Choosing Book Arts

A Talk at Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas February, 2004 by Gary Frost

Book arts are both timeless and modern. Many other attributes make the arts of the book strange and irresistible. First, the book arts teach that the hands prompt the mind. Second the field of book arts engages an expanse of technologies across history and into the future. Thirdly, the book arts challenge the creative person to share the aesthetic experience with a wider community of thoughtful people who are readers.

Hands Prompt the Mind

For millions of years primate dexterity preceded increasing brain size in the hominid genealogy. This circumstance engendered a learning mode based on discovery by manipulation and tactile observation. The perceptive channel of primate dexterity then prompted the mind toward conceptual thought. Such hand learning seems difficult to define and historians remark on the lack of documentation of the hand skills. The needed realization is that dexterity itself is a
medium of information. Hand skills are conveyed by direct miming of hand actions.

For example, projectile predation, or throwing rocks is deeply embedded in our species. This behavior, based on one arm pitching at a moving target, induced the bilateral asymmetry of the human mind. One result is that we are the only species that is right or left handed. Another result is that we came to manage ideas much like physical projectiles. Books are projectiles thrown across time and cultures. The book author weighs the message, calculates the trajectory, releases the conceptual work and hopes to stun the target.

Direct handling of ideas is also suggested by tactile/motor expressions that occur in all languages. Expressions such as GRASP A CONCEPT, GET A GRIP ON YOURSELF, POINT OUT AN ERROR, CAST A DOUBT, TOSS OUT AN IDEA or, even, TICKLE YOUR FANCY are well known in perceptual psychology.

Acts of manipulated navigation in book reading involve the vertical page, moving in position with a previous and next page and in recto/verso relationship and these pages handled in a mobile, bound structure which provides the mechanism for delivering and timing concepts. Fingers tend to start the lift of a leaf during the page read and tend to concluding motions at the page turn. Paper grain, paper thickness and other tactile features such as book weight are continually mapped against an emergent meaning. An embedded learning path of hands prompting the mind is at work as we read a book. The meaning is delivered and exemplified by a manipulated physical object.

By choosing the field of book arts you can develop, and not neglect, the hand-to-concept learning channel. Crafts of hand paper making, calligraphy, hand bookbinding and hand printing all nurture the arts of dexterity. In fact these crafts, including their conceptual issues, can only be approached through the medium of hand skills. In the book arts the hands prompt the mind and the mind prompts the hands in a rewarding integration.

**Expanse of Technologies**

The whole book arts technology spans most cultures and the entire historical era. Curiously, none of the basic components of this technology are obsolete. Each component technology is applicable today and each, ancient or modern, is as advanced and as relevant as another.

This sense of technological balance and inclusion is a great attribute of the book arts. While contemporary digital technologies breed six month cycles of obsolescence, the book arts simply integrates all advances into a much larger resource. At the same time the book arts enable the constructive interweaving of technologies that would otherwise be isolated by arbitrary partitions of time or culture.

An illustrative example of this interactivity is the connection of the sewn boards structure characteristic of the earliest bookbinding with on-demand binding from
computer output. Here the integration stretches backward to the technology of sewn boards boat building in dynastic Egypt and forward to automated adhesive binding, transfer tape bonds and Tyvek coverings. In essence a post digital paper book is derived from technologies dormant since before the advent of movable type.

The advent of the codex format, beginning in the first few centuries in north and eastern African cultures, combined the technology of the codex with sectarian social agendas. Subsequently the communication and production medium of the codex engendered and spread world religion. As research indicates, Gospels and scripture are not event reports, but rather the product of reading and rewriting of now lost books. Today this technology of late antiquity is shared by all cultures and proprietary to no specific culture; an example of the sweep of the technology of the book format.

Sharing the Aesthetic Experience

The advent of the codex format, in the first few centuries of late Antiquity, was coincident with the emergence of the readers voice and the history of the use and consequence of books has shown that this was not a coincidence.

The principle of the migration of the aesthetic experience to the user is a fundamental issue of the book arts. This wider issue has been especially developed within the book arts where bibliographical studies and artistic intent are particularly focused on the reception of readers. The concept of migration of artistic product from the point of production to the point of use is also strategic for understanding the influence of digital communications and electronic publication.

While digital technologies are integrated into the book arts the influence of new reading modes is only beginning. In the on-line reading mode each reader plays a larger part in the construction of knowledge from information. In the on-line reading mode each reader is a fabricator of the outcome. The book arts are particularly receptive to this trend toward greater interactivity of the reader.

The advent of digital communications, electronic publishing and computer networks brings further challenges to the special culture of the book. While networked data bases and linked Web sites have little operational need for the traditional knowledge unit of the book, it is apparent that knowledge is migrating into these digital systems. Such migration could help explain the increasingly strategic role of information technology in the management of universities. On the dark side, the momentous cultural event of transfer of knowledge from human to machine control, could signal the advent, not of artificial intelligence in machines, but an artificiation of human intelligence. In just such an environment of cultural change the book arts play a central role. Turns out that book artists can lead the debate.

Future of the Book

Digital discovery, research, and connectivity augment the relationships between books. These resources are similar to traditional human resources that construct
meaning and new content between print materials. The scenario in which digital resources supplant print resources has not occurred. The explanation for the overlaps...including "inside the book" engines is that the digital resources integrate and therefore can mimic all the reading modes. But their superiority, beyond the technological achievement of simultaneously screening verbal, written and print modes into a readable matrix, is overrated. For one thing the richness of expression of the visual/verbal mode is not approached, the conceptual exercise of the written mode is not fully required and the permanence and systematic accumulation of the print mode are not achieved. Digital research is still an accessory of the parent reading modes. Electronic reading technologies are still an accessory of the book.

There is the promise of merged reading modes, both traditional and on-line, and a post digital role for the traditional paper book that will continue the odyssey of the book arts. Add a shift from industrial, to information, to knowledge based economies and it is evident that the art of the book is not threatened with irrelevance.

It is an exciting moment for anyone who chooses the field of book arts. Parallel careers in the fields such as library science, book preservation, literacy and arts education, academic book studies, media industry and archival enterprise are all available to augment and accelerate the career of the book artist. Best of all, the book artist can engage the book at a time of transition in libraries and turbulence in technologies of communication media. The book artist can interpret exciting times.

02.18.04/glf

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