

Book handling as a research method - Tim Daly

The physician Oliver Sacks¹ when helping to restore sight to a previously blind patient, observed that 'natural vision itself is a braiding and nesting of the optical and the tactile.' Handling as a method for engaging with art is found within the discourses of material culture and museology, but less within the field of artists' book production.

Unlike most visual art, touch is a fundamental aspect of interacting with books, especially artists' books. Such works are made to be handled and scrutinised at close quarters in the personal space of the reader rather than behind glass in an art museum or library. As Serres² suggests, 'the eye has no weight to impose, it imprints nothing. On the subject's front line is the skin.' The prohibition of this knowing touch in museums, art galleries and even displays of artists' books within vitrines, disables a fuller reception of the work.

During my recent practice as research doctoral study exploring the materiality of the photographic print in artists' books, it soon became apparent that there was no obvious framework to describe my experience of handling books, yet this was a fundamental part of my research.

While Serres³ suggests 'fabrics, textiles and material provide excellent models of knowledge', how do we conceptualise touch? What syntaxes are available to report our experiences of handling an artists' publication? Can the material elements of a book trigger their own intertextual responses in the reader? While we can deconstruct the formal, visual and conceptual properties of a book and speculate on the intended and unintended narratives within – a rubric for handling seemed much less apparent. Touch does indeed present us with access to information⁴ but the way in which this is collected, synthesised and reported is not clear cut. Artists' books have a rich and unexplored material narrative quoting and cross-referencing other books. Makers employ a wide variety of material strategies gleaned from handmade traditions to mass production – both inviting a haptic experience for the reader.

Like many practice as research PhD students, I was at first daunted by the idea of creating a written narrative of my practice and struggled to find a satisfactory form that didn't sound too detached or too introspective. More importantly, I needed to evidence my findings and build to a convincing conclusion. Compounding this was a growing feeling that in addition to making my own practice, my experience of handling artists' publications of all genres was not a separate literature field activity but an integral part of the practice. Developing a method of reporting my experiences of touch therefore, enabled me to enrich my research project.

While it can be straightforward to corral examples of books for a literature review, it is not until you have a physical interaction with the real thing that you can fully make sense of a book work. A thorough reading and reception of a physical book can only be undertaken by handling the object itself, as Hayles⁵ suggests, as it provides 'the feedback loop from materiality to mind.' In addition to directly informing my own

practice, observations made from the experiences of handling of books also generated an additional way of contextualising works that lies outside existing fields of reference.

So, in order to capture my reflections it became necessary to fuse aspects of material culture (for touch) and literary theory (for intertextuality) together into a discourse with handling set at its core.

A discourse for book handling

Could the physical presence of a book object with all its attendant provenance (unique, original, copy, facsimile, limited edition etc) trigger a kind of souvenir-like reception from the reader? The recent upsurge in facsimile publishing of artists' and photographers' notebooks, journals, and sketchbooks as kinds of material souvenirs from a pre-online world, suggests a renewed interest in and perhaps re-instatement of more haptic works that engage readers through touch. As Pearce⁶ suggests, souvenirs

become the vehicles for a nostalgic myth of contact and presence in which a selected view of the persona past is vaunted over the grey and difficult present.

Does the book object too also transmit an urge to touch, handle and hoard? In material culture, Claessen⁷ suggests that our desire to collect and touch an artefact may be linked to Western Christian tradition of accruing benefit by touching a holy object. Such items are seen to possess mystical powers, conferring knowledge, sanctity and personal blessedness, not to say also healing and restorative powers.

Handling books inevitably bring to mind our previous experiences of the same and our interpretations involve weaving together new and old thoughts. In literary theory Kristeva⁸ and Genette⁹ suggests that "all texts (literary, musical or visual) are built like a mosaic of intertextual references." Although these concepts of intertextuality were developed to explore literary forms, Genette suggested his theoretical tools could also be applied to visual art. Since then, literary theorists have sought to extend the range of this concept, suggesting that imitation, variation, quotation, allusion and parody are part of an artistic strategy, and that, as a result, references to other works of art bear meaning.¹⁰

Without handling a book, entire swathes of intertextual nuances are missed - the deliberate material choices of the artist and the reader's own rich experiential past never get the chance to mix together.

Writing about book handling

While no research project ever occurs in a straight line, joining up my episodic practice (I was a part-time student over six years), with my experiences of viewing and handling the works of others provided me with a much-needed structure. I created fifty practice narratives that described book handling and making, each undertaken with a specific rationale. The outcome of each experience I described as

an insight, recounting my thoughts and observations which in turn were summarised by a short conclusion. Once completed, these fifty conclusion concepts were tabled and referenced as part of my thesis conclusion. These fifty instances were themselves sequenced together in a timeline to give a better sense of how book handling informed my practice throughout the duration of the my study. The literature field research element of my study was woven in and amongst my fifty narratives where appropriate, to evidence the breadth of the study and awareness of the field. This also enabled me to find the right place for those 'epiphany' quotations that you collide with along the way, which strengthen your resolve and impel your developing practice into new directions.

Sample narratives

Due to the nature of my research project, I explored a wide variety of artists' books, small press publications, serial publications, editioned folios of prints, photographic prints, plus unique books in held in public archives. The following passages describe a book handling experience first, then a practice response soon after.

Book Handling: William Eggleston's portfolio Southern Suite (1981)¹¹ at the V&A Print Room

Rationale: The Victoria and Albert Museum has one of the twelve existing William Eggleston Southern Suite folios of dye transfer prints, available for personal inspection in the Print Room. Eggleston's numerous portfolio editions consist of a small number of prints linked by a specific theme, and although intended for a moneyed, collector audience, the portfolio form does much to connect the reader with the artist's unique vision. How does the form and materiality of the portfolio and loose-leaf work held within impact on our touch responses?

Insight: Touching the individual prints, feeling the weight of the paper support, scrutinising at close quarters the saturated dyes and the visible mis-registration of the matrix printing process and the uncommon distribution of colours, triggered a very different kind of response to seeing Eggleston's work in the book or gallery print form. Whilst used to handling colour photographic prints through my own practice and family snapshots, the sensation of interacting with the Eggleston folio created different and an unexpectedly physical experience, seeing at first hand details and subtleties that are less obvious in any reproduced or mediated form of the work. Confirming Claessen's¹² suggestion that 'an important advantage of touch lay in its presumed ability to access interior truths of which sight was unaware', handling the prints was a unique experience and very different to seeing the same images in a monograph or website. The prints were housed in a box and the physicality of such a folio case impacts on our reception too – many are constructed from heavy board covered in buckram or more luxurious textiles, together with debossed text or hand-tooled lettering, presenting themselves as hand made receptacles rather than mass produced packaging. Their primary functional purpose is of a protective nature, preventing unnecessary exposure to harmful light, atmospheric pollutants and physical damage. Such folios with a hinged clamshell design also provide a readymade reading container, with left and right hand compartments for the placement and juxtaposition of separate prints. Both of these shallow walled boxes

are usually lined with fine papers simultaneously protecting the prints and also deliberately preventing visual interference by nearby objects or surfaces underneath. These simple constructional devices fundamentally alter the way in which we view and handle the work, perhaps triggering associations with a jewellery case, the velvet-lined clamshell box of a Daguerreotype, or even a board-game with its foldout cardboard playing surface making visual the otherwise abstract rules of gameplay.

Conclusion: Handling prints in a folio box creates a different kind of haptic experience to reading a book. High quality prints provide an enhanced optical experience too, which is in excess of our usual expectations from a book. The two-lid structure of a clamshell case also establishes its own rules for engaging with its content.

As a consequence of the reading in the V&A, I then made a piece of work exploring some of the ideas raised by the handling. For my practice narratives, I created a further 'process' heading to contextualise the subject, materials and reprographics used.

Practice Piece: A Street Name Desired Car

(See images [7,8,9 and 10.jpg](#))

Eleven unmounted C-type prints enclosed within a vintage wallpaper folder, letterpress label. 19.5x24.5cm. Edition of 10

Rationale: This project reused images taken from my own photographic archive of plotland housing developments. Using my experience of handling the Eggleston portfolio, this piece explored a flat folio outer case together with the use of c-type photographic prints – uncommon in a book work, but richly saturated in colour and with a material link to vernacular, family snapshots. The concept was to present a set of single prints that need to be handled and navigated by the reader.

Process: Jaywick Sands, Essex is a unique estate on the north side of the Thames Estuary lying a small distance from Canvey Island. Like many other coastal developments in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, Jaywick became established through the plotland movement. The idea for the piece was triggered by a wordplay on the Tennessee Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as all of the roads within the Brooklands estate in Jaywick are named after cars. I decided to use empty white space within the individual photographic prints to suggest the appearance of a page support, as would be expected in the book form. During the construction of the work, the print edges became an issue that required careful consideration, this resulted in rounded rather than right-angled corners. I felt that this would suggest an additional link to vernacular photolab prints and also providing an unexpected curve that might be explored by the reader's fingertips. These rounded edges were created with a hand punch after receiving the prints back from the lab. On a practical level rounded corners would not show the signs of repeated handling that standard right angle corners would do.

Insight: Providing a set of individual prints instead of a sequence of pages in a codex or accordion fold book, created a more open ended reading experience. Once the cover is opened flat, a single stack of prints sit on the recto waiting to be handled.

When readers interact with the work, they explore the book by placing a print onto the verso, rebuilding the stack one print at a time. This results in each printed image being viewed in two different locations and being viewed as part of two different pairs or spreads. Watching different readers interact with the book was interesting too – as few chose to return the prints to the starting point, meaning the next reader encountered a ‘shuffled pack’. This kind of reading/ handling experience is much more linked with the examination of prints in a portfolio, than flipping pages in a codex-form book. As such, the very act of interrogating the material sets up a reader challenge rather than replaying a familiar experience.

Conclusion: Reader reception of a loose-leaf work held within a folio-type container can be influenced by print size and shape and also by a reading support.

Aggregating my handling and practice narratives

Below is a selection of four statements taken from fifty book handling narratives – these were later folded into my thesis conclusions.

1. Print-on-demand is emerging as the vernacular reprographic style of self-publishing
2. The recirculation of material artefacts within the book form provides an additional kind of documentation, providing a haptic engagement with the work recalling souvenirs, the museum and private collecting.
3. Loose-leaf books or folios allow readers to engage with the material in a more speculative and non-linear manner.
4. The process of opening a loose-leaf work held within a folio-type container can be designed to reveal random, unordered content to the reader.

Touch for Herbert Read¹³ provided an enhanced way of understanding sculpture. Read suggested that compared to vision, handling could reveal three additional elements: a sensation of tactile surface qualities; a sensation of volume and thirdly, a synthetic realization of the mass of the object. While the first two are self-explanatory, Read’s third suggestion is pertinent as it describes the sensation of handling the object as a whole, like a souvenir, a wallet photograph or a netsuke. In this light, it can be argued that handling books provides a type of tacit knowledge that is unavailable from viewing alone. In conclusion, it now seems evident that handling artists’ books and artefacts is becoming less and less possible as Fiona Candlin¹⁴ observed, the diminishing opportunities to touch art in museums, so knowing by handling is increasingly only available to those who are part of art practice networks.

Tim Daly

Illustrations and captions

(note: these are self-standing examples of my work, so they don’t need to sit alongside specific bits of the text, apart from [7,8,9 and 10.jpg](#) which are indicated in the above text)

1.jpg

Returning Burton’s Plunder

24pp silver nitrate/ salt prints and inkjet on pulp paper, buckram cover with paper seal. Staple bound 140x140. 3 copies.

The concept was to reproduce images using Fox Talbot's salt print process, but leave them unfixed. From the time the book's seal was broken and the book was opened, the images would fade a little more, until they eventually fade to black. This inbuilt destruction – prompted by the very act of reading – creates an absurd dilemma for the viewer. Do they continue to look at the unstable images on the page or do they keep the book closed?

2.jpg

Hospital ledgers at the Surrey History Centre

The visit to the archive was a profound experience as I had the chance to re-encounter materials that I assumed were destroyed. The visit triggered a recollection about the material properties of seeing the same books in the hospital twenty years earlier– the copperplate script, ruled ledgers, laid paper textures, hand tooled leather covers, patinated by a hundred years existence but also from more recent damage caused by abandonment and vandalism. I made photographs of the ledgers, taking the decision to also photograph my hand in the act of touching the pages, prints and inserts.

3.jpg

Archive folders at the Surrey History Centre

Sometimes you encounter materials and forms by chance, as these examples of archive folders, and they too can suggest alternatives to the codex.

4.jpg

Neglected Dedications

Inkjet on vintage paperback pages (12), altered cover. 28x15 cm. Unique book

This was constructed from dedication pages detached from paperbacks left by previous visitors to a Cornish holiday home. Unlike most books where the paper page disappears as an invisible carrier of words and image, each sheet documents it's own transience, evidencing its exposure to light and handling by others.

5.jpg

Hardy Exotics Polytunnels

12pp accordion fold inkjet on pulp paper, buckram over boards. 30x20cm.

The first polytunnel book was created to explore the accordion fold format as an alternative to the stitched codex-form. To print on poor quality pulp paper required extensive testing and editing of the source image files, mostly to counterbalance poor contrast resulting from early prints. The first piece was printed in sections and held in a simple cover. The second and third pieces were printed on a continuous roll, creating a 4m long single print

6.jpg

detail of Hardy Exotics Polytunnels

The addition of a UV varnish over the image does much to raise the dynamic range of the paper & ink and will hopefully suspend the fading of this area while the outer paper margins darken with exposure to light. An unforeseen consequence of the varnishing process is the addition of transparent but visible brushmarks to the surface of the print – creating a non-mechanical mark on the paper, which has real potential.

Bibliography

My book handling activities include field research at the National Art Library and the Print Room at the V&A; the Centre des Livres d'Artistes (CDLA) in St Yrieix-la-Perche, arranged very kindly by Emmanuelle Waeckerle and Didier Mathieu, Special Collections at MMU and the Artists' Book Collection at the University of the West of England and the private reading and handling of books that have emerged through my project.

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 - ³ Ibid. p.82.
 - ⁴ Serres, op.cit. p83
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 - ¹¹ William Eggleston *Southern Suite* (Washington DC: Harry Lunn 1981)
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 - ¹² Classen, op.cit. p.141
 - ¹³ Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1956)
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Further reading

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