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The Impossible Book

by Jeff Derksen
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While the form of the “book” is now going through a period of general upheaval, and while that form now appears less natural, and its history less transparent than ever, and while one cannot tamper with it without disturbing everything else, the book form alone can no longer settle... the case of those writing processes which, in practically questioning the form, must also dismantle it.
Jacques Derrida, Dissemination (1967)

Following Stéphane Mallarmé’s rigorous architecture for a book, Klaus Scherübel’s project Mallarmé, The Book gives us a thing whose design, modes of production and political economy were meticulously scripted by Mallarmé himself. And despite the digital warning that sounded the death of the book through shifts in technology – from CD ROMs, virtual libraries accessible on the web and books loaded onto Palm Pilots – books as things have remained relatively constant in their form even as their political economy has fluctuated. Like many of the things we use here in Canada, books have become more globalized in their production and their consumption even as they continue to look more or less the same.

The book’s uncanny aspect is located in the tension between its use value (literacy and information) and its value as a commodity in the chain of production as it moves from the printing press and the bindery to the bookstore shelves, folding into reader’s lives and re-circulating as social meaning. During the bookwork discussion at Artspeak, Roger Farr commented that Mallarmé’s *Le Livre* is a composition to record the political and economic condition in which the book is published, and circulated compresses the uncanny condition of the book and the force of Mallarmé’s project.

Scherübel’s styrofoam-filled object fills the impossible center of Mallarmé’s project, producing something that is secondary to its political economy at the same time as it foregrounds that condition. Scherübel’s Mallarmé, The Book is the cipher of the “creative practice” that Mallarmé expended on the project (without which Scherübel’s project would not exist), as well as a commodity circulating in the economy of a standard book and an artist’s multiple within yet another economy and set of social meanings. It is an object whose thingness constantly refers back to the creative, economic and social scaffolding that produced it and gives it meaning.

Roger Farr's project of translating Mallarmé's texts also points back to Mallarmé's original labour. Farr's act of translating is a mirror of cultural production that does not seek to generate a unique text from Mallarmé's original, but re-inscribes the materiality of the text. Translation as experiment and translation as process have been a strong part of contemporary Canadian literature (perhaps most dramatically performed through the Toronto Research Group) and these investigations came on the crest of theories which sought to refigure the relationship between reader and writer, between source text and target text, between literary text and social text and the terrain of cultural translation. Farr's emphasis on the visual and the graphic contests cultural translation by moving away from it, instead pushing the materiality of the text to the foreground as the dominant feature. In this aspect, Farr's translation project shares something with the Russian Formalists who sought to define the "literariness" of a text in order to take it out of the hands of critics who did not provide any tools to understand how a text works, how it creates its effects. For the Formalists, the literary text was not a mysterious event tied to the genius of the author, but a skilled construct. Likewise, translation has been approached as a mysterious process – one which cannot fully yield the secrets of the original text – in which the goal is to semantically mirror the original text (and this is what facing page translations literally do). Farr does not aim to reproduce the genius of a Mallarmé text, but to produce the skill of the text, and in a sense, the precision of the material.

Mallarmé's precision was to provide every detail of *Le Livre*, but of course, without the book itself. Marina Roy's *Sign after the X* provides details of the letter X by accumulating a social history of that enigmatic sign. Supported by an abundance of formal book conventions – dedication page, contents, foreword, prologue, introduction, preface, etc. through to epilogue, postscript and appendices – Roy collapses the scale of the book with the scale of the letter. The letter – which is normally integrated transparently into a word, then words to syntax, sentences to paragraphs, paragraphs to chapters, etc. within the normal hierarchy of reading – here becomes the material of the book. But Roy's project is not a return to the moment of semiotics moved into artists' production, a project aimed to open the sign to chains of meaning, to free signification from its restrictions. Instead Roy takes what could be the most 'empty' of signs – and a sign which stands for a blank – and then fills it in with strings of historical social histories. These histories move from the most 'empty' to the most loaded. There are many candidates for both these poles – for instance, the most empty could easily be XFL, The Extreme Football League, which was cooked up by the mastermind of the World Wrestling Federation and lasted only three months (if I remember correctly, the games were shown on the Fox network, which is itself another candidate for the contested sign of X). For taking in an analysis of the history of race, capitalism and property, the most historically replete example is Malcolm X, who refused the name given to his family by slave owners and took X as the sign of resistance and transformation. A pun in the title, *Sign After the X*, is made when sign becomes a noun, not a verb. This book follows the sign X as it is filled with social meaning.

The spatial metaphor of Mallarmé's *Le Livre* as the architecture of a possible book provides an entry into Isabelle Pauwel's project, *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent*. If we think of Pauwel's bookwork spatially, it is a script for architecture. The apartments in which the scenes are placed are represented in the most generic manner through floor plan drawings and computer-renderings at the beginning of the book's sections. And the fictitious names and addresses of the apartment buildings, which are the subtitles for the sections, are generic enough to be anywhere in North

America, or they could be the type of addresses used in films or TV shows, addresses that function in the same way as the fictitious 555 prefix of TV phone numbers.

The lives of the characters that Pauwels writes into the apartments give the architectural space meaning. These represented spaces could also be film sets. In another sense, the scenes provide a view into the production of space through everyday life, but these everyday events are scripted for film, so the turn is that the script engages with the production of architectural space in film. The final script, in fact, is about the making of a movie and ends with the line, uttered by the character The Director, "Film is a powerful medium." The tensions in the scripts - the dialogue of the characters - is not focused on the spatial aspects of architecture, but in many cases, on the class tensions that arise between tenants and owners. This makes the scripts read more as sitcoms in which the situation has class tension (consider sitcoms such as *Chico and the Man*, *Taxi*, *Roseanne* and *King of Queens* versus classless, and predominantly deracinated, sitcoms *Friends* or *Seinfeld*).

As a bookwork *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent* shares a formal aspect with Steve McCaffery's *Carnival Panels* (1967-70, 1970-75) as the book has to be cut to be read or viewed. McCaffery's panels necessitate the "destruction" of the book; the individual pages must be torn from the binding to be assembled into the larger panel. Pauwel's bookwork maintains the untrimmed pages that are made as the book's signatures are printed and then bound – *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent* skips the last process of trimming and the reader must do this for themselves, or peek between the pages. This combination of architecture, cutting and destruction draws a parallel to Gordon Matta-Clark and his "cutting" of houses slated for demolition. Matta-Clark would transform the house briefly into sculptures and simultaneously foreground the structure as architecture. The final products of Matta-Clark's interventions were photos, films and bookworks.

The historical oddity of Mallarmé's *Le Livre* was to detail the production and circulation of the book in a way that made the book itself superfluous, and in a sense impossible. In contrast to our contemporary fetishized globalization, *Le Livre* privileged production over consumption. Part of the materiality of the bookwork has been to reveal its production in some way, to roughen up the commodity by leaving traces of its making. It is this imagined space – between the impossibility of completion and the insistence upon materiality – that *Sign After the X*, *Unfurnished Apartment for Rent* and Farr's translation of *Le Livre* seek to occupy.