other reasons. Digital media is also, unlike print media, subject to total inbuilt obsolescence, as file formats become obscure or inaccessible and data is marooned on old-fashioned physical media (as in floppy disks, mini-discs and, increasingly, CDs). There is also no strong ecological argument in favour of a shift to digital storage, which reduces use of certain physical resources such as paper but requires vast amounts of energy to power and cool mammoth server farms around the globe.

Still, it would be churlish to argue that the past three decades have not seen a general trend towards greater interaction with written text through digital interfaces and less through printed surfaces. The future of the codex is far from secure. In that recorded talk from 1986, echoing points made in his genre-defining 1975 statement 'The New Art of Making Books', Carrión presented the artist's book as the definitive creative expression of the dwindling lifespan of the book: 'books will ... die. At the moment, bookworks represent the final phase of this irrevocable process. Libraries, museums, archives are the perfect cemeteries for books'. In Borsuk's lucid glossing of Carrión's statement, 'bookworks take on greater importance when the codex itself seems to be imperilled ... As the material form of the codex threatens to disintegrate into the digital, works highly attuned to materiality give us a chance to think about and savour the physical artifact, precisely by asking us to reflect on the very immaterial "idea" of the book.'

We might note in passing artists whose works seem to dissect and display the innards of the book, as if they were raiding the very tombs of which Carrión speaks, among them Scott McCarney, whose *Hanging Index*, 1988, features the torn and ribboned pages of a book that flow downwards like a waterfall of viscera from a cover suspended face down from the ceiling, and Brian Dettmer, who creates complex, architectonic relief sculptures by scalpelting downwards into the surfaces of used books. Borsuk notes that as libraries have deaccessioned more and more physical stock since the early 2000s, the internet has become ever more awash with cheap second-hand books, facilitating an explosion in this subgenre of grave-robbing book art.

Devlin and Hampton are not book-artists in the sense evoked here, lacking the same interest in sculptural form or the final object as document of a physical intervention into the form of the book. Indeed, the publications considered in this article are all presented in the time-honoured, printed codex format. But, as in Borsuk's analysis, the great interest of their work undoubtedly reflects a sense that the future of the codex, and indeed of civic, public resources of all kinds, seems to hang in the balance. Perhaps Devlin and Hampton can be thought of instead as para-bibliographers, feverishly scouring the margins and neglected corners of printed matter for the esoteric data they contain, and the obscure and irreplaceable histories they unfold.

Greg Thomas is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.