"THE UNIQUE APPARITION OF A DISTANCE": AURA IN JULIE CHEN AND ELIZABETH McDEVITT'S *OCTOPUS*

By Michelle Strizever

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SEEMINGLY IDENTICAL MULTIPLES and the unique object is an important dynamic of the artist's book.[1] In the 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin differentiates between the unique, auratic work of art and the technologically reproduced work of art.[2] Ostensibly, the unique bookwork and the democratic multiple fit into these categories. However, limited-edition contemporary artists' books, particularly ones that incorporate handmade or sculptural elements, complicate the binary of unique and mechanically reproduced. Benjamin associates the auratic work of art with ritual and religion. The ritualistic use and singular location of the unique work of art perpetuate distance between the work and its viewer. On the other hand, the technologies of reproduction developed over the last two hundred years, including photography, allow the work of art to become more accessible. Technological reproduction, Benjamin argues, creates the conditions for art to become political.

Benjamin's distinction between the auratic and the mechanically reproduced work of art is complicated by the book. Betty Bright writes that despite book artists' invocation of

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1 *A version of this paper was presented at the College Book Art Association Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, Jan. 13-16, 2011.*

2 *Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," in* The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, *ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 19-55.*

the aura since the 1960s, "it is questionable . . . whether Benjamin would have extended his argument to include books at all, at least those books in his own collection."[3] For Benjamin, technologies of reproduction allowed art to free itself from the constraints of place and to become a political tool able to reach a large audience. However, writing about his own books in "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin takes pleasure in their rare and object-like status. He, like other collectors, does not read the majority of the books in his library, and at one time had read none of them. Unread, they exist as objects rather than books. Benjamin values each book for its unique history and acquisition story. He writes, "the period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object."[4] Benjamin's language is that of the aura: the book casts a magical spell over the collector.

Benjamin does not think of his books as multiples, but as individual objects with a history and material existence. Although he sees the text as multiple, he sees the copy as singular: the book is simultaneously multiple and unique. The book is a special case, more complicated than a photograph or a reproduced painting, since it may simultaneously be unique, multiple, object, and text. A book is the sum of a text (with or without images, or perhaps images without text) and a binding. In the artist's book, the content, printing and binding are conceptualized as a whole and often created by a single artist. Most artists' books fall somewhere between the idealized poles of democratic/technologically reproduced and sculptural/auratic object. Some projects, like Tom Phillips's *Humument*, span the spectrum with different editions, costs and availability. Crafts such as letterpress printing and lithography particularly create problems for Benjamin's conception of the aura. Letterpress-printed books incorporate the physical work and touch of the artist/printer more than computer-designed and printed books. The revival of interest in and experimentation with letterpress printing of the past two decades suggests that artists are returning to letterpress as a craft, rather than a mode of reproduction. In comparison with the computer, letterpress might seem like a more auratic means of production. However, the technology of the letterpress is one that Benjamin would have recognized as a tool of mechanical reproduction. Even a technology, like letterpress, may be seen as auratic when it

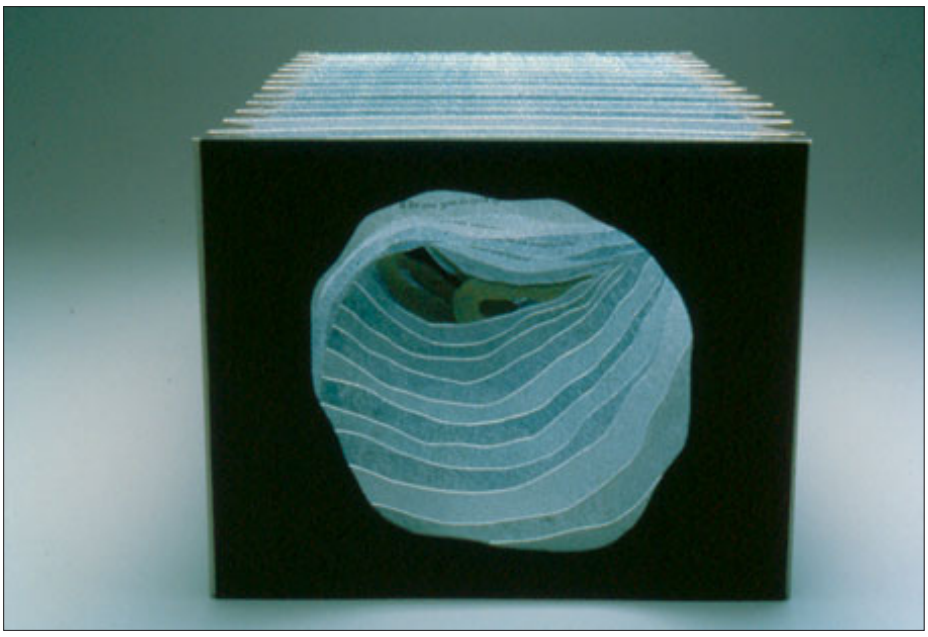

Fig. 1. Julie Chen and Elizabeth McDevitt, Octopus. *The tunnel book form. Source: www.flyingfishpress.com.*

3 *Betty Bright*, No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America, 1960-1980 *(New York: Granary Books, 2005), 113.*

4 *Walter Benjamin*, "*Unpacking My Library*," *in* Illuminations, *ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 60.*

seems to verge on obsolescence.[5] In the artist's book, and more generally in all books, the status of an object as auratic or not may shift with historical context. Object-like sculptural bookworks may have an aura but simultaneously be multiple, rather than unique, books.

THE AURATIC BOOK/OBJECT

The auratic potential of multiples and limited-editions is exemplified by the work of Julie Chen. Wavering between books and objects, the works produced by her press, Flying Fish, combine non-traditional structures, die-cut pages, colorful letterpress printing, and poetry in a distinct style. Flying Fish books can cost up to three thousand dollars, and edition sizes range from ten to one hundred fifty copies. The experience of reading a Flying Fish book is a carefully orchestrated and surprising interaction with an unfamiliar structure in which binding and visual appearance dominate the experience of reading.

Chen and Elizabeth McDevitt collaborated on *Octopus*, a 1992 work produced by Flying Fish Press. McDevitt created a unique version of *Octopus* in 1988, when she and Chen were graduate students in the book art program at Mills College. They revisited the book four years later, creating the Flying Fish Press version in an edition of one hundred.[6] *Octopus* is a tunnel book, a form in which a three-dimensional scene is created by progressively smaller holes die-cut in each page (Fig. 1). Both sides have an accordion binding, which extends the book thirty inches deep. Although there are fourteen pages, it is impossible to turn them since the book is bound on both sides. Instead, the die-cut pages form a single image that the reader sees by peering through the front. When first removed from its clamshell enclosure, *Octopus* is large but its dimensions are similar to those of a large codex. The interior is an underwater scene that utilizes the book's depth. The pages are varying shades of blue, with a grainy texture produced through collography. At the back of the book, the orange-green tentacles of an octopus lurk behind the wavy text of a poem.

The play of visibility and invisibility, both of language and of what it signifies, comes across in the book's textual content as well as its form. Octopus consists of fourteen pages, one line of a short poem by McDevitt on every other page. In the poem, the speaker demands that another recognize the hypocrisy of his or her language:

> Who are you to talk of
> "rigorous intellectual honesty"
> you who use ink as an octopus does
> also tentacled and beaked
> you for whom words are a decoy and a disguise
> a blue cloud in which I flounder
> not finding you?

The poem speaks of disguise, particularly the disguise that language and writing provide. The book's form physically hides the text, while the poem's language simultaneously

5 *See Jacques Derrida's argument about the current and future "resacrilization" of the book in "The Book to Come," in* Paper Machine, *trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 4-18.*

6 *Julie Chen, Interview with Cathy Courtney in* Speaking of Book Art: Interviews with British and American Book Artists *(Los Altos Hills, CA: Anderson-Lovelace, 1999), 218.*

Fig. 2. Julie Chen and Elizabeth McDevitt, Octopus. Octopus *in its flat form.*

conceals and reveals. As Chen has written, though *Octopus* is about a failing relationship, it is also about the failure of language to communicate.[7] The poem's subject, despite professing honesty, "use[s] ink as an octopus does." Ink allows the octopus to flee from predators by obscuring itself. The poem's subject also uses ink as a defense mechanism: ink metonymously signifies writing, connecting the octopus with the writer. The subject writes, but instead of demonstrating "rigorous intellectual honesty," the writing becomes "a decoy and a disguise." Language, which promises to represent clearly, is only artifice. The relationship between the subject and the speaker is like that between the signifier and the signified, between a word and its meaning. The signifier represents the signified, but that representation is indirect. Language can never transparently signify meaning. Its material nature stands in the way of direct representation. Like the signifier, the octopus-like subject can conceal and betray the signified. In *Octopus*, language comes between the speaker and the subject. Instead of transparently facilitating communication, it becomes opaque, like the inky cloud of the octopus. The poem's speaker ends up trapped in the blue cloud of words written by the subject. The octopus-like subject uses language to snare the speaker, who in turn uses the language of the poem to expose the subject. Language functions as "a decoy and a disguise," both in the subject's writing and in the poem. The subject even hides within the poem: the use of second person masks the subject's identity. "You" could be anyone—man or woman, singular or plural.

In a close reading of *Octopus*, Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert see the dynamic between speaker and subject as obviously gendered, envisioning the speaker as a woman and the subject "as the gentleman—perhaps her husband—whom she attempts to perceive and locate."[8] Although Hubert and Hubert note that both the poem's speaker and subject are indefinable, they proceed to define the unspoken genders of the characters, and in doing so, assume that the poem is about a heterosexual romantic relationship. In their reading, the speaker is a woman upset with the way her "gentleman" acts and speaks to her. The poem, they write, sets up and subsequently dismisses a stereotype of man as logical and intellectual and woman as emotional and irrational. Despite their assumptions, *Octopus* does not identify the gender of either character. Chen's books often employ the second person, which can make them seem falsely autobiographical: "The 'you' that appears changes with each book and does not necessarily represent anyone in my life….The intimate voice, the first-person narration that appears in many of my books, is sometimes confused with my personal voice, but this is not generally the case," Chen explains.[9] Hubert and Hubert's gendered analysis of *Octopus* is one of many possible readings. This

Fig. 3. Julie Chen and Elizabeth McDevitt, Octopus. Octopus *in its extended form.*

7 *Julie Chen, Artist's Statement in* The Book as Art: Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts, *ed. Krystyna Wasserman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 28.*

8 *Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert,* The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books *(New York: Granary Books, 1999), 114.*

9 *Chen, Speaking, 213.*

could also be the story of a reader and an author, an artist and a critic, or a signified and signifier.

The deceitfulness of language is both depicted and enacted by the poem. While McDevitt's text describes an octopus-like subject who employs language deceptively, the poem itself obscures and manipulates with words. Just as the use of the second person reflects the masked identity of the subject, the speaker's use of first person also conceals. According to the poem, the subject pretends to be honest and clear but actually uses language deceitfully. In this scenario, the speaker is a victim of the subject's hypocrisy and language's opacity. However, a closer look at the language of the poem calls the speaker's trustworthiness into question. Language is a cloud of ink in which the speaker "flounders." This verb stands out among the octopus-related metaphors. While the subject acts like the octopus, the speaker becomes associated with the flounder through the use of the verb form. The thrashing motion described by the verb "flounder" comes from the erratic motion of the fish. Although floundering is a violent, defensive movement, which certainly describes the speaker's reaction to the subject, the flounder is also notable for its camouflage, using its flat body to blend into the ocean floor. In the poem, the association of the narrator with the flounder and with floundering creates an unspoken duality: the narrator is both hidden and bare, both camouflaged and violently exposed. The speaker complains that the octopus hides behind the ink of words, but the flounder hides as well. If the subject's hypocrisy is the use of misleading language, perhaps the speaker is also guilty. The instability of the signifier (the word "flounder"), exposes the speaker's camouflage. After all, the speaker uses language to expose the failure of language.

Like the text, the form of *Octopus* disguises and reveals. The entire poem has been letter-press printed on each page with text, but because of overlapping die-cut openings, only one line is visible per page. Peering through the open top, it is possible to see that page thirteen contains the entire poem, although it is unreadable this way. The tunnel book can be transformed from a nearly flat surface to a deep dioramic space by extending the accordion sides. The form manipulates the space of the book, compressing it onto the plane of the page and then expanding it through the book's depth. When *Octopus* is flattened, its content is compressed into the space of a single page (Fig. 2). All of the text is visible, and readable, at once. Fully extended, it becomes three-dimensional. The content is spread out and seen at intervals within space (Fig. 3). There is no more textual or visual content than there was when the book was compressed, yet the depth of the tunnel form changes the book's relationship with the reader. The tunnel book is essentially a single page transformed by depth. The text, which was entirely readable when flattened, is spread out and becomes progressively more difficult to see. Overhead light, falling onto the blue pages, creates the effect of peering into deep water: the light catches the nearest pages, but the ones toward the back are murky and atmospheric. As a result, it is difficult to read the entire poem. The final line is nearly swallowed by shadow, and it seems as if the octopus's tentacles are possessively blocking the text from view. The book visually illustrates the poem: at the back of the book the octopus lurks, using language as a screen that ultimately fails and exposes it.

The form of the book reflects the content: the murky depths of the tunnel book hide part of the text, while the poem speaks of language as deception. In the poem, language undermines the speaker's indignation. The denoted and the connoted meanings of the poem

diverge. The complicated dynamics between the speaker and the subject are expressed through the connotations of language. With "flounder," for example, the signification exceeds and even betrays the primary meaning of the signifier. The textual split between denoted and connoted meanings is reflected by the structure of the tunnel book. When *Octopus* is first removed from its clamshell enclosure, the flat picture plane shows the entire poem. Once the book is extended and given a sculpture-like depth, the text becomes darker, deeper and less distinct. As it moves from two dimensions to three, simultaneously becoming more difficult to read, language seems to become more opaque. The apparent textual accessibility of the poem in the book's flat configuration is belied by its visual inaccessibility when the book is extended. The tunnel form demonstrates the irony of the work: the text that first seems transparent is exposed as having camouflaged depths.

As well as adding depth to the page, the shift from compressed to expanded form changes the reader's physical relationship with the book. A conventional codex is experienced one spread at a time, whether it is read in a linear or nonlinear manner. Although tunnel books consist of several pages, they are not seen in sequence, the way a codex is read. Instead, the entire content is presented on a single plane, which is then broken up by depth. While the form of the codex adds the element of time to a text, the tunnel book adds spatial depth. When compressed, *Octopus* can be handled like a conventional codex. It can sit flat against a table and the reader can easily pick it up to move it. However, *Octopus* rejects the physical intimacy of reading that the codex encourages. While Benjamin finds intimacy in possession, Buzz Spector focuses on the intimacy of reading. Spector points out that the codex is typically positioned against the body, on the reader's lap or chest: "Most of us read lying down or seated and most of us read at least partially unclothed," he writes. "We dress up to go out and look at art; undressed, in bed, we read. We seek greater comfort while reading than the furnishings of museums or concert halls will ever grant us."[10] Spector's intimacy comes from the open book, while Benjamin's books stay closed. Even when *Octopus* is first removed from its clamshell box, still flattened, it is unlikely that the reader will handle it like a codex. The tunnel book form does not give the reader the same sense of intimacy that Spector finds in the open book. Instead, the tunnel form creates distance, both in the way the reader handles it and in its own mechanics.

Rather than encouraging familiarity, *Octopus* inspires reverence. Due to its high cost and small edition size, the reader is likely to encounter it in a library or an exhibit, rather than own it. The structure and delicacy of Chen's works create a different atmosphere for the reader than other, more traditionally bound artists' books, even ones of comparable value. Her books require the participation of the reader because many contain moveable parts, but their apparent fragility makes the experience of reading almost intimidating. Chen's books are the only contemporary books I have encountered that librarians have opened for me, as if the act of normal reading would damage the book. Once *Octopus* is extended, the reader must change position. If the book is on a table, the reader must crouch on the floor to view the content. This posture shows the book's dominance over the body: *Octopus* requires the reader to bow down to it, like the religious, auratic art that Benjamin describes. Both the value and the structure of the book create an attitude of reverence. Tunnel books like *Octopus* are often displayed in a high case or on a shelf. The book may then be on

10 Buzz Spector, "The Fetishism of the Book Object," in The Book Maker's Desire: Writings on the Art of the Book *(Pasadena: Umbrella Editions, 1995), 16.*

eye-level, but the case multiplies the distance between book and reader and transforms the book into a static, untouchable object. Although any book can function as an object when it is not read, as in Benjamin's library, the book object is a different category. The sculptural book object resembles, but does not function as, a book.

Spector identifies the most important feature of the book object as its unique status. The conventional book is characterized by its multiplicity—the belief that every copy of a book contains the same text and layout. The concept of the exact copy is idealized: from edition to edition, texts change. Printing mistakes can occur, and pirated editions may contain different text. Individual books bear the traces of past owners, as well as occasional mistakes in production. Two identical copies of a text may be housed in different bindings, which could alter the signification and function of the book. Nonetheless, an important attribute of the multiple is the idea that every copy is the same. "Multiplicity is the very nature of the book," Spector writes. The book is "the theater of language," and the event of reading is "the textual performances of a book . . . enacted over and over again." In the theater, audience members see the same play although each has a slightly different vantage point. Spector finds the collectivity of the theater audience in the multiple copies of a book. Although each reading takes place in a different environment, the book seems to enact the same performance for each reader. The unique book object is not theater, but art: as Spector writes, "it is precisely the 'uniqueness' of the book object that redefines it in terms of art."[11] The book object is similar to Benjamin's auratic work of art: it is located in only one place and inspires a sense of distance and, perhaps, reverence in the viewer. The shared experience of the theater of the multiple is unlike the private viewing of the book object. The text of the multiple seems to exist outside of its form, although textual scholars like Jerome McGann have argued that text is actually dependent on its material form.[12] However, the power of the multiple is in its promise of shared text. The unique existence of the book object means that its text, if it has one, does not exist outside of its material support. When the unique book object contains text, that text is inseparable from the book form.

Between the shared content of the multiple and the unique existence of the book object is the limited edition. Many artists' books could be characterized as limited editions. The individual copies in a limited edition can be difficult to access, depending on the edition size and availability. Although there may be several copies of an artist's book in existence, the nature of the small edition limits accessibility. Spector's description of the multiple as a theater of language is based on the assumption that the physical book is widely available. Since the copies of a limited edition are not readily available and are often found in private collections or clustered in a few library collections, its content is not shared like the ideal of the multiple. In this sense, the limited edition is closer to the unique book than the multiple.

Although *Octopus* is not a unique work, it seems to create an auratic atmosphere. The combined effect of its value, rarity, sculptural quality and the awkward, bowed position of the reader is the production of an aura. As the reader bows or kneels, *Octopus* occupies an unusual position of power. The reverence manifested in this gesture is a key part of

11 Spector, "Fetishism," 15.

12 See Jerome McGann, The Textual Condition *(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).*

the book's auratic quality. In describing the aura, Johanna Drucker writes that "it is as though [auratic books] have been imbued with a power which animates them beyond their material limits generating a metaphysically charged atmosphere which surrounds the work."[13] Her description appears to situate the auratic quality within, or rather around, the book or object, as if an aura is inherent to certain works. However, it is possible to imagine the aura as an atmosphere produced by the reader and by institutional practices, rather than an attribute emanating from the work. The location of the aura may be in the viewer, not the object. Having to seek out an artist's book in a library or museum already adds a layer of mystery and ritual to the act of reading. The institutional attitude towards unconventional artists' books can seem almost religious. Works that are particularly rare, delicate or valuable will require more care and reverence in handling. *Octopus* and other expensive limited editions are housed in clamshell boxes. Delicate and/or valuable artists' books require the reader to be painstakingly gentle. They also call attention to reading as a performance because they alter normative reading practices. Unique and sculptural books transform, and refuse, reading practices much more drastically than other artists' books. As a result, they are seen and treated more like ritualistic art objects, which in turn creates the conditions for the aura. ■

13 Johanna Drucker, The Century of Artists' Books *(New York: Granary Books, 1995), 93-4.*