

The Hall of Mirrors

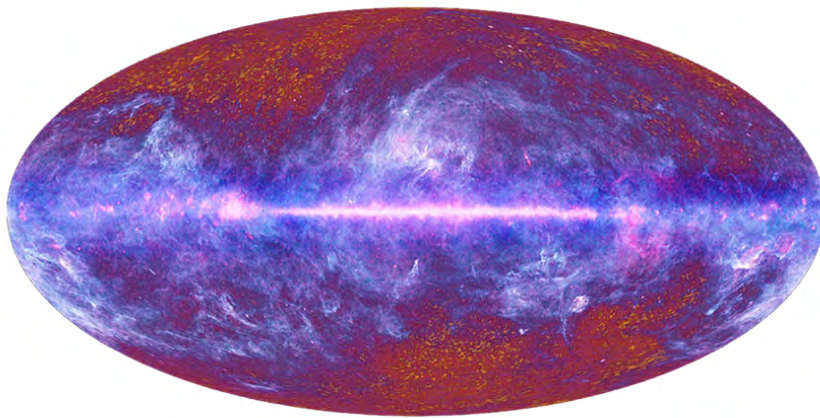
Lyn Ashby

March, 2014

A CODEX Australia 2014 symposium presentation. The CODEX Australia symposium was held over the mornings of 1 and 2 March 2014, with a fine book fair following each afternoon. This paper, the sixth of the six in the symposium, was a primarily visual presentation (as were all the others) and the text has been slightly edited for ease of reading. Three of the six papers are published here on Pretext: Caren Florance, Monica and this one by Lyn Ashby.

Good morning everyone, my name is Lyn Ashby. I am a maker of artist's books. I am honoured to be here to talk to you today. I am going to talk about what entices me about the book as an expressive medium, and show some of my own work along the way as examples of this enticement.

Actually, there are so many things about the book that entice me. It is a window onto countless other worlds, and in this way it is a portal. It is personal, portable, energy-independent and so on. But today I want to focus on another aspect of the book. This is just an idea, and may not even be true. But I find it a useful way of thinking about aspects of some of my own books. So today I want to sketch out the idea of a series of cascading grammars, and attempt to place the book in the big picture of this cascade. The really big picture. Let's take a little cosmic stroll.



Planck all-sky survey of the visible universe

Astrophysicists tell us that we live in an entropic universe. Apparently, the second law of thermodynamics tells us that all the matter and energy that we can observe in the universe is forever tending towards disorder, chaos and ultimately heat death. But at the same time, it seems obvious that the universe is alive with the very opposite process. That is, things are coming together in a patterned and ordered way. It's full of galaxies, stars, planets, organic molecules, and possibly complex life. These are the lumpy bits in the porridge of entropy.

With the writings of Buckminster Fuller I first came across the terms synergy and syntropy. This surely is the opposite of entropy. This term is everywhere now, but to extrapolate on one of the original meanings of this term, we find the suggestion that the universe comprises a series of synergetic

fields or dimensions of patterned order. As humans we probably think of this as being meaningful.

This is a series of organised and organising systems, each with their own operating codes or generating rules. Or their own grammars. What's more each of these synergies make possible the next level of order, each of which dramatically increases the density and sophistication of the organisation and shaping of matter and energy.

And so for example, stars (and their deaths) make possible both planets (potentially habitable environments) and organic molecules, which together make possible sustainable complex life, which can lead to, or make possible, consciousness. And consciousness, in turn of course, makes language possible. Interestingly, no human group or tribe has ever been found on earth without spoken language. When humans invented the scripted or drawn graphic representation of language the next level of order appeared. This is all the human modes of storage and transmission of language. And of specific interest here today, of course, is the book.

We see here some of the countless, astonishing, beautiful books that have arisen over their two or three thousand year history.



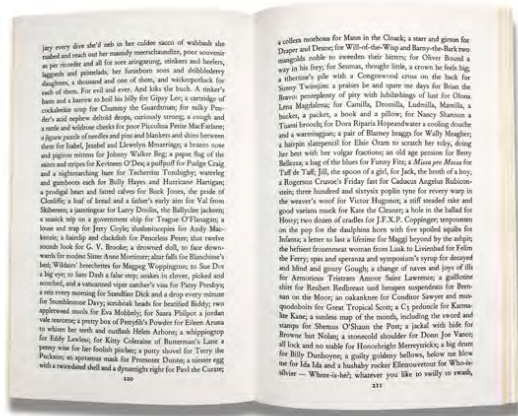
The Phaistos Disk, circa 1700BC



Hynerotomachia Poliphili, 1499



Woodblock print book — Katsushika Hokusai, circa 1820



Ulysses — James Joyce, 1933 – 1922

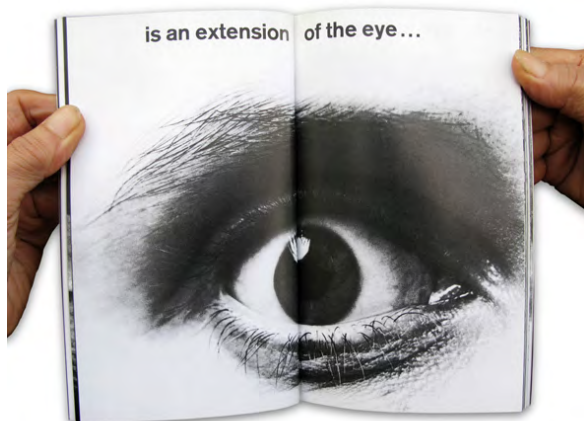
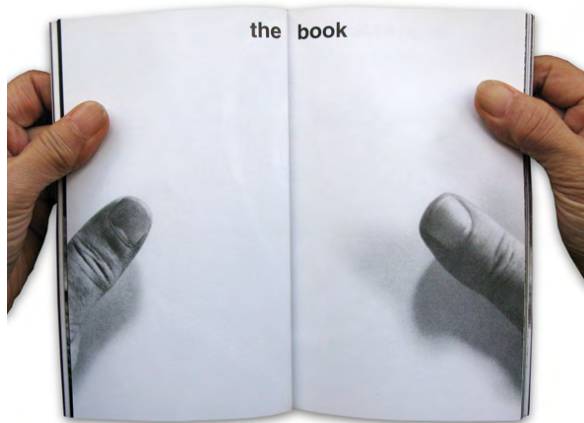
As I propose it here then, the book is on the end (relatively speaking) of a chain of dimensions of order, each of which derive their system of ordering, their grammar, from the previous level of order. In other words, the grammar of each level infuses, reflects and informs the next. To consider just the end of this chain, for example, the grammar of life (we might deem this to be in the nature of DNA) determines the way of operating of consciousness; the grammar or code that generates consciousness reflects and infuses the grammar or code of language, which in turn determines the grammar of the book.

This is a complex chain, and I clearly don't have time to fully explain or justify this claim today, other than to briefly state some obvious things, as follows: complex life is based on sensory perception, which, with greater brain processing, leads to systems of organisation like conceptualisation: percept gives way to concept (this is a hierarchical way of synthesising different operations); with this, the existence of self in an environment can be conceptualised like any other object in the environment; in higher complex life forms, this leads to sentient self-awareness; this way of organising elements (this system of conceptualising) is almost intrinsically linguistic in nature; when spoken language is graphically represented in alphabetic forms, it relies on a linear, fragmenting sequentiality; in turn,

this determines the representations of the spaces and moments of the book.

While this is interesting enough, perhaps a more interesting aspect of this cascade of grammars is that once established, it seems clear that they echo backwards up the chain. So, for example, though humans somehow created language, language and the book, in turn, shape the human mind. As if backwards up the eyebeam.

Effectively this means, among many other things, that our inclinations for a certain experience of space and time (and these are very big issues) are conditioned by their representations in the book.



Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage (1967)

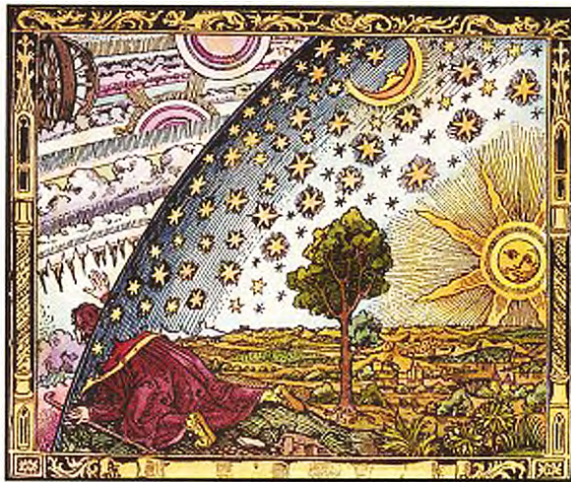
This is part of the Hall of Mirrors referred to in the title of this talk. When we look into the book, what we see there is ourselves. Its way of operating reflects the operations of language and consciousness. Perhaps we humans actually encounter ourselves in the book, or even come alive in the book in a way that happens nowhere else. In reflecting back to the human mind the shape of its own operations, the book fulfills, I think, one of its main intended purposes.

Incidentally, if it is true that a book is infused with a grammar that echoes backwards up a chain, perhaps all the way to the big bang, then this has fairly intriguing metaphysical implications. It also helps to explain the sweep of some claims for the power, primal originality and purpose of the book from the Torah to Mallarmé.

BUT then again, perhaps all this is just an over-complicated way of describing what we simply call reading — something that happens routinely whenever we pick up a book. Maybe it is just the

conventional book simply arousing standard reading, albeit, if I am right, based on this miracle of a cascade of echoing grammars. For, although this process of a series of grammars, as I have presented it, sounds monumental, cosmic in weight, in fact, by the time we are talking about consciousness and language and book, as well as being a miracle, it is also a mirage. It is just a mutual agreement or an accepted system (albeit mainly unconscious) of generating and organising information, conceptions and perceptions. It is just a kind of preloaded software or operating system (or a series of them), and as we know from our modern lives, operating systems can be rewritten anytime.

And so naturally a curiosity arises to try to get a glimpse beyond or around this self-generating, self-consolidating mirage, to know where the exit is, to discover our options, to find the window that offers a view out of the hall of mirrors.



Flammarion

Perhaps, in fact, the book is also a completely open field, also just spaces and moments and pages and paper and board and so on. With this idea, in a way, we can come to our senses and simply start again. We can re-imagine what the book is, or what it might be and other ways it might work. Thus we might try to imagine the experimental book, the defiant book, the wayward book, a book that is more than just a medium for the conventions of all these codes and grammars. With this re-imagined book we might literally come to our senses. One of these re-imaginings, for me, is what we call the artistsbook.

The artists' book is a book that embodies a willingness to open up the code again. This term, the artists' book has been plagued by a lack of any solid definition. But for me, this is part of a joyful underlying disregard for any final allegiance to all the codes that infuse the conventional book. Somewhere at the heart of the charter of the artistsbook, for me, is the experiment.

To be a maker of artist's books is to be happy to honour and exploit the conventions of these codes, these grammars, but to take them provisionally. To acknowledge the essential arbitrariness of these agreements, and thus to search for the unexpected vistas, to search for the view beyond the hall of mirrors. In practice this means to tamper here and there with the codes, to experiment with the grammars, to tweak the algorithm, to set up aberrant production modes, let them run and to see what happens.

No longer just a receptacle of ideas (texts and images), with this, the book form itself is activated in the exploration of a meaning. This is to dynamically reshuffle what Plato called the LEXIS (or the mode

of telling) with the LOGOS (or what is being told). And all this implies another kind of reading, another kind of contract with the reader, in which the reading process itself is an enactment of the book idea (in some way) or perhaps involves the arousal of a suite of mental qualities in the reader. As part of the echo back up the eyebeam, it is (perhaps) to somehow change the reader's mind. Here the actual book is proposed as the site for a possible transformation, of understanding, conception of mind, even mentality itself.

This is why (and where) the artistsbook is exceptional. This is the extraordinary book alongside the ordinary book.

I myself attempt to make artist's books. I try to use the book in this open-ended way to explore or experiment with ideas, and then to 'realise' them. That is, make them real in material book form. I attempt to ask questions of the book (in relation to some idea or other) and try to allow the book to answer in its own terms. This is to collaborate with the book and all its intrinsic qualities to reveal something that I probably could not have imagined beforehand.

The sort of questions I pose for the book sometimes involve the ideas I have suggested to you already concerning the grammar of things and the grammar of the book. One particular interest for me is the nexus of Language, Selfhood and the Book. Thus, for example, I find myself asking "to what degree is selfhood a linguistic construction?" Significantly, I want to explore this idea with the grammar of the book itself.

1: I DECLINE MYSELF



ONE book I have made on this subject is I Decline Myself. Here the book structure refers to the structure of reflexive languages, in this case, the declension of nouns. (In Latin a noun might fall into one of six cases depending on its grammatical function in a sentence.) The image in this book is completely composed of the letterforms of the text, suggesting that the self is composed solely of language. Since the pages are made of translucent material (each one dealing with a language component) together they compose metaphorically and visually a self. The turning of the pages tends to simulate or enact the peeling away of the layers of both language and identity.

The back panel of the book is also translucent. This allows this image (of a self) to be purely a product of passing light, and begs the question about what is left when the final layer or page is peeled away. Is it nothing? Is it light itself? What I was looking for here was the intersection of these

grammars: that of language, self, and the book.

2: THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS



BUT the kind of grammars that I want to explore are not just linguistic. They are also phenomenological and ontological: the nature of things and the nature of being. I wondered if the book could tell me something about the boundaries between things, or the nature of the material world.

I had come across the phrase The Ten Thousand Things, and I knew that it was meant to signify all of the material world. If this were so, I wondered, what might be the ten thousand and first thing? How could the book offer an answer to such a question, I wondered? And so I decided to take this term literally and compile, progressively, in a book, the images of ten thousand things.

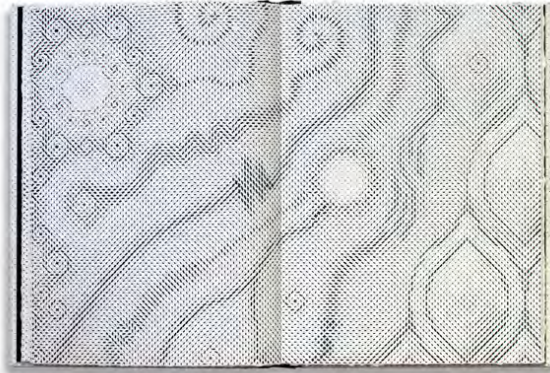
But after a short while the developing field of things on the page reminded me how printed images are always comprised of many tiny points of printed ink. This, it seemed to me, was the book starting to answer the question in its own terms.



Just like the images printed in a book, the ten thousand and first thing was a product or result of all the other things. (Interestingly, this had an echo of the genetic code of DNA. Every cell in one's body contains the coded information of how to generate all the other cells of one's body.) And so poetically, and practically, the book seemed to be saying that everything is made of everything else, and that everything contains everything else. And perhaps, bizzarely, in this case, not only once as the book seems to go round this block once more!

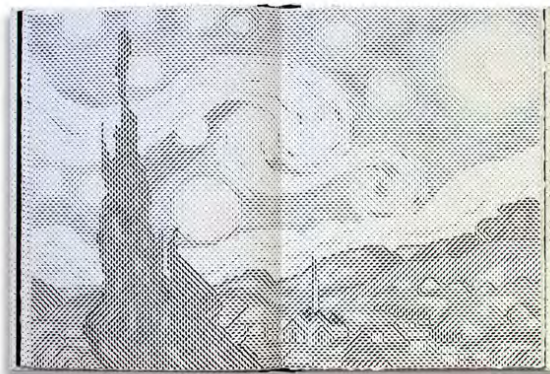
3: PARTICLE PHYSICS

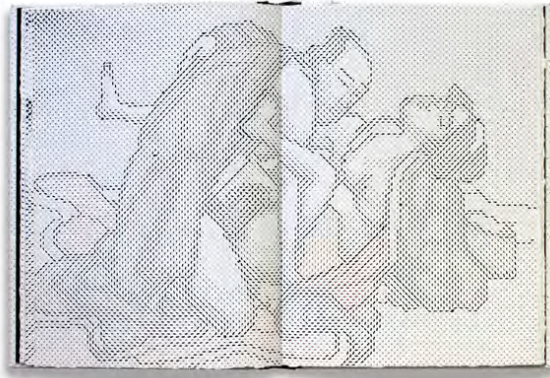
I WAS also looking for a way of exploring a sense of the universal grammar of things when I made a book called Particle Physics. Coincidentally the scientists at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland had just claimed to have found the Higgs-Boson field, which if my understanding is correct is a field that induces matter into being. From "nowhere". What sort of grammar is in operation there, I wondered.



This book is made of fields of dots or particles. As part of the operating system of this book, the dots are locked to a grid, but are able to shrink, expand, swivel, change shape etc But any meaning, imagistic or otherwise, generated on these pages is solely the product of the countless changing relations between the particles. What could this simple structure or grammar, in metaphor and as a graphic field, generate? I wondered.

— For example, could it generate the cultural images or artefacts representing the countless human dramas such as wonder, terror, transcendental longing, sex etc?





(These are obvious representations of famous artworks. Apologies to the original artists.)

But far from actually encountering these dramas, or even representations of them, what we really see in this book is the source code, so to speak.

I wondered too, if this system could present the evolution (and devolution) of the code we call written language.

The texts that do temporarily take on familiar forms on these pages, are themselves concerned with the nature of meaning by the temporary chance alliance of particles or fragments but whose real significance lies elsewhere in some underlying generating grammar.

But since, on its own terms, this book presents an ongoing series of mutations, there are no real dead spots in meaning, even if we don't understand the forms being presented. The hybrid language forms that do appear, prototypically on a continuum between image and symbol, suggest that meaning arises (like friction) more from the ongoing relation between things (like intervals on a page) than in any fixed or "correct," final forms. The reader finds then not mistakes, I think, but new, as-yet unfamiliar iterations.

4: TWENTY MINUTES

ONE of the other main grammars under inspection in these books concerns the conventions of the conception and perception of time. This is a big one for people of the book.

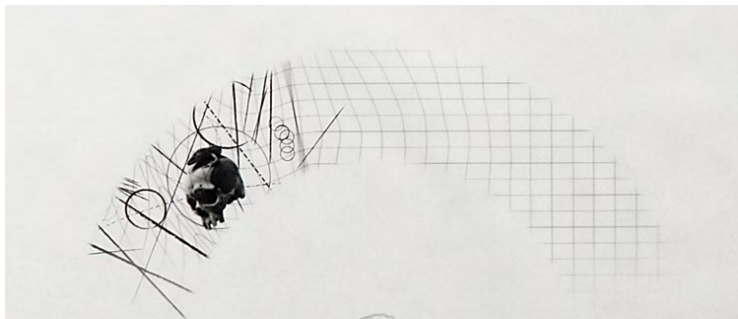




Printed on translucent pages, *Twenty Minutes* presents slices of images, some abstract some concrete, in 120° arcs, or 20 minutes on the clock. These segments cycle round the pages in an ongoing panorama that describes a singular, helical form through the pages of the book block. This is a helix. Does this ring a bell?

Usually, we turn pages through a book's beginning, middle and end, thus confirming our preference for a certain experience of the temporal relation of all things, including ourselves in time. We consider this to be temporal coherence. It is a specific, unidirectional, linear, conception of time. It seems to me that the conventional book has co-opted (and consolidated) the conventions of time and story more than any other human medium.

The translucent pages here allow a sense of things arising gradually out of the uncertainty of the future on the recto pages, and a sense of things slowly disappearing into the obscurity of the past in the blurring images on the verso pages.

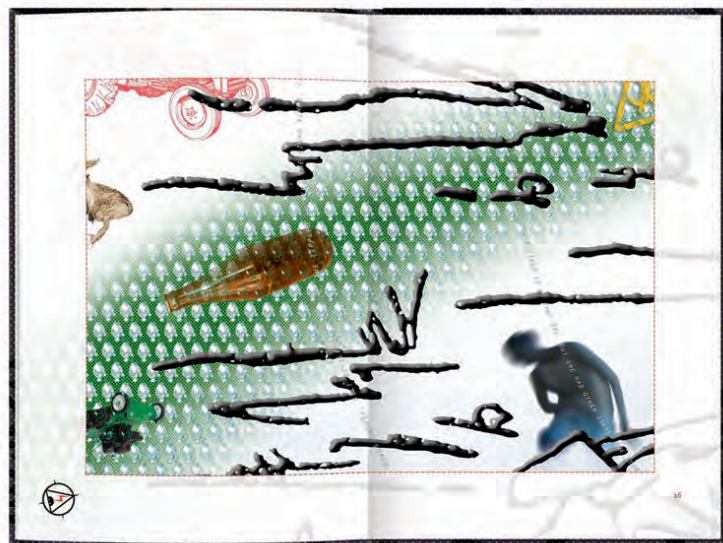


At certain points on the clock, so to speak, micro stories are told episodically, as we cycle round to that point each time, thus simulating the human process of synthesising disparate moments into coherent narratives. Time, as explored in this book is variously continuous, cyclic, episodic, looped and singular. The book here just explores simultaneous options to the usual grammar of our

conventions with the perception of time.

5: 37PEACES — the puzzle of an epiphany

COUPLED intimately with the conventions of time is the idea of the narrative itself. This is a system imbued with histories of code and grammar. I attempted to investigate this with a book titled 37PEACES – the puzzle of an epiphany.



When I was making this book, I was thinking about the possibility of what I came to describe as a modern mythic form. That is a modern book that might partake of certain aspects of the traditional myth. The normal story comprises sequential causal chains. But the characters and events of this 'story' (they are both imagistic and textual) are scattered spatially and simultaneously, through all the pages of the book without recourse to cause and effect.

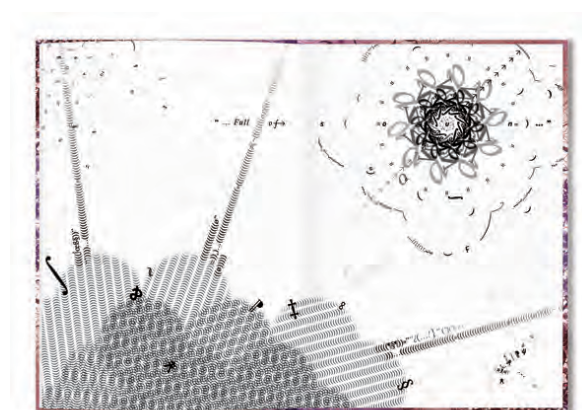
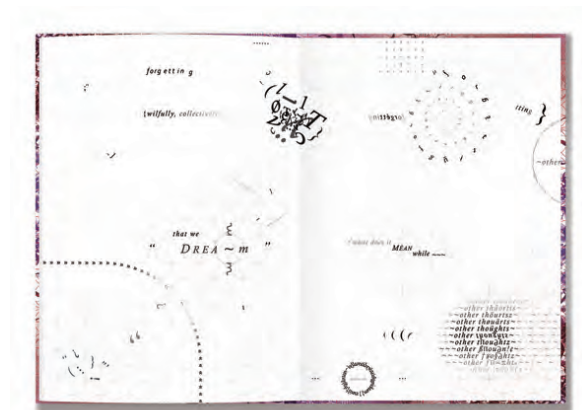
Overall this book presents the landscape of one main image. This is the story as map, map as story. In the case of this book, the reader is set the puzzle of reconfiguring the elements of this map, like a street directory, in order to discover what is the central image buried in this book, and perhaps, along the way, unravel some of the many little visual stories that inhabit the landscape of this image.

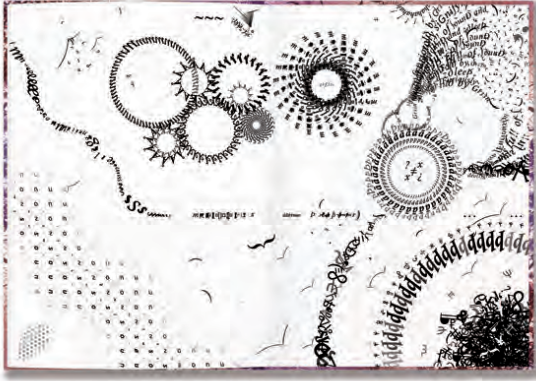
The key to how these pages fit together is presented on a page at the end of the book. And in the margin of each double page spread is a tell-tale navigational aid. But what does it point to? And what, the reader might ask, is referred to in the subtitle "the puzzle of an epiphany"? An epiphany, I think, is the moment when all the pieces of something fall together into a kind of timeless insight. But what is the insight here?

A cheat's clue: The image that is embedded in this book is an image from the book *Hyperrotomachia Poliphili*, published originally by Aldus Manutius in 1499.

6: IDEO(T) GRAMMATICA

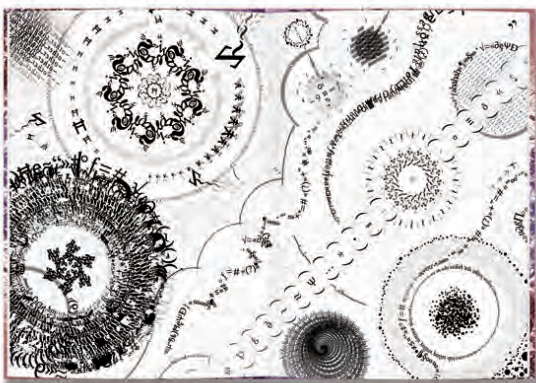
WITH the book, *Ideo(t) Grammatica*, I wanted to take a closer look at language itself. The text in the first pages of this book offer a self-commenting demonstration of the transmutations of language that drive it. My task here was to let the usual phonetic, alphabetic, linear, gridded representations of standard written language subside, I did this in order to let its more marginal logographic forms come to the fore with their own spatial grammars. I also wanted to make special reference to that poor cousin of the alphabetic letterform, the ideogram. The changes here gradually lead the reader, if they are willing, into stranger territory.





Strings of words begin to snake around the space of the pages. The letterforms begin to re-assemble as word-clusters, or they cohere as "wordstars", as I described them to myself, or word-fields in arrays that conjoin according to a poetic spatial sense. Here and there, Ideographic "sentences" appear that work by iconic suggestion or visual association, and whole phrases break out in linguistic cosmological formations.

For readers that lose their way, or lose interest, there is a quote from Shakespeare (that seemed to sum up the theme of the book) that runs through the book offering a kind of life line back to the surface of normal reading.

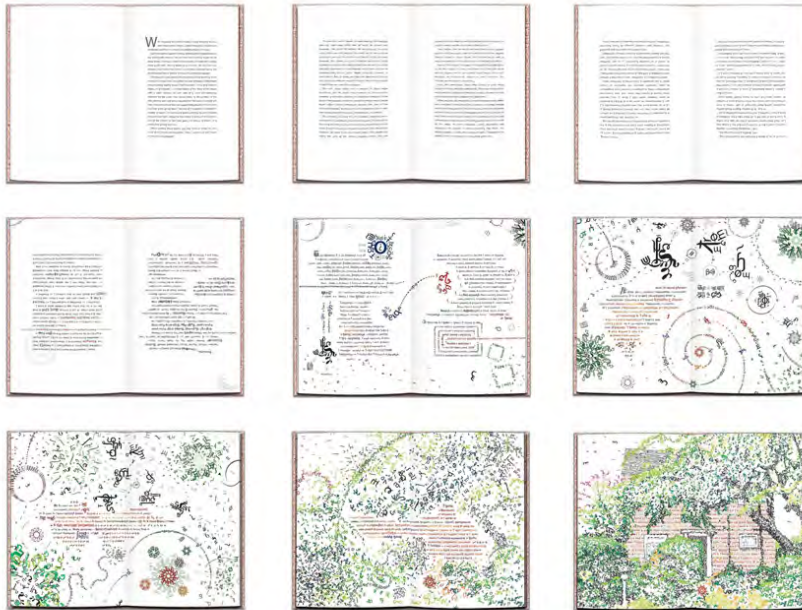


An interesting aspect of this book for me is how the underlying, usually unprinted geometric grid of written language is allowed to transform itself into circles within circles. This changes language dramatically. This type of grid seemed to offer a gateway for these other unutterable letterforms to

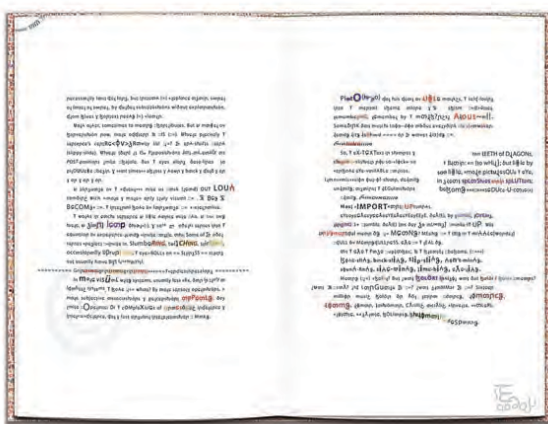
operate more by visual rhythms and graphic shaping. This book offers itself as an experimental petri dish, to allow these visual forms with their spatial grammars to arise and show how they might operate.

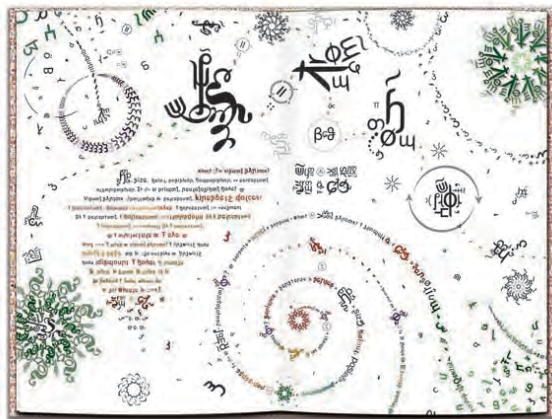
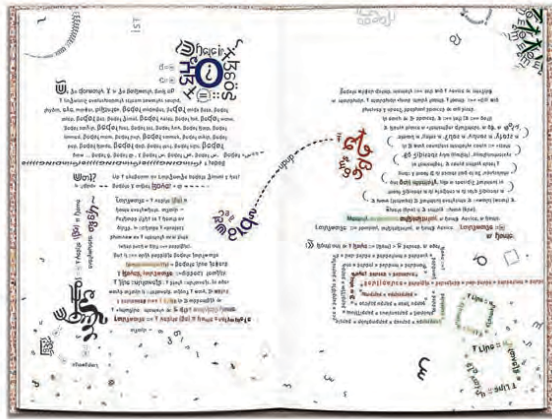
7: DECODEX

AND finally DECODEX. This book develops some of these themes in language. It is a kind of companion work to Ideo(t) Grammatica, though they were not made sequentially.



This book is based on the notion that with language we generate images, both mentally and visually (literally). It explores the transition between these two modes as if they might be on a continuum. This is the ride that it takes the reader on. In a sense, I was looking backwards to some sort of preliterate graphic forms, even though this is a contradiction of terms.





The initial normal text here first undergoes a series of substitutions from familiar letterforms to unfamiliar but equally functional forms. As well as this, grammatical operations mutate, but these changes are explained and demonstrated in the actual transforming text.

If the reader stays with this process, then they fairly easily stay literate, as it were, with this progressively alien language. What I was looking to demonstrate here was that literacy takes many forms, and can go in many directions, and that its specific forms and processes are essentially arbitrary. After a while on these pages, words become non-phonetic icons of their former selves, Or sentences become logographic clusters.



For example, though no longer linear and hardly phonetic: this graphic cluster here reads, "Where in the chaos is the code?"

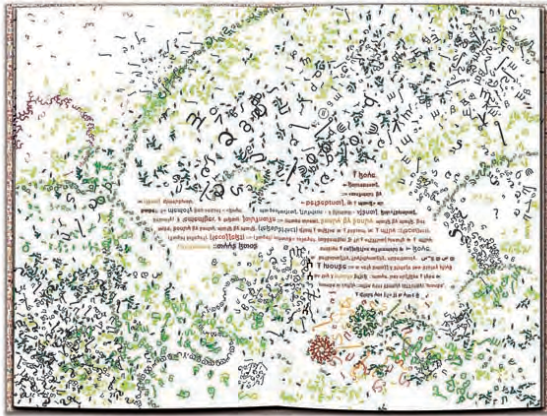
All this occurs as part of a paradigmatic shift towards a language that is leaving its sonic base behind and moving towards a logographic, or morphemic visualisation. Its meaning is becoming literally visual.



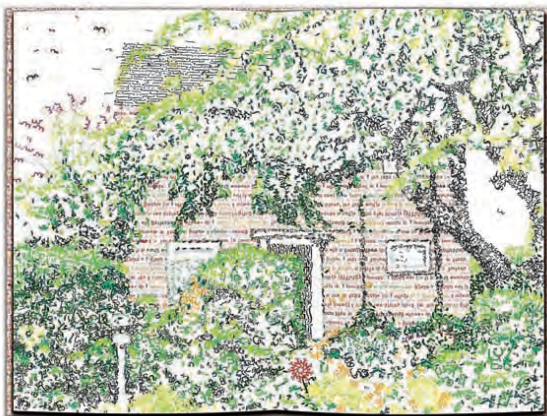
For example, there is a logographic form that is a visual construction for the usual word for Language. It is made up of mutated versions of our familiar letterforms in the word "Language", but it works now more like a unified character. And the surrounding sentence reads: "Language is the memory of being at home everywhere in the world."



— And another pattern of characters reads (though it can read in several directions): "Is the primal memory and meaning of the senses the first wordless language? To me, these forms are like preliterare Lascaux cave markings, but across some future cave wall. Perhaps some futuristic screen made of who-knows-what. They are like one possible proposition for the graphic forms of our future language or post-literacy.



The first paragraph of the text in this book describes a small house with a rose in the garden, and ruminates on the nature of the mental image that the reader conjures from this linguistic description.



The last spread arrives, after this whole series of language transmutations, at an imagistic construction of such a house, with such a rose in the garden. (The rose is actually a logogram meaning the SENSES.) The whole image is comprised of these re-imagined, mutated letterforms. Thus the journey between the two ways that language generates images (one mental, one visual) is completed. And there is a final implication here that humankind's true home might be language, or perhaps even the book itself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to recall something that John Berger wrote in one of his books.

He wrote: " ... the coming to terms with the sense to be given to life cannot be deferred. The future cannot be trusted. The moment of truth is now. And more and more it will be poetry, rather than prose, that receives this truth. Prose is far more trusting than poetry; poetry speaks to the immediate wound."

As usual, this comparison of prose to poetry is interesting. For although there are obvious differences it strikes me that prose is to poetry as the conventional book is to the artist's book. The experiment at the heart of the artist's book has always struck me as a poetic act beyond the usual grammars of our more prosaic life.

Elsewhere Berger suggested that because of this urgency, the quest to understand the mystery of the stars will have to wait until we understand the mystery of our hearts. But it seems to me that these two mysteries overlay each other — inside the workings of the book — precisely because of this series of cascading grammars, as I have tried to describe them, that echo right back to who knows when. Surely to the stars.

In this way, to explore one of these mysteries (that of the heart or the stars) with the humble book, is to explore the other. All of this seems like a monumental task for a book, albeit an extraordinary book. But then again, in the big scheme of things, do we really want to attempt anything less?

Thank you.

About the Author

Lyn Ashby has completed studies in literature, visual art, film-making, graphic design and the art of the book. He has worked in teaching, photography, graphic design and journalism. In 2006 he set up the imprint [thistoopress](#) to produce personal book projects, and since that time has produced 13 handmade, limited-edition artist books. These works have been exhibited in numerous group book shows (and some shows with other media) in Australia and overseas. They are represented in various private and public collections in the US, the UK, Europe and Australia.