

The Bookmark Project 2009: *Obsolete*

Now in its eighth year, The Bookmark Project is an annual intervention of artist-designed bookmarks, organized by the Koffler Gallery of the Koffler Centre of the Arts. Both unique pieces and multiples created by visual art students and practicing artists are inserted clandestinely into the thousands of books for sale during the Koffler's Annual Jewish Book Fair. This year's theme, *Obsolete* explores the act of reading from a historical perspective, focusing on contemporary trends that seem to signal an impending death of the book as we know it. As society's fascination with new media continues to rise and the digitization of libraries is becoming common practice globally, is the disappearance of the printed book inevitable? And how does the fate of the bookmark parallel this progression?

The word 'bookmark' has come to refer to more than a tangible object used to signal one's progress when reading printed material; it also references a part of the interface of web browsers, a way to mark one's advancement on the internet while recording a virtual palimpsest of explorations. This obsession with digital media and the consequently altered vernacular of reading marks a shift towards new, intangible ways of absorbing the literature of the past and present. Attention spans have become a scarce resource, decreasing rapidly as the available information multiplies infinitely. This project alludes to the distractions, changes and challenges we face as contemporary readers. With Google steadily becoming the next "Library of Babel," what will happen to the bookmark when all the books are gone?

Although Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Library of Babel* was published in 1941 and spoke to a different time and place, his words resonate loudly in our generation and his ideas are used by contemporary writers and thinkers to make a case against the direction in which our society is headed. His concept of the library is one of a universe where all the world's information and knowledge is contained and can be seen as a precursor to the internet. The modern day explorer is confronted with so much material on the Internet that most of it is rendered illegible and the few genuinely useful texts become all but invisible. Readers have been given access to the ultimate data bank, yet very few know how to properly access and filter through the knowledge. In the past, the printed book held a sort of legitimacy — presumably, the facts had been verified by an editor or trusted source before being sent to print and distributed. The Internet, on the other hand is an endless sea of information, where fact and fiction are indistinguishable.

This year's multiple considers the bookmark as an object in flux, one whose materiality and status is constantly changing. Examining the original knowledge bank, **Clare Yow's** *Hey, Nostradamus!* uses the present day library checkout slip to symbolize the new vernacular of reading in the digital age and how the interface of this institution has adapted with the advancement of technology. The bookmark itself is a digital reproduction of the front and back of a library checkout slip recently used by Yow. The slip becomes a substitute for the bookmark, whose fluid nature allows for replacement by something easily at hand. Also signaling the new role of the bookmark in marking our navigations on the internet, this slip is the electronic record of the artist's reading habits. Checkout slips are ephemeral in nature and physicality, and although the ink will fade away and the paper will tatter, this reproduction will remain, complete with notes that Yow has written on the back, a trace of the artist's ideas and search for information.

Speaking to the issue of legitimacy and the Internet's lack of credibility as reliable source, **Rich Curtis's** work draw attention to what he likes to call 'the grey areas of truth'. As a Notary Public for the state of Alabama, USA, Curtis is legally bound to uphold truthful declarations. Although his jurisdiction is only within the state of Alabama, Curtis has chosen a subtle way to respond to this year's bookmark theme. By producing ten slips of paper imprinted with the declaration 'This is not art' and then stamping them with his official seal, the artist is playing with notions of legality and authority. The declaration that Curtis has notarized with his official seal has in turn legitimized the slips of paper as bookmarks. Generally, once an object is declared a work of art, any sort of utilitarian nature it may have once possessed disappears. In this case, a piece of paper is notarized as 'not art'; therefore it can serve as a bookmark. Using the vernacular of the American legal system, Curtis has turned these seemingly simple pieces of white paper into a conversation between truth and art, questioning at the same time the relationship between his artistic career and his role as a notary public.

While the digitization of the world's libraries is changing the way we absorb the printed word, our way of understanding location is shifting due in part to the digitization of maps and the widespread use of GPS systems and Google Maps/Earth. **Robi Smith**'s work addresses the disintegration of hard copy maps and draws attention to the new ways of navigating the world. Smith's bookmark is based in collage, using found and previously loved materials, such as old postage stamps and book pages, emphasizing the tactile experience of the printed page. In this case, Smith used maps of decades past to emphasize the constant change of information, puncturing holes into her bookmark to amplify the gradual disappearance of the tangible reference. A single fingerprint appears on one side of the bookmark, itself an illustration taken from an old book, reminding that our experience of an object is mediated by our body.

Similarly dealing with issues of tactility and the printed page, **Jennifer Globush** uses the process of etching to produce two bookmarks examining the romanticism inherent to the act of reading books. The bookmarks draw attention to the sensuality of the printed page through a seductive image of birds in flight. By using an old form of printmaking that was abandoned by publishing houses long ago and is currently reserved for fine art practices, Globush examines the history of the printed page and emphasizes her affection for texture, scent, and the aesthetic of this medium. These are momentary treats offered only by a personal involvement with a book. The anticipation of such delicacies of reading are likened by Globush to the instant when birds are about to take flight – an awareness of heightened senses signals that you are about to experience something rare. Technology may be able to provide the words, but lacks the intimacy of each turning page.

Taking the aesthetic properties of a book as inspiration, artists **Stephen Cruise** and **Jacquelin Heichert** have both chosen to produce bookmarks whose physical attributes reference the very materials they were created to accompany, using the book as bookmark. In Heichert's *Pedia*, the artist has chosen to create a hyperlinked botanical encyclopedia by remixing the aesthetics and conventions of old reference books with the new, virtual version, *Wikipedia*. *Pedia* accentuates the vast amounts of information and the vernacular in which we access it. By creating a physical book, with hyperlinks to more information, Heichert humorously plays with the notion of the dead end and the diminishment of our attention spans. Issues of banality and boredom are brought to light in her work, due in part to the fact that the entire encyclopedia is based around the age-old question: is the tomato a fruit or vegetable? This query offers an appropriate insight into contemporary strategies for acquiring information while alluding to the vast amounts of banal information for which *Wikipedia* has become so popular.

While Heichert uses a subtle mix of aesthetics to intervene in this discussion of digitization, Stephen Cruise's interventions confront the reader through their physicality as a way to draw attention to their purpose. Creating bookmarks that look like books, the artist has chosen to reinterpret their traditional role of keeping a reader's place. As stand-ins insisting on reminding the readers of the many books still waiting to be read, the bookmarks are meant to cement a longstanding and unwavering relationship to printed material. Taking aesthetic cues from the history of literature, *ALWAYS*, *neversaynever*, and *What were you thinking?* reinforce Cruise's firm argument that the printed book is not conceding to any demise and our close relationship to the printed page will never cease.

Referencing the media theorists who predicted the shift in technology and the way we absorb information, **Bradley Alan Hart** and **Tania Ursomarzo** have used Robert Logan and Marshall McLuhan as inspiration to deal with the theme of obsolescence. Bradley Alan Hart's bookmark contains the image of a phone jack cast in resin containing appropriated text and real telephone wire. Casting objects means reinforcing them, solidifying their value while also rendering them obsolete. By using an image that represents the end of an old form of communication, Hart plays with notions of nostalgia and change. Choosing to adopt the traditional appearance and physicality of the bookmark, he produces, however, an image that represents our current form of information exchange. Hart argues that although the vocabulary of data exchange has been transformed, books and bookmarks have maintained their relevance in our contemporary world, shifting meaning as time passes but always retaining their importance in our life.

Tania Ursomarzo's work *The Medium is the Massage* is a play on Marshall McLuhan's famous book *The Medium is the Massage*, reproducing page 41 as a symbol of media manipulation. Using the medium of

photography, Ursomarzo has replicated this page numerous times, each successive print being re-photographed and re-printed until the image becomes a mere block of colour. By nature of this process, the image becomes increasingly more cropped, rendering any trace of the original document obsolete. Since McLuhan posited that the way people view the world has changed by the adoption of new media, Ursomarzo takes this statement to an extreme, altering and completely obliterating the original reference material.

Finally, **Gabriel Graham** took a different approach, intervening in the way we read by arbitrarily blacking out blocks of text. Using an old piece of acetate to reference the throw-away nature of information, Graham has chosen to intervene in the reception of knowledge. By blocking out random spaces on the bookmark, the printed page looks like a confidential government document that has been censured for release. This intervention is meant to draw our attention to the way in which our reading has hastened in modern days. By blocking out and haphazardly making words obsolete, the viewer is required to read less and fill in the blanks themselves.

While each artist took a unique and relevant approach to this year's theme, what resonates throughout is the importance and inevitability of change paired with the assurance that books are here to stay. With our fidelity and trust firmly embedded in the printed word, how will we react to the world's largest libraries being converted into ones and zeros? Although some see digitization as a response to calls for environmental reform, our romance with the printed page seems to remain true. As change is inevitable in society, our vernacular of reading must adapt to advancements in technology. The state of the bookmark is in limbo, and only time can tell its fate.

- Teresa Aversa, Guest Curator, The Bookmark Project 2009