

THE THING THE BOOK: A MONUMENT TO THE BOOK AS OBJECT

John Herschend and Will Rogan, Editors
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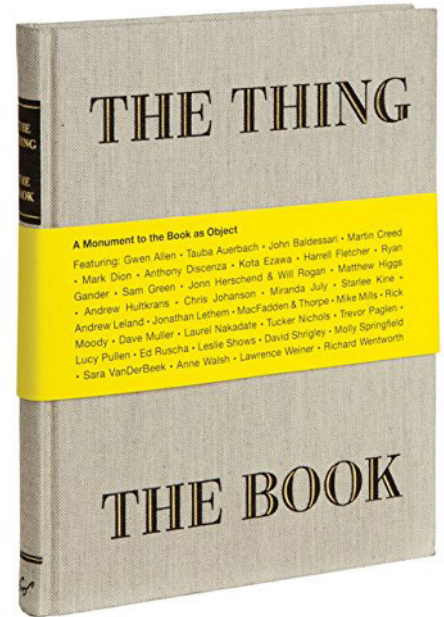
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PART COFFEE-TABLE BOOK, part serious contemplation on the idea of the book as an object, *The Thing The Book: A Monument to the Book as Object* presents textual and visual essays, meditations, and playful engagements with components of the book. Over thirty artists were invited to participate in the project, each assigned a particular aspect of a book to use in what Chronicle Books calls a “creative playground”: endpapers, table of contents, thumb tabs, endnotes, colophon, et cetera; each individual part of the book is presented as a field, called out, and examined for its creative potential. Many of the artists have previously worked with the editors, John Herschend and Will Rogan, on their project *The Thing Quarterly*, an experimental magazine that presents text on objects. The contributors range from multimedia and conceptual artists to writers, and include Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Miranda July, and Rick Moody.

In the introduction the editors state their desire “to approach the book as an exhibition space, as an object, and reexamine the structures of both its contents and its physical self.” They want the project to showcase the complexities of the book—to explore the physical life of a book apart from its role as an information-delivery system. Specifically, they want to explore books as receptacles for memories and the other “stories we imbue them with,” including what makes an individual copy of a particular book physically distinct from other copies, as, for example, one of the author’s books “puffed up like a textual marshmallow” after being left in the rain. Certainly the readers of *Openings* are pre-tuned to this frequency in a way that other readers may not be. Ideally, book artists and scholars always consider the interrelationship of form and content.

I believe each reader, no matter his or her previous engagement with these concepts, will be charmed by some of the entries and, perhaps, bewildered by others. My fear is that the overall project lacks contextualization that would make some of the work more meaningful. If a reader neglects to read the band wrapped around the book (which acts as a sort of advertisement for and introduction to the project), he or she may not discover that Ruscha’s “Bookplate” has a historical source, though reading the band still leaves the history unexplored and unspecified. The photographs of Richard Wentworth’s installation *Firma Terra Firma* do not communicate the potential impact of a gallery space filled with books hanging from a steel framework overhead; the perspective of these photographs fails to capture the magnitude of how the books inhabit space. In these moments the book’s purpose seems to be to introduce artists for readers’ future study rather than to examine the potential of the book as object.

I’d like to propose that the book is best read as a coffee-table book—at a relaxed pace, small portions at a time (the cloth cover and embossed titling do make it stand out from



most commercial productions). Otherwise the book can seem a bit disconnected and constructed of one-liners, such as David Shrigley's ribbon bookmarks with "care instructions" printed on them or the placement of one of Sara VanDerBeek's photographs of Roman statues: a centerfold obscured by being placed, not just across a gutter, but where two folios are sewn. Not to say, of course, that the book's humor isn't welcomed or at times successful. Miranda July's "Erratum" partially, if temporarily, obscures the text of Andrew Leland's essay "A Note to My Students," which implores his audience to "avoid reading any text that's not this page of the book." Not only is July's errata page easier to read, printed as it is in a larger font size, but one could imagine its sexually explicit subject matter could be distracting to Leland's students.

Although the artists who participated in the project come from many different countries and work in many different media, I think the book would have been better served to widen its scope of contributors to include book artists, scholars, conservators, and writers whose first medium is writing. Anthony Discenza's "A Table of Contents to a Book Other Than the One You Are Holding in Your Hands" lacks the cohesiveness and sharpness that writers such as Dean Young and Jack Matthews have brought to similar projects. The flipbook dancers that move across pages 10–14 reinforce readers' preconceptions about flipbook imagery, unlike, for instance, Janet Zweig's *Sheherezade*, whose visual manipulation of text and image elevates the form to another level.

Of particular interest to book artists might be the essay "The Artist as Bookmaker" by art historian Gwen Allen, which provides a quick history of art books, focusing on the democratic multiples of the 1960s and 1970s. She holds out specific examples, such as *Aspen* magazine, as "one of hundreds" and quickly mentions many of the major figures from this period, including Ruscha, Roth, Carrión, and Lippard. In this way the essay serves as a nice introduction for the novice book art enthusiast. Allen is clearly not just interested in the history of the book as "a realm of radical, utopian promise," but also believes that "the potential of artists' books remains latent, still waiting to be realized." Perhaps it is this very tight personal interest in these books from the sixties and seventies that keeps her from discussing or even mentioning the ever-expanding world of book art. She does mention both the New York and LA Art Book Fairs and a few contemporary presses, but she fails to mention the Codex Foundation, academia's slow but steady embrace of book art and book studies, or the large number of thriving community-oriented book art centers and print shops. Sadly, she ends the essay without questioning the premise that books are "endangered."

The Thing The Book does succeed in its mission of provoking thought about the thingness of books. I was thankful for the bookmarks as I used them to flip back and forth between essay and endnotes, or to mark a page I wanted to revisit. I also, as the promotional video invites one to do, ended up using the book for nonreading purposes (although I did not, as suggested, use it as a cutting board but as a temporary barrier between an excited dog and a sleeping cat). Some of the contributions triggered thoughts about aspects of book production not mentioned in this volume: how the artists transferred their texts to the editors/publisher, Chronicle's printing process, the process of acquiring rights, et cetera.

I'd like to end by briefly mentioning a few of the pieces that charmed me, including Leslie Shows's "Endpapers," which showcases collages created from texts in the book; Jonathan Lethem's "Footnotes," an engaging personal essay presented in a format that recreates the process of reading footnotes; Molly Springfield's "Indices," which highlights marginalia; and Harrell Fletcher's essay "My Friends," which connects the physical world and desires (the desire for a reclining chair, for example) with the discoveries that can be found in reading fiction.

Of course, the book comes with a disclaimer that states, "You understand and agree that you may be exposed to content that is inaccurate, objectionable, inappropriate, or otherwise unsuited to your constitution. On the other hand, you may be exposed to content that is beautiful, meaningful, potentially life-changing, or simply nice to look at." It's yours to discover and agree or disagree or, as the essay printed on the inside of the book's band suggests, "neither agree nor disagree." ■