

Beyond Reason: the artist's books of Lyn Ashby

by Des Cowley, Rare Printed Collections Manager, State Library of Victoria

**This image was misattributed in the Winter 2011 issue of IMPRINT. The correct attribution is: Lyn Ashby, I Decline Myself, 2008, Cottles Bridge, Vic., thistopress, digital prints on transparent paper, written, printed and bound by Lyn Ashby; maximum edition of 50, 30 x 34 cm, clothbound box. Collection: State Library of Victoria*

There is something mildly uninged about the artist's books of Lyn Ashby. While his books emerge out of conceptual concerns, there is a tendency for them to go beyond reasonable inquiry, moving into obsessive and irrational processes. At the same time, they exhibit a mocking and playful quality, steadfastly refusing to take the world too seriously.

A case in point is *The Fall* (2010), which displays a determined resolve to pursue an idea to its logical conclusion. It comprises 666 digital prints, derived from an original hand-made series of potato prints (a photograph of the potato appears in the book's colophon). The book is a sequential assemblage of the progressively chaotic prints that record the degradation of the potato as it was literally mashed during the making of the prints. Convinced that this process of decay had to be a metaphor for something or other, Ashby carved into his potato a relief image of an angel falling from grace, based on an image of Lucifer. On one level, *The Fall* is an absurd playing out of a foregone conclusion (i.e. the potato will be mashed), and at the same time the book's 666 prints recount the dramatic events of Lucifer's fall and descent into hell.

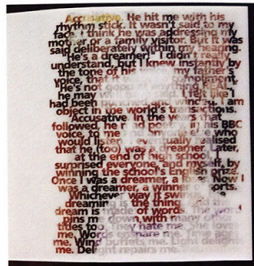
Lyn Ashby's educational history points to an intellectual restlessness, and a willingness to engage with a wide variety of art practices. His earliest studies were in architecture, a discipline he acknowledges he didn't enjoy,

due mainly to an absence of 'story'. He switched to literature, which remains an important influence, and later completed a degree in Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts. For a period, he made short animated films, before undertaking a Masters in Graphic Design at the London College of Printing. He is currently a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, investigating artists' books as the future of literacy.

While this apparent rag-bag of formal study might suggest an unsettled character, the reality is that Ashby's current practice of book-making draws upon all these disciplines: architecture, 'visual' literacy, graphic design and print technologies. At their most fundamental, his books could be said to combine physical structure — or architecture — with storytelling.

Ashby's books generally take as their starting point some fundamental truth or received wisdom. His interest lies in road testing these theorems, looking at them from every angle, turning them this way and that. As such, his books function like slightly crazed philosophical investigations, the products of an obsessive desire to expose the rusty mechanics underpinning rational thought.

The Ten Thousand Things (2009) takes its title from a well-known phrase, derived from Taoist philosophy. In it, Ashby poses the question: if everything in the world can be



expressed in ten thousand things, what then is the ten-thousand-and-first thing? Echoing Stéphane Mallarmé's famous dictum — everything in the world exists to end up in a book — *The Ten Thousand Things* posits the very first thing as a book. This book or 'thing' is gradually joined in the subsequent pages by photographic images of thousands of other 'things', some symbolic, others random, until the conglomeration of shapes begins to re-coalesce into one of the original 'things', thus beginning the process anew. In this way, the book itself functions as a loop whose ending posits one final question: what 'thing' is beyond *The Ten Thousand Things*?

For several of his books — *I Decline Myself* (2008) and *Twenty Minutes* (2010) — Ashby printed the text and images onto transparent paper, allowing the reader, at any point, to view what has come before and what comes after — though in a purposefully occluded way. *I Decline Myself* investigates the idea that we are formed by language. In working his way through the various declensions of a noun, the author literally constructs a self-portrait of the artist out of words. *Twenty Minutes* is a book about time, and how we can never perceive more than a fragment — or twenty minutes on a clock face — of what takes place around us. The book presents a history of everything — framed as panoramic twenty-minute slices — that attempts to replicate our experience of the world as it whirrs by.

Lyn Ashby's books are made from digital prints, in projected editions of fifty copies. While they appear to operate within a logical framework — incorporating his varied interests in philosophy, literature, film, photography, architecture — there is a marked tendency in these works toward an existential breaking point, which is perhaps where the real inquiry begins. His books ask questions, they set propositions in motion. In attempting to play out their permutations and patterns beyond the point of reason, I suspect there are times when even Ashby himself is at the mercy of where the answers might lead. •

www.lynashby.com

Lyn Ashby, *The Ten Thousand Things*, 2009, Cottles Bridge, Vic., thistopress, digital prints on Arches watercolour paper; written, printed and bound by Lyn Ashby; maximum edition of 50, 29 x 25 cm, hardbound with paper on boards, clothbound box. Collection: The Artist.

