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The Book as Technology

By Megan N. Liberty



JANUARY 18, 2018



WHEN WE THINK of reading, we think of scrolling, clicking, and pushing screens, seeing these as replacements for the analog method of turning, flipping, and folding pages. But the book, made through mechanical processes, engineered as an appliance for leisure and instruction, can also be seen as a machine, a tool for use, a technology developed to serve a need, and one with a long and rich history. We, of a certain generation, can remember learning to type and swipe, touching screens as we once touched paper pages, forgetting that previously

the book, too, was a form to be learned. In 2001, a Norwegian television show spoofed this very idea in a skit called “The Medieval Help Desk” in which a monk, distraught, unable to use this new thing called “the book,” goes for help. The aide at the desk then teaches him how to open the cover, assuaging the monk’s fear that “some of the text would disappear” upon turning the page. Curator John Roach cites this skit in his introduction to *The Internal Machine*, an exhibition, at the [Center for Book Arts in New York](#), of more than a dozen artworks that explore and reimagine the mechanical aspects of the analog book’s status as both a sculptural and use-value object. From flipping pages to creasing spines, these artists present the book at the intersection of form and

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function, wedging open the space between its intended purpose as tactile tool for research and the acquisition of knowledge, and the vast possibilities for books as objects with myriad surfaces, planes, and bindings.

At the entrance to the show, mounted at eye level, birds flutter. Wings flap up and down as the pages of the book quickly flip, mounted so the spine is horizontal and powered by a motor. Juan Fontanive's *Ornithology P* (2014), composed of screen-printed images of birds on paper, stainless steel frame, and a motor, makes literal the technology involved in turning pages and, by shifting the traditional orientation of the book, also gestures toward the method of reading on screen, transforming a bound book into a scrolling machine. Connecting the original book structure with aspects of digital reading is one of five categories Roach sets up for the artworks in the exhibition. The others include the book's relationship to machine technology, technology that extends the book's traditional use-function, the sensory aspects of the book, and the book as a tool for gaining information, each exploiting the moment when shape meets utility to reframe books in the cyber-landscape.

Books usually take the form of the codex, composed of multiple folios bound together between covers and joined by a spine. The pages within are arranged in a sequence to create meaning and narrative. For textual books, this meaning is built from linguistic components, a series of links and connections. Mixed media artist Doug Beube disrupts this effect by slicing pages out of books, circling and covering words, then rejoining the pages with those of another book, attaching them with brightly colored zippers. The result is an accordion formed from three previously distinct volumes, the zippers evoking craftsmanship and hand labor, and allowing viewers to trace the moments where Beube has chosen to collage. They also nod to digital editing tools. As Beube writes in the catalog, "The dyed zippers allow the reader to know the history of the actions taken if pages are reconfigured, just as in the software program, Photoshop, in which the history of cutting and pasting is recorded." Thus, Beube relates the physicality of bookmaking to digital labor, where the work is less visible in the final product.

Many of the artworks in *The Internal Machine* demonstrate how aspects of digital reading and making are similar to hardcopy production, and vice versa. As Beube reminds us of the invisible human labor on the screen, Brian Dettmer's sculptures cause us to consider the book as machine. Dettmer carves geometric layers and pathways into books that have practical applications — such as manuals and maps — sculpting them into the shapes of gears and cogs. We know our phones and computers work as we read; when it's quiet we can hear their hard drives hum. But how about books? By carving out specific words, diagrams, and lines of text, Dettmer highlights the structures of language and illustration, revealing the book as a complex machine, one that makes meaning via the turning and grinding of pictures and words.

When we read on our phones, tablets, or computers, we frequently ask Siri, Cortana, and Alexa to tell us the news, the weather, or supply us with handy how-to information we once had to research and investigate in actual books. Caroline Bouissou's photographs recall this old model of research in collaged images of hands holding the pages of open manuscripts and guides. Keeping the hands visible reinforces our tactile engagement in the subject at hand. But the layers of images in a single photograph also recall the screen, where windows (or web *pages*) pile on top one another.

Taking a different angle, Ranjit Bhatnagar's book machines tap into the long history and tradition of reading as an *aural* experience. His auditory sculpture, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, requires the viewer (or listener) to raise a glass to an old worn-out book in order to *hear* what's being read. As the glass is moved against the cover the text changes, switching between various lines of poetry and even including some music. In this way, a disembodied voice — perhaps human, perhaps machine (nowadays it's hard to tell) — links verbal storytelling, physical reading, and listening to AI, podcasts, and audiobooks.

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The unknown voice also suggests that Bhatnagar's book is haunted by all its past readers, an effect heightened by the use of a worn old hardcover. An old book emphasizes its own physicality as an object that has moved between owners — in the process the covers wear, pages crease, and spines break. András Böröcz's *Turning Books/Van Gogh* (2009) similarly indicates past handling, placing items that recall Van Gogh's paintings onto and into each of the books on display. When the handle is turned, those items, and the book itself, come to life. Any viewer might imagine the things they've left scattered in their own library: photos, movie ticket stubs, odd notes slipped in between the pages. Such items are evidence of memory and history, and are activated by reading.

While these kinds of connections are more obvious in material books, digital documents also preserve a record of their virtual movements. Researching online, our web pages are linked by a pattern of clicks embedded into the codes behind the pages. Benjamin Wright's *Vivisection* (2017), the largest installation in the show, makes visible these cybernetic trails. Rising from the floor to the ceiling and covering the entire back wall, surrounding corners, and part of the floor, the work is an immersive collage of magazine and book cut-outs, neon lights and flashing screens, plant environments, motors and other moving parts, with strings and wires running between them. It glows a soft pink from the lights, illuminating stacks of books along the floor at its base. The title refers to the controversial surgery performed on live animals to examine their internal structure. *Vivisection* is thus a map of inner associations across media and topic, bouncing between celebrities, commercial advertisements, to actual living things. It's interesting that the ropes and wires that link the images and objects remind me of dropping into a Wikipedia hole. But if the prevalent narrative of the day places cybertechnology at the forefront of research and communication, books haven't stopped allowing us to travel outside ourselves, to serve as windows and doors into other worlds. Wright's piece, like the others in this good exhibition, reimagines the possibilities of the book as a device in a digital landscape. He shows us what a book might be if we removed the confining covers and let it physically expand.

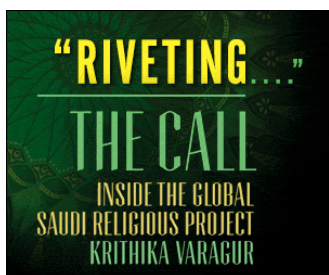
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Featured Image: András Boröcz, Book Machine, 2008.

Banner Image: Ward Shelly and Douglas Paulson, Archive Library v.I, 2012.

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Megan N. Liberty is an arts and culture writer interested in text and image, print culture in the digital age, and artists' books and ephemera.



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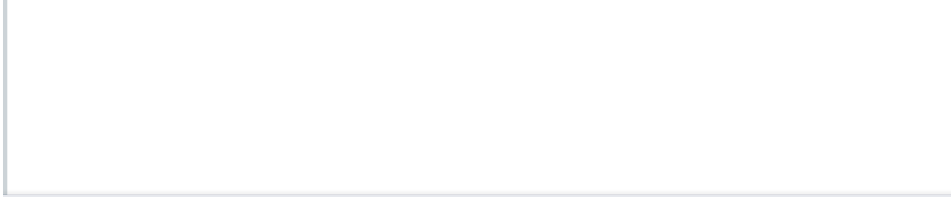
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It's good to approach the topic from the other side - not artists who try to define the book, but inventors who try to add functionality to the book.

I'm still most amazed by the book that can be read six ways. It's a clever version of the dos-à-dos book, was printed in Germany in the 16th century, and includes six separate devotional texts.

Plus there is Blink (book+link), Enciclopedia Mecánica, or infinitely beautiful book hyperlinked with a thread. Put all these tremendous books in one place and the next exhibition at the Center for Book Arts is ready <https://ebookfriendly.com/m...>

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