

CODEX AUSTRALIA

Interview with Lyn Ashby

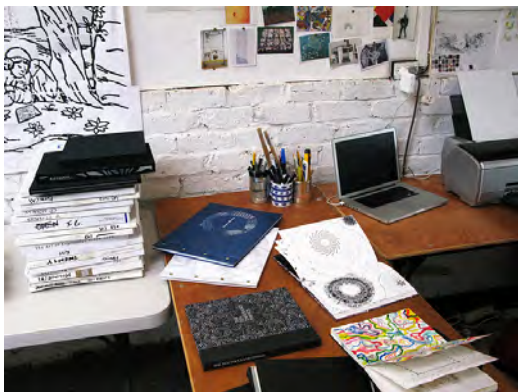
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Your background is quite diverse; you have qualifications in typography, film making, photography and literature. How do these reflect your interests and in what way have they informed your book works? Where do your book works sit in relation to these other mediums?

At their centre. For me, the most interesting works produced in the name of the book, seem to be at the nexus of all of these fields and more. My own history of production feels like a spiralling in (taking the scenic route) towards book art, via these other activities, as if I had to gain these other necessary skills, as basics, to really approach the kind of book I wanted to make. The book itself often has features of all these fields.

Your book works thematically deal often with impermanent states, processes and sequences, also with language and memory. Are these themes a result determined by the book or codex format? I suppose this is really a chicken and egg question, what comes first, the concepts or the forms? Can you talk about the relationship between the two?



Oftentimes, the theme or idea of a work is my avenue of approach, and is something that I genuinely want to explore in its own right. (And I guess such ideas just arise out of one's obsessions and preoccupations.) But inside each idea or issue, at the same time, is always a question for the book form itself. How can the

book, as an open form (especially as an art form), deal with this issue or that, in an enlightening way? What can it tell me, for example, about the relation of my 'inner life' and language, AND reveal it to me in terms of the unique qualities of the book? The two queries (one about some idea, the other about the book itself) are facets of each other. I always feel that the making of a book might tell me something profound and useful for real life. But then again, it might not. Or it might not be so clear about it.

Regarding the types of materials you have used, you employ a variety of papers; drafting film, translucent paper and laser vellum, and use different printing processes; from digital technologies to the humble potato. What is the reasoning behind your material and process selections? Is there intent to signify something? Potatoes aside, is there a conscious decision to embrace newer technologies and materials?

Unlike many makers of books, especially in Australia, I have little traditional art printing experience in my background, though I do have some. I came to the book, as you noted, from other angles. One of these was the expediency and immediacy of digital printing, which suited me since my primary concern was with the book as an entity and idea, and how we read it, and less with materials or traditional production values. This liberates me in a way. Given that I also want to make a thing of beauty as object and experience, I choose the shortest path, and by any means necessary, to achieve my goal, and in this my usual default setting is to use digital printing and materials. My understanding of materials is an endless work-in-progress and hopefully ever expanding, but decisions are always made, and materials chosen, to serve the idea of each specific work. For example, when I have used translucent paper or drafting film it is because the work needs it to help make its point, or achieve its effect. The use of the potato was central to the idea of that book.

While your works use current technologies they sometimes refer to antiquity, mythology and the religions and philosophies born of other ages, Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism. Does this seem a paradoxical marriage to you or do you see them perhaps as simply a manifestation of the past in the present?

The basic technology I use is the book, usually the codex book form, and as we know, this is a very old technology. My printing methods are just incidental, modern idioms for producing this ancient form. For me, this ancient technology (the book) is still (or again) full of a wealth of fruitful surprises. As far as I can tell, Taoism and the other religious and philosophical systems are also ancient tools of thinking about the big questions, and may still prove to be useful in their ways. But because they are also largely ossified, they could do with some major dismantling and investigation. And what better tool to do this investigation, than that other ancient technology of the book, itself deeply historically implicated with both the liberation and ossification of thinking and experience around the big issues of being and knowledge. But then this is not my only direction for the book.



In terms of content your work draws ideas from a considerable historical arc. How do you view your works in relation to the history and traditions of the codex and bookmaking? Is this something you consciously address?

I see my own works as being clear examples of one of the several streams of the contemporary experimental expressions of the book. My own interest is in making (mainly codex) material works as an expressive medium for investigating whatever I feel is important at the time. This may be a specific contemporary (and temporary) idiom, but since these books are conceived to be handled intimately, read (in the widest sense of this activity), contemplated, and re-read, I see no real break with the long, long tradition and history of the codex, bookmaking and reading. Sometimes I wonder if the term 'artist's book' will fall into disuse, as we become accustomed to the apparent 'strangeness' of these contemporary works, and we realise that they are still (and always were) essentially 'just' books. I make books out of a kind of personal experimental compulsion, and though I never really address these issues consciously, the long venerable history of the book does provide the power of a lineage that is very humbling and gratifying.



In your book works, language and text seem to me to have a highly elevated status. In some senses it is almost as if language to you might be a living entity. At the very least you are fascinated with languages, fonts and their dynamics as a phenomenon through which the world is understood. Is this a reasonable assessment? Can you elaborate on this fascination with the look and structure of words?

There seems to be a circuit of connections between the book, language (including 'visual language') and the human mind. There appears to be a level at which they are mirrors to each other, with no certainty which is the 'original'. Language is so fundamental to us that we don't usually notice to what degree it actually *is* us. I don't at all think that human consciousness is nothing without language (in its broadest sense), but it is interesting to attempt the exercise of trying to imagine that mind ('to be' that mind) without language, especially since you are using a mind infused with language to do this. Modern technology offers us the model of software and hardware, in which language is the software for the hardware of the human brain, thus creating the (modern) human mind (and thus too, by the way, a fixed 'self'). But even this doesn't really capture the symbiosis of the relationship. When I look at the forms of language (including images), its material visual forms, especially in the book, I feel like I am seeing the operations of the human mind. This is so obvious really, but at the same time, completely mysterious. It is like a positive psychic (and cultural) narcissism, or feedback loop. I think our culture has had a deep fascination with the book for millennia for this reason, and this fascination has recently mutated into a kind of object (and gadget) fetishism when it comes to the new technologies and the language operations they entail. But some of us are not done gazing into the reflecting pool the old technology of the book.

You state that your books tend to run in editions of 50 and are handmade. Are all your works produced by yourself at the studio of *thistoopress*? How do you source your materials? What exactly are the digital tools and software you use? Is there any input from other book arts industry professionals or collaborators?

Once or twice I have paid an assistant to help with some of the more tedious and repetitious aspects of making batches of books, and I have sought advice on occasion from 'real' book binders when my own limitations as a binder became too stifling. Mainly, however, I do the lot, including printing and binding. I generate all this visual and textual material that goes into the books, with the exception of an occasional line of text (lifted from James Joyce or a friend), and some visual images in the public domain. I source

materials from various suppliers around Melbourne, such as Melbourne Etching Supplies, and very gratefully use the services of a local commercial printer for trimming book blocks when I need it. When it comes to using pre-cut, coated digital paper I am usually limited to who will allow me to handle the paper and test the grain direction of the sheets. Amazingly, this is no small limitation, and reminds me how little is the overlap, in this country at least, between digital print technologies and books at my level of production. I use an Epson or Canon digital printer and all the usual software programs such as Illustrator, Photoshop, InDesign and Quark. Much of the visual material is generated by hand before being digitised and manipulated. I have never collaborated on a work, though I would be interested to try.



As well as national, state and university collections in Australia, your books are also held in some international collections, for example the Tate in London and the New York Public Library. How are your books received overseas? Is there a discernable difference in the status of the book and the relationship between artist and audience from here to there?

I don't know how my books are received generally overseas, but I am gratified at the enthusiasm with which public collectors in London and New York have purchased some of my books. My impression is that even with growing budget restraints, there seems to be a real awareness of the importance (and urgency) of collecting such works. It seems that the great modern adventure with the book is going on everywhere, but most noticeable is the different directions the 'book arts' industry is moving in different parts of the world, each promoting a certain type of 'artist's book' as most important. Some places have had a longer history of respect for the book and a practical indulgence for the variations of publishing models (livre d'artiste in Europe, for example) all of which, I suspect, nourishes a deeper book sensibility in modern times. My impression, for example, is that book artists in Germany have a level of understanding and appreciation among their audience (and possible financial supporters) that is not really the case in Australia. There is a wonderful general enthusiasm here in Australia, but it seems less focused.

A hypothetical question – if you had the keys to any museum, archive or library in the world where would you go and what would you be leafing through, or looking at when you were finally discovered and asked to return the keys?

I think I would head to the Klingspor Museum in Offenbach in Germany. I don't know what I'd be onto by the time they dragged me out, muttering and complaining, but I would start by trying to find some work by Ute Schneider, Ulrike Stoltz, Ines von Ketelhodt, Peter Malutzki and a host of other contemporary German practitioners.



As an artist who appears to be embracing digital technologies what do you see as the future of the book? Or to focus the crystal ball a little, what do you see as the future of your own practice and *thisoopress*? What projects are you working on presently?

The question of the future of the book generally is a big one, and I don't know what the answer might be. If the mainstream, material book itself becomes a rarer thing, one happy possibility is that the marginal practice of the handmade book, or the artist's book however it is made, that we are considering here, becomes more important and more highly regarded, and that its hybrid nature as 'visual literature' (art and perhaps literature, sometimes/maybe) generates for itself a bigger audience. Perhaps big publishers might get interested. But this scenario seems unlikely. If the future of the limited-edition book depends on the goodwill and budgets of public collectors then, I guess, it will always remain marginal. While the idea of print-on-demand and online distribution to a potentially wider audience is a great idea, the product is clearly not a handmade book. One model that I am interested in exploring for *thisoopress* soon is the double version of a book work: a handmade, limited-edition version for collectors and collections, and a cheap, POD version for the rest of the real world. For the moment, however, the POD version has severe technical limitations (materials, and especially binding), which would require, from my point of view, a complete rethink of what sort of books can work with these limitations. Perhaps these limitations will be overcome soon.

At the moment I am working on a mainly visual book called *Particle Physics*, although language (and the look of language) once again get featured. It seems to be about the question of the possibility of an underlying 'grammar' for both written language and the material, visual world. And maybe everything else as well. Sound familiar?
