

"The Case for Failure in Artists' Bookworks"

This talk will be about a particular approach to artists' book making. While it might appear to exclude other approaches, my intention is to be inclusive rather than exclusive. First of all, I didn't study art in Australia but in Canada at the Ontario College of Art. My work is in the European and North American conceptual tradition, rather than in a craft and printmaking tradition that seems stronger in Australia and which has its own merits.

Artists' bookmaking conjures for me more questions than answers. For my purposes I would say that the artists' book (and indeed the book) as a form, is relative. That is, relative to its context and relative to the prevailing technologies of its time. Who knows what shapes and forms it might take in the future. I like to use the term 'bookworks' which in itself is inclusive and ambiguous enough to keep me happy.

I would like to adjust the title of this talk to be about '... strategic failure.' By that I mean, some works might deliberately present themselves as "failed" in order to make an unexpected point. It sounds like a riddle, so I hope that what follows will make the idea clear.

Several years ago I wanted to make a bookwork that engaged with ideas of inequality and privilege. As a starting point, I worked with the particular cliché that equates light with reason and ignorance with darkness. I required the work to reverse this. After a series of drawings of possible structures, the piece eventually took on a form in which the reader encounters a book that has pages embossed with Braille. It is a false book made of polyester resin constructed in such a way that it contains electronic devices controlled by the movement of the fingers of the reader across photosensitive cells embedded in the surface of the page. With this action, light is blocked. This causes switches to be activated. Each release sounds from a sound storage system visible in a clear acrylic cavity beneath the book. All that is needed is a very light touch to activate the fragments of sound that come from speakers located above and around the reader.[i] As the sighted reader runs her fingers across the Braille text and encounters the photosensitive cells, she can only guess at the possibilities of meaning within the text, while the unsighted reader, if she knows how to read Braille, is privileged.[ii] In fact it is the creation of shadows that produces the sound. Darkness and shadow contain knowledge and reason after all.

The writer of the Braille text, Anna Gibbs, extended the metaphorical content of the work and advanced more deeply into ideas of the sensuous nature of reading. She wrote in the catalogue essay, "And even if intelligent fingers can unlock Braille, can translate the works, language still escapes at unforeseen tangents. Makes its own lines of flight through an atmosphere charged with potential encounters. Out of such collisions, new trajectories are created: meaning is not fixed in language, but comes and goes in it like forked lightning in a dark sky; making connections, transmitting a current, never striking in the same place twice..."[iii]

It is implicit in the work that most readers will fail in their attempts to access the meaning. As the artist, I am held in parentheses – a state of anticipation as I wait for a Braille reader to complete the work. It might not happen. Once again, when a reader fails to access the text, the moment of failure and exclusion makes sense of the book. It forces the sighted reader to acknowledge the relativity of her own position and it forces reflection on the privilege she can usually take for granted.

The strategy of failure isn't new to visual art. Especially not to artists' bookworks given their history within the appropriative practices of contemporary art. The altered books made by the Canadian artist Daniel Olsen challenge the authority of history. He has re-titled H.G. Wells The Outline of History as The Outline of History: a Reconstituted Index by Daniel Olson of the Plain History of Life and Mankind By H.G.Wells. It is a large volume with 1,288 pages. To begin with, Olson has re-configured the Scheme of Contents.

He has omitted the text. This omission is highlighted by the lines of dots that connect the blank space of the absent headings to the page numbers. The book proper begins with the Introduction and the sub-heading - World War 1. On the following pages, Olsen has listed the points that he has regarded as the most significant, leaving out the rest.

As the book goes on, the skeletonised text communicates something of a perception of history. It begins to read as a history of Imperialism and Empire in which the richness and significance of the everyday or ordinary lives is completely subsumed. (The Plain History of Life and Mankind is a misnomer!) It tells a not surprising story of power and exploitation within a history of officialdom. Olsen has worked with that which has been "given" on each page. At first glance it is the result of a depersonalised, even pragmatic approach. On page 692 (a page selected at random) is the following:

The artist has carefully reproduced the dust jacket of the book complete with its marks of wear and tear and its dog-eared corners and the original blue cloth cover beneath. This completes the ironic setting up of the book as an example of authenticity and indisputable authority. As I glance across my desk, of all those standing on it, this book is the broadest in dimension and the most dignified in appearance. It claims a certain grace. The printed name H.G. Wells at the top of the spine is partly obscured by the wear and tear of the original dust jacket. Cheekily, the name of the artist David Olsen, near the bottom of the spine is signed in clear black ink. The forward slant of the signature with a casual negligence for the difference between letter-shapes and a mischievously floating dot-that-has-become-a-dash above the letter "i", suggests Olsen's confidence in his hi-jacking of this icon of history and scholarship. Books of course are vehicles for the construction of history. It is an unstable task given the acknowledged fallibility of human memory, the fictive nature of what is remembered and the vested cultural and economic interests of its scribes. Olsen's book is predicated on the idea of failure. A conventional book has been appropriated from its customary usage in order to reflect upon history's own malfunction.

As an example of another approach to "failure" (as we are engaged with it here) imagine a fugitive who is hunted either for the pleasure or like a rogue elephant, is considered to be a danger to society. Imagine the desperation of this escapee and apply this image as you open the book. It is a large and heavy. The cover is bound in fox hide and the title The Fugitive is impressed into the cover. Note that the imprimatur is The Garden Path Press. Perhaps something uneasy is about to take place. There may be some trickery afoot. The corners of the pages are worn and discoloured by many readers who have left the evidence of grease from their fingers. Some of the heavy soft textured pages are discoloured and musty. There are spots of mould. In conservation terms this is called "foxing". You note that the text begins with a single phrase, an incomplete sentence that leads you to turn the page. The next word turns up in an odd place and you shift your gaze about the page in order to find it and quickly move to the next page. Your eyes dart about to see where the text will next present itself. Will it emerge from the centre of the fold? Will it dart across to the next page and squeeze itself into the crack where the pages meet? Is it possible that the text is evading you? Some of these pages are blank but the visibility is good enough to see that the text is further on in the book. At this moment you might realise that you are in pursuit of the text. The reader is a predator, you have set your oily dogs on some of the page corners, you have cracked the spine. No matter how careful you have been you have torn at least one of the more delicate pages. In effect, you have contributed to the book's destruction. You are implicated. You are the member of a virtual lynch mob. At some moment the text will remind you of this. The fugitive is the anti-hero of negative space. It is an unresolved narrative. You can almost hear the laughter of the fugitive as she disappears through the nether pages of the book.

In another way, you have become one with the text. In your effort to catch up with it, you are now familiar with its tactics and you, the most perceptive of readers, realise that the position of the hunter and the hunted is interchangeable. The text that was once in front of you is now behind you. You are presented with your own "other face" that occupies negative space. You too are an ambiguous construction. You have experienced a movement from outside to in and inside to out and when you turn again it is no longer possible to separate the two conditions. There are no "two conditions". There is only complicity and the endless effort involved to track the changes, to modify the stance that you wish to take within society and culture.

When I decided to work with the genre of the artists' book and book works, I was attracted by the fact that it did not belong to the main stream of the art establishment. It appeared to retain a certain freedom of decision and action. It could come and go as it pleased and yet bring with it particular knowledges such as the formal constraints of painting and sculpture in terms of such things as composition, perspective, shape, form, materials, space, kinetics, etc. These could be deployed to develop a hybrid form that in retaining a sense of "bookness", could be valued as a loaded metaphor for mobile knowledges that cross borders, that dip in and out of the market place, that ferret in the garbage of rejected ideas and make things emerge from it with freshness and vitality. I also saw it as a form that might, in its reflexiveness and adaptability resonate with contemporary cultural conditions. For the book is a relative form. Any attempt to contain it by a conclusive definition must fall away. The book is what it is according to its particular context and time whether it is in the hands of a poet, a painter, a storyteller, a letterpress perfectionist, a medievalist, a scholar of the antiquities, an accountant, a blogger, an electronic information specialist or a pig farmer. This ability to escape definition - this "failure", is the essence of the Book's capacity to survive. A book is a foxy thing.

The "fox" is the one that has remained in the margins, the outsider who conversely and perversely enjoys "the privilege of partial perspective".[iv] In other words, it occupies a space outside the universal framework of any objective perspective - what I call negative space. At the same time, it is a subject aware of its own fragmentation; of it's belonging to more than one "world" and consequently a curious point of view. By being on the outside it has a knowing perspective that Donna Haraway describes as "situated" knowledge. It is a knowledge that acknowledges its own partiality and its own grounding in a particular set of practices.

Has this discussion drifted away from the idea of a strategy of "failure"? I will attempt an answer by describing another book for which I search on my bookshelf. As I gaze along the spines of the books, I have a moment of concern. The book is small - more or less indistinguishable from the rest. It keeps a low profile. The spine is black with a few white specks scattered down its length. They are the traces of the title and author's name - I presume. The cover is white and there are a few specks of black where the title should be. A little lower down, there is a row of what looks like typographical fragments where I would expect to find the author's name. I cannot for the life of me make out the words. I turn the book over and the back cover is blank except for what I assume is the obliterated name of the original author and four marks that I think were once the year of publication. Right next to it is the name and date, R. Wakkary 1995.

In an attempt to wring some meaning from my "reading" I open it. Apart from the pencilled amount that I paid for the book and a retailer's code number, the first page has only a series of variously shaped spots that run down close to the edge. They look a little like punctuation marks. I turn the page and down the left hand side are similar marks. On the next page there's that enigmatic title again. I wonder if the original (if there was one and now I have my doubts) was in English. The name "Wakkary" suggests that it might not have been. It might not even be in code. How misleading.

On the next page there are enough letter fragments left to see the shape of the block that typesetting makes on a page. I assume that there would have been a table of contents but this page is very much organised in the same style as all of the following pages.

A trace of the page number is centred at the top. A single line at the bottom of each page is like the title. This placement gives me a clue and I now think that the book was in a script other than a Western one and that the book was originally read from the back towards the front. The lines were read horizontally but from right to left. Now, I am in hot pursuit. I see that each line has a surfeit of diagonal marks. I can't imagine that traces of a European language would have so many. Am guilty of exoticising the unfamiliar?

I wonder if the book did have an original text that has been photocopied so many times that a process of elimination over many generations of the copying process have left only these remains - like flotsam and jetsam in a field of zilch. I feel exhausted and my head is fuzzy. I have been duped. The signifiers float mercilessly. This book by posing in the form a conventional book has failed the expectations of this reader. At the same time I can't completely put it aside because perversely, it has surprised me with its "nothingness" that paradoxically contains a perception of the essence of a book. This fugitive text has turned the tables on me. In its failure it has indicated something important about a reader and the process of engagement with a book. The thing that this book suggests is that we really only know a fraction of the inferences of the text (dare I say any text) and that knowledge like memory is unstable. It seems to me that after the experience of "reading" R. Wakkary's book that at least one strategy of failure in the book arts, is to shake the reader's perceptions, to put her in the position of not knowing and knowing that she doesn't know – a situation a person might try usually to avoid. This is made palatable by the use of humour or wry wit. But then it would be well to remember that humour is of itself anarchic. Its intention is to disrupt the usual order of things. It toys with a semblance of rationality while positing a breakdown or a failure of logic, in order to cast light on a subject, to bring something out of the shadows.

At this point, to my delight (that is paradoxically tinged with disappointment) I have discovered the whole name of the artist and the content of this otherwise aphasic book. I am delighted because a mystery has been cleared up and I am privy to a higher level of knowledge. I am disappointed because I have found considerable pleasure in the book's failure and a kind of eloquence in its muteness. I am afraid that it will lose its poetic intensity. But there is no need to be concerned because I soon find out that nothing is lost. The first thing I notice is that Wakkary's first name is Ron or Ronald! I am shocked by its ordinary Englishness and the exotic implications of the "text" fall away in an instant. But the coupling of the plain name Ron with the more "foreign" name Wakkary still maintains a minor dissonance. The next thing I see is that the marks on the page are composed from an actual font that has been designed by Wakkary. The name of the font is "Alphabet". The book is after all, decipherable. The greatest shock of all comes when I see that Wakkary has hijacked an existing book. He has completely transcribed, in his font, Gustave Flaubert's Dictionary of Received Ideas.

[v] All of my readings were as far as I can tell, wrong. Accompanying my apparent failure is a feeling of success. I find that after this experience I feel more alive and I want to go on and find Flaubert's original book.

Now, I am drawn to the thought that "failure" is ambiguous. When it is strategic it is deliberately so. Books that fall into this category employ tactics that will take the book to its limit, that is the point at which it appears to be dysfunctional. For example, what kind of treacherous object is *The Fugitive*? With its leather binding and carefully selected papers it poses as a book which is meant to remain in a good state for a century or more. But then its conceptual significance lies in the fact that the reader is destroying the book – slowly but surely. Like many artists' books, it defies the conventions of collection.

Ulises Carrión wrote that artists' bookworks have failed to be comfortably accommodated by institutions – galleries, libraries and museums. He put it this way, "One book may be too small, another too fragile, another too expensive or even too cheap, another may be too hard to find, or too poorly bound, or it may have a text in an unknown language. Another book could be suspected of pornography or nonsense, or could be badly printed, or maybe the artist stinks." [vi]

As difficult as a bookwork might be to exhibit, the diversity of book production, the depth and range of creation has taken the genre beyond the point of containment by the conventions of aesthetics and "institutionalisation". If the book and the artist "fail" in conventional terms they may well be very "successful" within the realm of cultural production. Within the strategy of failure several tactics have emerged. Paradoxically, if when a work "succeeds" this might well be a "failure" and when it "fails" that might be its "success". Herein lies a key to the relativity of the book form and artists' bookworks.

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[i] One of the designers of the electronic circuitry of *The Braille Book* (Mike Worthington) found that in his choice of LDRs (Light Dependent Resistors) as the sensing elements, that initially, enough light could transit through the skin at the fingertips to prevent the covering of the sensor to be completely dark. As he said, "This made the setting of the circuit sensitivity and the ambient lighting more critical than expected". [ii] A very small percentage of unsighted people can read Braille. It is also read by a few sighted readers such as librarians.

[iii] Anna Gibbs in a Catalogue essay for the exhibition of *The Braille Book* at the Geraldton Regional Art Gallery in 1996. Currently the Scitech Discovery Centre owns the artwork. The curator was Paul Thompson. The book has also been shown at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as well as some regional galleries in Western Australia.

[iv] Haraway, D. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3).

[v] When I searched the web after my somewhat strange (estranging) reading of his book, I discovered that Ron Wakkary is an Associate Professor in the School of Interactive Arts at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He has a QuickTime site in which he has a version of his *Alphabet*. <http://ubu.clc.wvu.edu/contemp/wakkary.html>

[vi] *Ibid.* P.193