



WRITING BOOKS

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He sees his body as a librarian might, as a librarian might regard an estate, penetrated by divergent patterns, each claiming a new hold on his nature; and this particular librarian daydreams that, when the sun is finally insufficient and the lamps must be lit, then the wild penumbra of other orders will present themselves, and so, burned orange in the lamplight, the world is available for reinvention on the same tired shelves.

A pair of wonderful book titles: The first, by Keith Smith—book artist and photographer—is a slim volume titled *Text in the Book Format*. It's a detailed exploration of the visual grammar of the space of the page—what happens when words are allowed to float free, to run into the gutter, to rotate, blur, change sizes... what happens when words behave like things? The title is the simple gesture of not taking for granted how text should fit into the “book format,” and for me, it opens up a host of questions and possibilities, takes the proverbial cork out of the bottle. Let's adjust the title though, make it more familiar (*text* is plain, *format* is clinical): let's consider “writing in books.” It's so romantic.

The second title is from a survey of a number of book artists—makers of “artists' books.” Artists' books are works of art in which the form, or variations on the form, of the book is central to the idea or theme of the work; the book is the medium, sometimes the canvas of such work. Artists' books can tend to challenge our notion of what a book is or what a book should contain; they compel us to read differently and to manage a range of sensations: imagery, textures, sculptural elements, strange openings, and non-linear courses. The title is *The Cutting Edge of Reading* (Hubert & Hubert).

For me, the cutting edge of reading is the reading that challenges us deeply, that stops us in our tracks, that leads our brains down some winding road and leaves us gaping into a void, a blank. The cutting edge of reading compels us to write, maybe in a notebook, or in the margins of the book—anywhere. But this writing at the cutting edge isn't necessarily a response; it might be a break with the text, even a dismissal. Most books won't be jealous if they lead us right out of their gates. This cutting, slicing, separating edge of reading breaks with us as it breaks with the familiar landscape of meaningful phrases, sensible ideas, known quantities. It welcomes us to our own ignorance.

He wrote: "Stories don't live in books, but between them, in that noise in search of signal—but no matter the signal, the noise remains!" In this way, he resumed from the tension between books—his notes, his marginal and metaphorical presence less and less unsure. A rearrangement of texts produced a new body and the same old body, renewed the prospect of it speaking in the terms of story, in readable terms, through him, to take the shape of the noise immediately lost as it is gathered.

What of books? I could wax poetic on the qualities of a well-bound blank book, the beauty and immediacy of writing in books, the non-linear, bodily process of pouring one's ideas onto pages that gain shape as they thicken and warp with ink.

Of interest to me here, though, is the subtle deceitfulness of books. Books offer the lies of wholeness, sequence, and permanence. Books offer, in this sense, an image counter to the disruptive cutting edge of reading, something counter to the possibility that something more can be written. Part of the deceit rests in the apparent unification of text and book; to most literate people, the two seem inextricably conjoined: the text begins at the beginning of the book (or near enough) and ends at the end; one writes simultaneously a "novel" and a "book," as if the two were the same thing.

The simple phrase "writing in books" draws me toward a different image. I see, on the one hand, books, a wall of books, all spine and shoulders and joints, pages well-packed between dividing covers. On the other hand, I can conjure the sense of the words, lines, and paragraphs of those numerous volumes as divisible again and again: unbound and rebound in some new order: all contain mere writings, gestures of thought that for every reader carry distinct vibrations, send out new spectral airs, sentient, fibrous interweavings that illuminate the space between books. That is where writing and reading might coexist.

...the long unending lines of formless forms, stories crammed against the walls by the dozens, thousands even, lines woven tightly together to form substantial apparitions among the pages, between books: stories leap and hold to one another like lovers and like enemies and unearth a new desire, a desire that takes its own form, a form in the grid and in the mass of the reader, like a haunting, a lonely form, waiting and all the same engrossed in the gruesome possession that lets us read and write as if with liveliness: he could then speak, could then move and orient himself as a character, beneath the necessary clouds one day as a character, and what's called a speaker, with verbs and objects and articles arrayed as torches, and by his own rhetoric become a place where voices can intersect, where lurks an eye that translates between the dead subject and the living object, not the precious intricacies of feeling and image, but the very pattern that warms blood in the reader's cheek: in the intimacy of marginal writing, that margin where readings intersect, there, he would become the moment of reading with no recourse to memory.

We write in the desperate attempt to repeat the experience of reading *in* ourselves, *from* ourselves. We write toward the idea of a book in order to reproduce the pleasure of deception, perhaps the pleasure of coming upon our own book one day, finding it lovely and romantic and recognizing in it someone altogether strange, a voice started and stopped.

And we write as a gift, a voluntary failure to use language properly. We compose for the book form, and we compose toward the cutting edge of reading because the edge is the ignorance we hope to reveal and the form is the body that breaks beautifully as it is reanimated on the shelf with its lovers and its enemies.