

Colin Sackett: *Manifold* – Publishing 1984–2024

This generous selection of materials by Colin Sackett, mostly produced before he began the imprint Uniformbooks in 2011, offers myriad shortcuts and byways through several decades' worth of publishing and associated projects. Presented in landscape format, with something of the feel of a workbook or publisher's dummy, *Manifold* is, in a sense, a Sackett reader, except that the content tends more towards the diagrammatic or schematic than the pithy excerpts which that genre implies. Here, larger projects are rendered through collections of miniature page-spreads, marginal notes, sections of reset text, short retrospective essays – or quotations from longer essays – occasional larger images etc. Analogies of map-making and scale-modelling seem apt.

In spite of such subversions of the form, this assembly of works – also available freely page by page as individual PDFs on the Uniformbooks website – partly serves to introduce Sackett's style and ethos. On that note, as the author states in an opening excerpt from a 2015 essay, 'to publish [is] to have a preoccupation with the book itself: how it could be made, how it could be used, and how it could be read'. Indeed, Sackett has been frequently concerned with deconstructing the conventional idea of the book through the radical alteration of its expected visual and linguistic content, arrangement and sequencing. This often means working with existing texts, 'borrowed, or commandeered, for new usage. Edited piecemeal from sources such as geographical texts, modernist literature, radio transcripts; the book became a structure for fragments to be placed and read, by page, and then by the further diminishing unit of line and word and letter.'

What does this mean in practice? There are, for example, several books presented here that can be read from front to back or back to front, a separate text leading us in each direction. *singinging*, 1995, uses two versions of a list-poem abstracted from a bird-themed nature guide to this end, one piece reversing the line order of the other. In this and other cases, ideas of mirroring seem important. The second half of a book might be a near or exact mirror-image of the first (same words, images and so on, strung out in reverse), making the central page-break something like a line of symmetry (*BBBN* from 1998 is a case in point). Elsewhere, as in *Black Bob*, a 1989 publication of Sackett's from Coracle Press, repetition is the order of the day. In this case, the idea of the minimalist blank book is given an illustrative update by reprinting a single frame from a *Dandy* comic strip across an entire volume.

These and other disruptive exercises – which, to paraphrase Sackett, also take place at the diminishing levels of line, word and letter – carry metaphorical

baggage. We are not simply being shown modified textual apparatuses of various kinds but also being offered allusions and associations between reading books and other time-bound activities and technologies via the fresh focus brought to bear on the former activity. Connections are drawn, for example, between the spacing of words and the passage of rivulets through rock, or of dead crustacean fragments through a desert sea (*Chalk...*, 1995/2024); between the forward motion of the eyes across the page and a bike gently accelerating downhill (*Cycle*, 2002). There are books whose fanned pages are coded as the arms of a windmill (*[Dutch English English Dutch]*, 1998) or the waves of a radio signal (*Radio.*, 1992/93). The train journey seems a particularly apt motif, as far as Sackett is concerned, for the rhythm and dynamics of reading. This is the basis of *way*, 2004, which, like several other pieces, employs a timelapse effect, offering incremental snapshots of a landscape (in diagrammatic or linguistic form) passing before our eyes. In the space that emerges between and beyond these references is the atmosphere of a childhood spent in suburban England in the 1960s and 1970s. At times, this gives the content of *Manifold* something approaching an autobiographical tenderness, despite its affectless, post-conceptual modes.

Importantly, Sackett is not just concerned with how reading books is like other things, but also with how other things are like reading books. In particular, he is interested in the book-ness of the screen: the ways in which PDF formats, the scroll of a webpage and other aspects of digital interfaces might mirror, modulate or contrast with the proprioceptive relationship between human and codex. Thus, some of the most intriguing material presented in this book was created from the 2000s onwards, when Sackett began to engage more concertedly with such ideas. The visual essay 'The Simple Reader', 2007, serves as a useful route in, while pieces such as *Boundary*, 2009, show the author working through the points of contrast and comparison between analogue and digital literacy. *Manifold* is a treasure trove of the art of the printed page that tracks a crucial period when its centuries-old hold on text transmission has been loosened, freeing perhaps both the word and the codex.

Colin Sackett, *Manifold*, Uniform Books, 2025, 192pp, perfect bound with corrugated sleeve, limited edition of 100 copies, £48, 978 1 910010 37 2. The book is also downloadable for free at colinsackett.co.uk.

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