

Detail from *The Morse Dry Dock Dial*, Brain Washing from Phone Towers, *Sarah Nicholls*. (See page xx.)



FROM THE EDITOR

by Peter J. Tanner

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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WHILE RECENTLY UNBOXING AND ORGANIZING my book collection after moving into a new house I came upon a favorite book, Hannah Arendt's edited edition of Walter Benjamin's essays titled *Illuminations*. Naturally, when finding one of my favorite books, I had to leaf through it, looking at the titles and all the underlining and notes that I had made. I could not help but notice the parallel between my situation and the title of Benjamin's short 1931 article, "Unpacking My Library."¹ Upon rereading it I rediscovered, ruminated upon, and recontextualized several passages that I believe are relevant to artist books and their creators. Amid Benjamin's reflections upon his unpacking his own library, he proposes,

Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method. At this point many of you will remember with pleasure the large library which Jean Paul's poor little schoolmaster Wutz gradually acquired

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by writing, himself, all the works whose titles interested him in bookfair catalogues; after all, he could not afford to buy them. Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like.²

Book artists, past and present, have been and are engaged in “the most praiseworthy method,” even above that of “writing [a book] oneself.” They move beyond this by creating not only works that engage with text, but also by creating visually complex and haptically engaging work of a hybrid nature that questions the formation and accumulation of knowledge and the metanarratives that undergird systems. Book artists must create the works that interest them, and by association, us, because we are dissatisfied with existing books that do not provide what we would like to see and read. What do we want? I propose that we are seeking a diverse array of voices, expressions, experiences, and perspectives that respect and include all people.

The task of creating all the books that are lacking in this world is a daunting one. Despite this difficulty, that is exactly what book artists already do. They question individual and collective experiences and relationships. This is not a task for the faint of heart in a world filled with turmoil and war, which render so many geopolitical relationships in flux. What once might have appeared stable, or merely accepted as such, cannot continue. Questions must be raised, authority challenged, rights demanded, and freedoms guaranteed. Privilege is actually a responsibility, the duty of which is to make the world better, on either a micro or macro scale.

As Benjamin continues unpacking his library, he comes across some photo albums, which prompt him to muse upon their value in the following remark:

I put my hands on two volumes bound in faded boards which, strictly speaking, do not belong in a book case at all: two albums with stick-in pictures which my mother pasted in as a child and which I inherited. They are the seeds of a collection of children’s books which is growing steadily even today, though no longer in my garden. There is no living library that does not harbor a number of booklike creations from fringe areas. They need not be stick-in albums or family albums, autograph books or portfolios containing pamphlets or religious tracts; some people become attached to leaflets and prospectuses, others to handwriting facsimiles or typewritten copies of unobtainable books; and certainly periodicals can form the prismatic fringes of a library.³

What struck me most about this observation is that the volumes that Benjamin thinks do not belong in his library bookcase, which are inherited and are included in every library, exist within what he calls the “fringe areas.” These works represent our past in need of revision, but they can also prompt evaluation and examination of which books we generally think “should” be in a library.

These persistent memories are the defining moments that are used to provide the narratives and metanarratives of our present. They come from the fringes of the libraries, and they are the books that represent the unwritten knowledge that exists within and without archives on the bookshelves of the lived world. These local, personal, and often neglected



Detail from *Nine Lives*, Coriander Reisdorf. (See page xx.)

sources of knowledge must be reframed, understood, and heard. As Paula D. Royster points out,

It may be theoretically accurate to believe words are “purely arbitrary ... maintained by convention only” (Barry, 2009, p. 40) but in praxis, not so much for is it not our lived experiences that inform us? Words matter; words have always mattered. My lived experiences serve as a constant reminder of some truths, most of which are inconvenient for some and irreconcilable for others.

There is no one, singular event that brought me to where I am. I suppose I could trace my interests in the tension of socialized racism back to my love of history and the books that did not love me back. Trying to contextualize the authors’ interpretations of my ancestors without a counternarrative was glaring even for an uninformed third-grader whose greatest social challenge was getting to the swing set first during recess.⁴

I would modify her statement to say that *books* are not arbitrary, that *books* inform our praxis. Books matter. Books, and all historical and present forms of portable knowledge, have always mattered because they contain information necessary for us to address questions that surround us, despite their being inconvenient and at times irreconcilable. When books do not love us back, or require contextualized interpretations, the omissions within canons are glaring. Benjamin suggests that book-like creations can illuminate the fringe areas that represent our lived experiences, can produce those titles that provide the counternarratives that are so lacking in the ontological now.

When narratives meet each other and overlap in books and knowledge formation, the gaze and understanding of disparate individuals intimately cross paths. Derrida describes it in the following way:

When my gaze meets yours, I see both your gaze and your eyes, love in fascination—and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are visible (things or objects in the world) as much as seeing (at the origin of the world), I could precisely touch them, with my finger, lips, or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you—if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared.⁵

If we dare, we can approach the fringes of the library of human experience and produce the counternarratives that provide a deeper vision of experiences, objects, and people, thereby illuminating the whole. ■

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1985), 59–67.

2. *Ibid.*, 61.

3. *Ibid.*, 66.

4. Paula D. Royster. *Decolonizing Arts-Based Methodologies* (Boston: Brill, 2020), ix.

5. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3, quoted in Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortés-Rocca, “Notes on Love and Photography,” *October*, no. 116 (2006): 3.