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COMING TO OUR SENSES WITH A MODERN MYTHIC FORM: POSTLITERACY IN ARTISTSBOOKS

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In this paper, I want to consider the possibility that when we read artistsbooks¹ and their curious kind of literature, we are participating in a new kind of literacy, and that, in honor of the quietly evolutionary nature of this new literacy, we might call it “postliteracy.”

The genesis of my own interest in this possibility started a long time ago. For a while, when I was quite young, I used to carry around a small English-French dictionary in my back pocket. I couldn’t speak French and I had little idea what this resource really was. I simply loved the idea of having a small portable book, available at all times, that I could refer to whenever the fancy took me that would somehow offer me insight into my present experience, and, by referring to another or bigger world, translate it into something both exotic and useful. I might, for example, after admiring the sky, find the English word “sky” in the dictionary, and there discover that somewhere around the world people called this big, blue expanse “ciel.” In this way, I had instant access to another imaginary, yet also apparently real, world. My interest here was not language translation, but this sense of a more profound mental transformation available in a humble book.

Many years later, this same sense found a related, sympathetic home when I discovered an extraordinary category of books called artistsbooks. When reading these works in various public collections, if reading was what I was still doing, I had the dizzying sense that some of them (the most challenging) were speaking in a language as if from the future and trying to teach me how to read them. Though usually still employing all the familiar, basic language elements of texts, images, pages, and spaces (no matter how abstracted or alien these sometimes appeared), the experience I had in front of them resembled little of what I thought of as the processes of standard literacy. With the shapes of this future language, these works were invoking, I thought, our next literacy, or what today I think we might term postliteracy.

By this term, I do not mean a literacy that comes after our time of literacy, as if we are now no longer literate. Clearly, we still are.² But I do want to place the idea into the developmental stream of the evolution of our ways with languages. My own interest here is the very specific possibility that the hardcopy artistsbook, a material experimental book, is the laboratory and home of this new literacy.

Postliteracy may seem a contentious or confusing term, especially since today scholars write not only of post-structuralism and postmodernism but also of post-postmodernism.³ There are also claims of other terms describing modern literacies that have arisen over the last twenty five years of screen and digital media technologies. Just some of these terms are “post-textual,” “multimodal,” “hybrid,” and “multisensorial.”⁴ But in the spirit of the new technologies, I think of these as “bolt-on” or “plug-in” literacies, which is different from the nature of the postliteracy that I speak of here, which is a more natural evolutionary extension through the phases of our pre-literacy and literacy.

The idea of a new literature and literacy in artistsbooks, however, is not at all new. Joan Lyons, co-founder of the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, wrote in 1985 that the importance of these new books “lies in the formulation of a new perceptual literature whose content ... challenges the reader to a new discourse with the printed page.”⁵ This idea never was

contentious. In fact, it is more or less self-evident when we read artistsbooks. The contention arises, it seems, when deciding if this new literacy can usefully be called postliteracy. For the moment, let me simply float this term as a way of thinking about the experience we have when reading some artistsbooks and the language operations that sometimes go on inside them.

If this is postliteracy, what is different about its processes, especially compared to what we would call “standard literacy”? To get a sense of the answer to this, we might attempt to remind ourselves what it means to be literate. This might not be as easy as it sounds, since literacy, a specific cognitive-linguistic turn of mind, involves many internalized ideologies. It is the ocean in which we swim. But, as Jacques Derrida suggested long ago, all ideologies are worthy of critique.⁶

Figure 1: The Gutenberg Bible

Literacy and the Line: A Brief Historical Recollection

What are the core qualities of literacy? Immediately, I must put aside, for the moment, other (mainly Eastern) literacies that involve non-phonetic, morphemic, and hybrid scripts that appear to activate quite different cognitive processes and precipitate significantly different reading experiences from our own alphabetic one.⁷ Those reading experiences may well be our future (in several ways), but I focus here on the tradition of our core, mainstream (mainly Western) experience of alphabetic phonetic literacy.

One of the first noticeable qualities of this scripted symbolic code is a rather strict, fragmented linearity and sequentiality. The alphabet is, as Marshall McLuhan suggests, “a construct of fragmented bits and parts, which must be strung together in a line, bead-like, and in a prescribed order.”⁸ Words, endlessly and ingeniously configured from a small number of letterforms, strung together in one-directional sequences, are themselves composed into larger and larger one-directional sequences under strict rules of engagement.⁹

The principle inside this linear sequentiality is the *line*, which structures the look of language and the way we read it. The line does this, I suggest, by tending to establish a certain conception, and thus perception of those elemental dimensions we call space and time. Although it may sound grandiloquent to invoke the ideas of

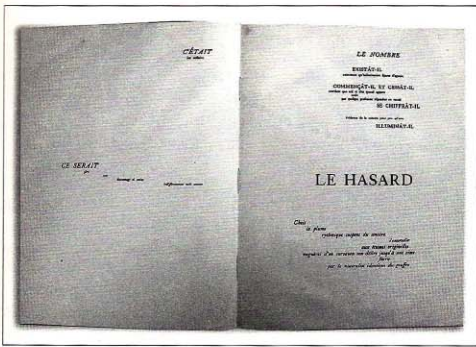


Figure 2: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Stéphane Mallarmé

space and time, there is no need to be mystical in this. For many tens of thousands of years, humankind has had to contend with the representation of these dimensions, in one form or another, in order to record and transmit experience. The important point here is that our centuries of literacy have, amid all the many options, come to privilege a very specific code of representation of those dimensions.¹⁰

As Henri Lefebvre writes, “As Object opposed to Subject, as *res extensa* opposed to, and present to, *res cogitans*, space came to dominate, by containing them, all senses and all bodies.”¹¹ Lefebvre here describes the establishment of a belief in an external, objective space, beyond and encompassing all human cognition, sensation and cultural constructions, rather than as a product of them. John Berger puts it more simply when he writes that the appearances that perspective described are called *reality*.¹² This space that reflects certain qualities of literacy—a space that is abstract, empty, and infinite—is Euclidean space.¹³

In a similar way, the regular sequentiality of our letters, words, and pages tends to consolidate and render time as essentially chronological, unidirectional, calibrated (moment-by-moment): an indifferent metronomic scale onto which we chronologize all events and experiences. Spatial and temporal, physical and metaphysical, the line structures space like a scaffold, and passes through time like an arrow.¹⁴ Thus established are the twin conventions that pervade and dominate almost all Western art and literature from the early Renaissance until the twentieth century: pictorial space and narrative time.¹⁵

On the page and through the book, the line becomes the grid, the invisible scaffolding structure of language. The singular beam of perspectival viewing is paralleled by the steadily roving, decoding beam of the reader’s eye. Such conventions corral and normalize all the operations of our notation systems; that is, text and image and the way these elements relate on the page. These conventions also schematize the enfolding of the contents of contiguous pages onto each other. This is done in compliance with the convention of sequential reading in order for us to experience what we think of as temporal coherence.¹⁶ The whole literate way of being is deeply encoded in the way a standard book looks and works. The world is writ small across the picture plane of the page and its story chronicled through the one-way sequence of books’ spaces and pages. Such conventions were of course consolidated by Gutenberg’s technology, which virtually enshrines the line.

The resulting standardized homogeneity of the look of printed language has been the norm for many centuries, even when industrial print technology shifted to photo-litho techniques in the latter part of the twentieth century. In essence, the mainstream page didn’t change much in the five hundred years between

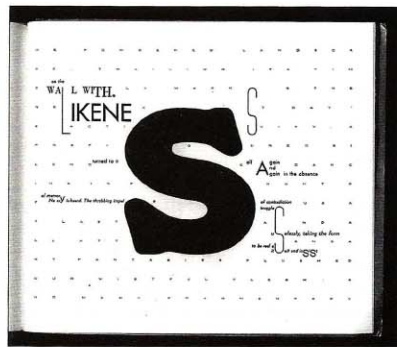


Figure 3: *The Word Made Flesh*, Johanna Drucker

Gutenberg’s *Bible* and James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* [fig. 1].

In this way, standard literacy becomes a closed feedback loop between a specific way of being and a specific way of representing that being. And one way it does this is by tending to shut down the uncertainty of the participation of the reader’s senses. For, over the centuries of our literacy, the effect of its homogeneity seems to have been a numbing somnambulism or blindness to the material, sensory, expressive potential of our language forms. It becomes largely invisible to us, and we become absent to it.

Even though all of this is true, clearly it is not the whole truth, because we can discern the voices of an alternative experiment with language through the centuries of standard literacy. Among the artists and writers working against literacy’s closed loop was nineteenth-century French Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé. His final and most influential poem, *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (“A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance”) was posthumously published in its radical form in 1914 [fig. 2].¹⁷ Looking at such works, classics in the canon of artists’books, in relation to this idea of postliteracy is instructive.

We might look at this poem today and think that it’s just one more concrete poem. But it was published over a century ago and represents a pivotal moment in visual-literary art. Mallarmé employed a variety of typographic figures with which he shaped separate text streams and constellations. Immediately evident is the new possibility that the relationship of the letterforms to the space around them—the semantic silence—activates the whole page. It becomes a unified, dynamic, spatial field of figure-ground interplay. This tends to change everything and radically challenges the usual conventions of reading. Another kind of space is suddenly represented here that necessitates a spatial comprehension. It was no longer possible to understand such a work simply with the standard tools of semantic literacy.

Derrida writes of “another structure of unity.”¹⁸ While it is important not to over-romanticize such ideas, he refers here, I think, to an experiential unity before the effect of the conceptual partitions inherent in our recent literacy. In order to recover “the access to this unity,” he observes, “we must de-sediment four thousand years of linear writing.” For, unlikely as it might seem, this was always still feasible, since, as Derrida continues, “The ‘line’ represents only a particular model, whatever might have been its privilege.”¹⁹

I would suggest that one of the inevitable evolutionary steps in literacy is the reawakening of the spatial and sensory dimensions in language apprehension. This is just part of the complex and radical wave of changes in thinking and perception concerning space and time in science, art and literature from the early twentieth century. Thus began the transcendence of the domination of the line, that

conceptual and organizational engine of our standard symbolic literacy and the awakening of a wider sensibility for language.²⁰

Coming to Our Senses

Returning to our senses may be one of the essential aspects of this putative postliteracy. If Mallarmé opened the door that challenged the dominant conventions of literacy, then countless experimenters leapt through that door in the early twentieth century. In this lineage is Johanna Drucker, who picked up this idea and developed it with a letterpress work, *The Word Made Flesh* (1989) [fig. 3]. This is an oft-quoted work, and for good reason. We can use it here as a paradigm for some of the sensory processes of this material literacy.

As its title suggests, this work attempts to reactivate the material, visual, sensory dimension of language. The structure of this book hinges on the placement of each of the individual letters of its title onto consecutive pages of the book, using large, dominating wood type. This embedding of the title is an idea Mallarmé also used in his poem. These large letterforms—and sometimes other smaller ones—are shared in the formation of clusters of phrases that operate more as constellations than as linear text. The large letters also act as an orienting, optical pulse through successive pages, allowing all the elements in concert to function as both linguistic code and sensory affect.

Thus, the printed mark is allowed greater value for its visibility and materiality. Its meaning and value reside less emphatically in its role as a signifier, which becomes more suggestive, more malleable, less stable, and more flexible in the signifying process. By becoming material presence in its own right, the letterform is valued as much for its capacity to be seen, with all those inherent qualities, as its capacity to *mean*, or represent. As Drucker writes, this is “to short-circuit the transparency of the linguistic signifier, to call attention to its materiality and to insist on this materiality as a primary element of the signifying process.”²¹

The way such language elements are composed on the page and its implications for meaning might be understood, as Drucker writes elsewhere, “not as arrangements, but as movements and forces in a system of relations.”²² And indeed, the physical task of reading this book is a lively, optical one. We must locate letters, construct words, and determine how they interact and operate on their various, simultaneous levels. This active, sensory reading process is to enact the theme of the work, to embody language, to bring it to life with the action of the senses: to make the word flesh.

Here too language operates in a way that, as Julia Kristeva describes it, allows the transgressive, semiotic mode to intrude into what she calls the “well-ordered forms” of normal semantic language.²³ According to Kristeva, this effectively sets off a poetic revolution in language, by generating potentially subversive and competing visual-verbal forms that always swirl around “normal” language forms.²⁴ The idea that there is a kind of secondary, predatory level of language, always ready to challenge and transform normal forms, has implications for the forces behind this idea of a postliteracy.

But the materiality of language also includes the expressive meaning and effect of its longer structural forms that operate across the whole span of a book. This includes its sounds, shapes, rhythms, and visual-structural patterns and rhymes. Invoked here is an

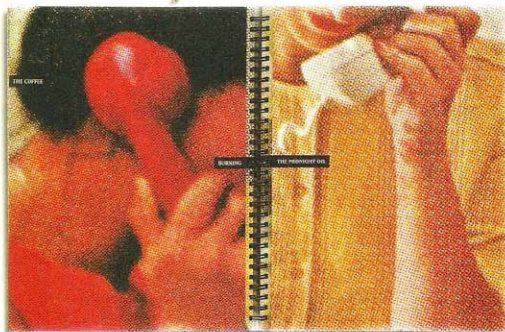


Figure 4 [top]: *High Tension*, Philip Zimmermann
Figure 5 [bottom]: *Long Story Short*, Philip Zimmermann

obvious musical analogy with qualities such as harmony, discord, cadence, and orchestration. Some of these qualities, I suggest, recuperate aspects of preliterate, oral language forms which, as Walter Ong writes, were often structured as music and song.²⁵ To now recover and render some of these preliterate forms—that previously had no graphic representation—in an expressive, visual graphic dimension for the page and book, I suggest, is part of the development of a new literacy.

One book artist who appears to have risen to this challenge is Philip Zimmermann. One of his books, *High Tension* (1993) [fig. 4], is also a justifiably oft-quoted work. The pages of this book open at alternating angles to the spine in an explosion shape. This ongoing, paginated outburst is material metaphor, of course, for the mental torment alluded to in the title.

Strings of text run across the pages through most of the book in a persistent litany of self-mocking, perhaps paranoid, phrases, such as “You try to accept the fact that you will always be an outsider,” or “You think: If I had a better sense of humor, everything would be okay.”

The regular cadence of this endless incantation acts as a kind of hypnotic, phonic drone, and, by their placement, act as an unrelenting textual stream, which may be part of the overall visual and language humor in this work. For the whole book is framed with the images of a train—in the first pages approaching (dangerously) and at the end passing (thankfully)—and everything in between is the jittery clamor of this textual train of thought. This is part of the

material orchestration of all the elements of this book. The visual images generally depict a slightly hallucinatory, patterned series of scenarios and abstractions, designed precisely (presumably) for their destabilizing sensory effect.

In this way, this material language system, which is textual, phonic, and visual, and completely integrated with the rhythms and conceptual structuring of the book, is a multisensorial one; for some of us, much more so than any audio-visual computer experience.

Zimmerman made another, larger, seemingly simpler book, *Long Story Short* (1999) [fig. 5], which comprises full-page color images that are close-up clippings from 1950s' magazines. This is a systematic extraction that implies more by exclusion than inclusion. In this clipping and enlargement, the original halftone dots are greatly enlarged. The effect, in this case, is to offer an instant visual metaphor for the myopia of a narrow view, reminding us of the manufactured nature of our cultural reality.

Text strings, printed white on black strips, are placed through most of the book. These are short, simple phrases, each broken into their two main linguistic parts, which take the form of single present-participle verbs, such as "burning," and short noun phrases, such as "the midnight oil." Most pages present a number of these phrases, which are always split into these components by the gutter, page-turn, or gate-fold.

Thus, we can read these phrases normally, for example, as "burning / the bridges," "cooking / your goose," or "wrestling / with demons." But since several such phrases appear on most spreads, we are easily tempted (perhaps encouraged) to make other "incorrect," perhaps more subversive, combinations. For example, instead we might read "burning / over the coals," or "cooking / with demons," or "wrestling / your goose."

While the conventional reading of the phrases reinforces the banal clichés that might pass as wisdom in a superficial culture, our more seditious readings seem to imply a lurking, existential absurdity just below the fragile, sanitized surface of this consensus reality.

This small shift in our own act of reading, which permits these more mutinous meanings, is achieved by the simple, inventive alignment of one aspect of the structure of language (its linguistic sections) and the structure of the book form itself (the gutters, gate-folds and page-turns). This material orchestration is simple but powerful.

Books such as Drucker's and Zimmermann's do their work, I would suggest, not by persuasion of literate logic, but by the orchestration and synergy of the material and sensory affects of their various language systems and book structures. They are able to induce a more direct sensory experience in the reader, to entrance with their phonic and visual rhythms, cycles, and rhymes. And in these affects we can identify, I believe, an echo of preliterate devices such as incantation, charm, and enchantment, but delivered now with a dazzling visuality.

These works explore just some ways in which artistsbooks represent space with a material, sensory choreography of language. We could find various examples of other ways that an artistsbook might do its work. For example, the elements in a mosaic or field structure might be juxtaposed, interlaced or layered instead of

linear. In this process, perhaps some other less-coded grammatical sensibilities might be restored. But what of the temporal dimension of this putative postliteracy?

A Modern Mythic Form

If our standard literacy represents itself with standard chronology, how would a new literacy represent time? What kind of story could it tell? How would it tell that story, if not with narrative time? I would argue that our usual story form, the narrative, is inherent in the linear sequentiality of our standard language structures. Language is infused with hierarchical, subordinate relations, which themselves imply stories, and these stories are generally projected in sequential, causal chains. In preliterate, oral language forms, however, meaning did not especially depend upon chronological time. Other forms could prevail.

Traditionally, we might associate the word "myth" with preliterate world views that, among other things, offer various explanations of cosmic creation or supernatural ancestry. Most cultures have such myths somewhere in their DNA. But I want to explore this term in a more contemporary sense here, focusing on the temporal madness of the mythic method.

Myth is a form that potentially permits a single, synchronous overlay of the various times and dimensions of different ideas, events, and experiences. It is relatively rare to find in the contemporary artistsbook the conventions of the standard narrative. Instead, in the spirit and method of myth, the artistsbook often offers a more open field capable of hosting multiple, simultaneous, perhaps contradictory, moments, spaces or realities—often in defiance of temporal logic.

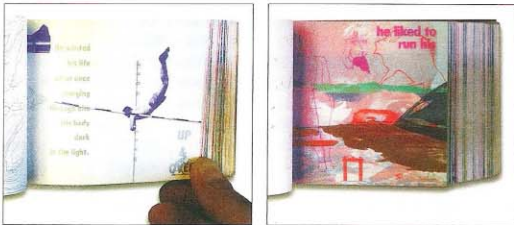
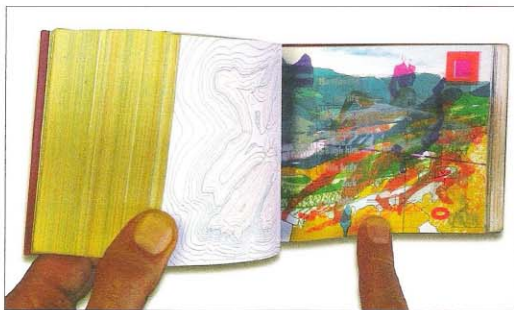
As a form that confounds many of the conventions of standard literacy, including time, myth may well be a mode, I suggest, that is recreated anew in the artistsbook, which is perhaps a hardcopy home for a modern mythic form.

"We begin again," McLuhan writes, "to structure the primordial feelings and emotions, from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us. We begin again to live a myth."²⁶ While McLuhan wasn't referring to artistsbooks here, he might well have been.²⁷

Myth is just one form, I suggest, in which the temporal dimension is explored with this possible new literacy. And myth often renders time in cycles.

One bookwork whose representations of time suggest to me the forging of another literacy is *Real Lush* (1981) by Kevin Osborn [figs. 6 & 7]. This work too is often quoted for good reason. This work masquerades as a kind of fat little flipbook. In it, time has become multiple cycles of time as the text and image elements are revisited at various intervals and layered into larger patterns of interaction. And this allows rhythms of meaning to accrete and resonate.

A large vocabulary of repeating visual elements include drawings of a landscape, the torso of a woman, machinery, photographic images of various faces, and so on. Many textual fragments add to this lexicon, such as "destiny," "delay," "violence," "beauty," "difficult to change," and many others. All these elements are cycled and recycled. Over the various juxtapositions of such elements, portraits of some main characters incrementally arise. There is a father who "always had a plan," a mother who "wanted to eat the petals of a flower," a frightened and lonely child, and a narrator/



Figures 6 & 7: *Real Lush*, ©Kevin Osborn, 1991

author who might, at different times, be any of these characters.

The varying conjunctions of elements encourage different interpretations of the same elements. For example, the phrase “Up and Over” in conjunction with different sets of images variously implies something athletic, psychological, sexual, or military. Phrases such as “he liked to run his hand down the dull metal of the engine” connote different and compounding meanings when placed variously in conjunction with the image of a generator, a primeval bison, or the torso of a woman.

In a conventional storyline, these momentary combinations of elements might resemble “events,”²⁸ but the result here is very different. These are more like shifting nodes of meaning that do not condense into causal chains or hierarchical structures, nor encourage conclusions. Amid the complexity of overlay, which is both visual and metaphorical, these elements and cycles simply speak as, and between, themselves each time. This allows their own mutually modifying moments of meaning to arise and pass.

This book proposes and presents a conception of time and a way of accreting meanings that is very different from the plotlines, events, and conclusions of conventional narrative sequence. Its grammars of accumulation, association, repetition, and resonance avoid linear disquisition, and, like it or not, speak more like the changing conditions and chaos of a real life lived.

Time in Osborn’s work is presented as cycles in repeated overlays. But another conception of time presented in the artistsbook might be like an instant overview, or singularity, as in a map.

To explore this option, I will consider one of my own works called *37PEACES – the puzzle of an epiphany* (2012) [figs. 8 & 9]. This book works in two ways: the way a puzzle works, with its endless, shuffling problem-solving with the hope of final resolution, and like a map, which, in its way, banishes time entirely. It could be argued that a map’s instant overview is itself problem-solved, a singularity out of time.

There are repeating visual elements in this work, such as fields of photographic images, drawings, and strings of text. While some of

these overlapping and cross-referencing elements seem to imply incidental narratives, the pages themselves don’t offer any clear reading sequence. The most insistent element on each page is a wandering black line describing some kind of abstract image.

In the left-hand corner of each spread, the reader finds some kind of pointer and this is, of course, a guide as to how these image-spreads might be put together. The pointers suggest we are reading some form of navigational directory. At some point, the reader will have flipped to the back of the book, where there is a legend, a map of maps. And this reveals how all these page-spreads interlock and overlap, indeed like a street directory.

In fact, the image buried in these pages is the reworking of a woodblock image from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Aldus Manutius, first published in 1499.²⁹ Each page-spread here is a fragment of the map or landscape of this image. To determine what this means, the reader will have to read on and perhaps somehow cross-reference or patch together (mentally or materially) the images of these pages. Here we enter the game of this work: the map as story, the story as map.

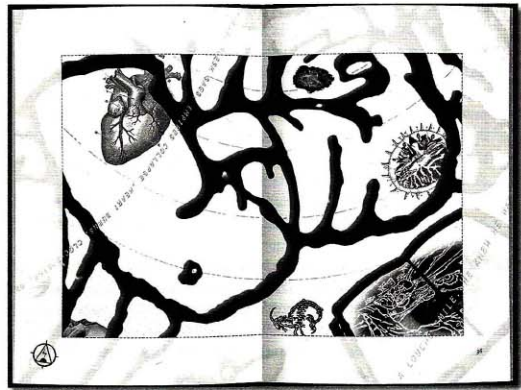
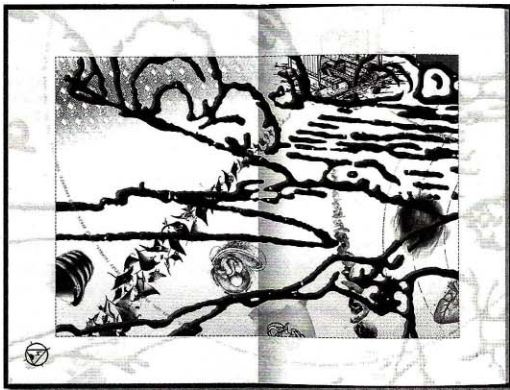
Conventional stories might also sometimes be thought of as kinds of maps that help us locate ourselves in a larger cosmos of things or events. Conventional stories, however, do this with chronology, for narratives (like progress) need time. But unlike the conventional narrative, the map is timeless. It proposes an immediate moment or dimension of insight. In this sense, the map is also “mythical.” In the same instant, the mythical map surveys all sorts of different, metaphorical terrain that might include innumerable, perhaps incommensurable elements, whose co-appearance and webs of relations may be illogical from the point of view of time and sequence.

The map of *37PEACES* conjoins, without resolution, images from very different moments in space and time. We view an upturned suburban lawnmower and a pseudo-erotic drawing by Leonardo da Vinci; the exploded parts of an engine and the walnut brain of a drawn character. When assembled, the drawings on these pages propose one of those classic instant moments of insight: an epiphany. Embedded in its own landscape—the timeless map—the epiphany proposes a short-circuit of narrative time and serves as temporal focus of this whole idea of a modern, mythic form.

There are, of course, many other ways in which time is construed in the artistsbook beyond narrative chronology. For example, Michael Snow’s classic *Cover to Cover* (1975), by previewing and reviewing other sequences in the book, seems to fold time like a fan, or shuffle time like a deck of cards. In the end, this has the effect also of collapsing time, in this case quite pointedly between the covers of a book. If one drew a temporal graph of *The Better Half* (2011), a work by Ines von Ketelhodt, they would find that two simultaneous backward paths of time conjoin at the centre of the book—its present. This exactly mirrors its theme of genetic lineage. The potential examples are many.

Where does all this leave us? For myself, in spirit, I still carry a small book in my back pocket.

In this short paper, I have briefly explored the idea that, over the centuries of our standard literacy, the conventions of pictorial space, chronological narrative time, and the line came to privilege a very specific way that our language looks and works. Its standardized



Figures 8 & 9: 37PEACES—the puzzle of an epiphany, Lyn Ashby

homogeneity encouraged a retreat from the dimension of our perceptual, sensory lives when making meaning with language forms. This surely was a limitation out of which, it seems, we were destined to evolve. One way or another, slowly perhaps, we return to our senses and read a living page.

What we find on the pages of some artistsbooks (perhaps the most challenging) is an active spatial grammar in which language forms are valued as much for sensory affect as semantic code. We reclaim, I suggest, aspects of preliterate language forms that invoke qualities akin to musical grammars and sensibilities. But the representation of these qualities now in modern, textual, graphic, photographic, and spatial forms means that in order to truly read and comprehend these works, it is not sufficient to simply apply the tools of standard conceptual literacy. It is not enough to merely be literate.

Largely gone is the dominance of the line, both spatial and temporal. Gone, mainly, is Euclid. More radically, perhaps even gone (or receding fast) is Ulises Carrión's "space-time sequence."³⁰ For what is sequence in the end but a convention of one-way reading?

Going by the evidence of what we see on their pages, contemporary artistsbooks appear to have transformed or transcended the core conventions of our background standard literacy. When reading these forms, have we thus also transcended standard literacy? This has, I suggest, probably been a long, quiet evolution, until recently, and is now really picking up a pace.

If the general proposition that some preliterate, oral forms and sensibilities are now given form by the devices of our notational literacy, then this does suggest to me a natural, leap-frogging evolution in literacy. Perhaps then the term "postliteracy," positioned as it is in the developmental stream of our ways with language from pre-literacy and through literacy, with their enfolding, layering and inventive synergy, captures more of the sense of the evolutionary, experimental future of all this. But, of course, this is an open question for all of us.

In the end, I think it is unimportant what we call this literacy and its perceptual literature that Joan Lyons wrote about thirty years ago. It seems more useful that we attempt to recognize its features and its functioning in order to become more fluent in this language of the material page. With this greater fluency, rather than getting sidetracked with various novelty qualities, as sometimes happens now, I think we'll know better how to truly read artistsbooks. When this happens, I suspect, we'll see a great leap forward in the discourse surrounding this whole field of reading, understanding, and talking about artistsbooks.

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- 1 The term "artists' book" has always been contentious, and the term that I prefer and will be using in this paper is "artistsbook." Although only a small modification, it eliminates the uncertain possessive case. This contraction emphasizes, I think, process rather a product, which captures more of the core experimental sense of the types of works I consider here.
- 2 Just as Jean-François Lyotard proposed that postmodernism is not something that comes after modernism, but, in ways that defy the conventional interpretation and experience of time, entails qualities that are more like the inherent "nascent state" of modernism, as if its creative engine, I suggest that core aspects of this idea of postliteracy are more like literacy's suppressed creative core that is contained and normalized by conventions of literacy. For more about Lyotard's ideas, see Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *Modernity/Postmodernity*, ed. Peter Brooker (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1992), 147.
- 3 Besides its various speculative applications in the world of digital and screen technologies, the term "post-literacy" is used also to refer to the next stages of skills acquisition for the newly literate. The cascading use of the prefix "post-" began to come to my attention with articles such as Robert McLaughlin's "Post-postmodernism," in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (New York: Routledge, 2015), 212–23.
- 4 These terms have all arisen in the various fields of speculation about new literacies both in the digital and print realm usually concerning the mix of visual and textual material. Of greatest interest here are those concerning the print-based cousins of artistsbooks, such as experimental literature, concrete and visual poetry, comics and comic narratives, and certain types of photobooks.
- 5 Joan Lyons, ed., *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 7.
- 6 It might be justifiably suggested that Derrida built a career on critiquing the ideologies inherent in literacy, language, and the book.
- 7 There is a considerable body of neuroscientific evidence to support such ideas. For example, a few sample articles

- concerning partial stroke victims whose language is Korean or Japanese in which reading is a complex mix of both phonetic code and a more holistic, visual ideogrammic comprehension offers very strong evidence that these functions take place in different parts of the brain and represent different cognitive processes. See, for example, Mee Kyung Suh, Eun-Joo Kim, Byung Hwa Lee, Sang Won Seo, Juhee Chin, Sue J. Kang & Duk L. Na, "Hanja (Ideogram) Alexia and Agraphia in Patients with Semantic Dementia," *Neurocase* 16, no. 2 (2010): 146–56.
- 8 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage, An Inventory of Effects* (San Francisco: HardWired, 1996), 44.
 - 9 Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Writing* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 41. The actual direction of this one-directionality differs between alphabets and cultures. The Arabic and Hebrew alphabets run right-to-left, while the early Greek form, the boustrophedon, switched direction line by line, until it settled on the familiar left-to-right.
 - 10 From within the world of our literacy, we might find it hard to imagine options. But there have been many examples of preliterate peoples representing their experiences with non-linear and non-sequential forms of space and time. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan explored some of these in a series of publications. For example, see Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter, *Explorations in Communication, An Anthology* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1960).
 - 11 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 1.
 - 12 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), 16.
 - 13 Euclid is considered to be the father of standard geometry, writing *The Elements* circa 300BCE. Of course, Euclid could not have written this thirteen-volume tome without the qualities of literacy.
 - 14 The cultural forces to establish such a conception of space (and time) were powerfully augmented from the world of the sciences in the late-seventeenth century when Sir Isaac Newton argued, apparently convincingly, for "absolute space." Such an idea maps closely onto the idea of Euclidean space. See Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 23.
 - 15 Both pictorial space and narrative time are huge research areas in themselves and command a great deal of intellectual, cultural, and philosophical inquiry. I cannot pretend to have done more than scratch the surface of these topics and only use them as pointers in this paper as focus for this idea of the domination of the line in literacy. The issues unleashed by these ideas compound when we consider the difference between time and chronology, and what this difference might mean for our ideas of narrative, to use just one example.
 - 16 Though mainly unconscious, literacy's grammatical operations, from the interplay of simple letterforms to the mechanisms of its larger language structures, are essentially linear, analytical, logical, and conceptual even when dealing with images.
 - 17 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: Poème*. Facsimile of original, Paris: Gallimard, 1952 [1914].
 - 18 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1st US ed. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 86.
 - 19 Ibid.
 - 20 By 1914, Picasso and Braque had ruptured the picture plane in the visual arts while Einstein had revolutionized both space and time in the scientific world. By 1922, the modernist pastiche of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Gertrude Stein's characteristic repetitive literary structures had reimaged these dimensions for literature. But perhaps the most radical experiments for the page were with innovators like FT Marinetti, Ilia Zdanevich, and El Lissitzky working at the nexus of the literary and visual arts in what we would now call the book arts.
 - 21 Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Book, Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 147.
 - 22 Johanna Drucker, *Diagrammatic Writing* (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Onomatopoe 97, 2013), 27.
 - 23 Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), 92–93.
 - 24 Ibid.
 - 25 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 98.
 - 26 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (London: Rapp & Whiting Ltd, 1969), 17.
 - 27 Ingrid Sishev provocatively (and perhaps presciently) wrote that "If Marshall McLuhan were a gypsy and his tea cup the art world, the tea leaves would be artists' books," *National Arts Guide* 1, issue 1 (Jan–Feb 1979): 2–3.
 - 28 Roland Barthes proposed that narrative needs events or "agents" (often identified as "characters"). But in Barthes's conception here, such events or agents are "players" rather than passing forces or conditions like those we find in Osborn's work. There is a similar distinction to the landscape as character that we find in *37PEACES*, discussed a little later. See Roland Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image Music Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 106.
 - 29 Francesco Colonna, *Hyperotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream* (Lexington: Theophania Publishing, 2011) is a modern paperback translation of this classic work, with images, first published by Aldus Manutius in 1499.
 - 30 Ulises Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books," in *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 31. This is a refreshing, radical essay which has the flavor and energy of a manifesto and seems to disencumber the book of much of its obscuring history. Early in the essay, Carrión writes that the book is "an autonomous space-time sequence."