

Spines That Bind

An Exhibition of Artist's Books

tender technology: literary machines in the digital age

Was the first cave painter an artist or an engineer?

—Stephen Johnson

I remember fumbling my way through the door and out into the bright sunlit corridor, astonished by my abrupt re-entry back into the physical world. It was the spring of 1994 and I'd just spent the last hour in a darkened room staring wide-eyed at a computer screen. I was suddenly back from a journey I didn't fully understand; reeling from an epiphany that left me pleasantly manic and bewildered.

A graduate student had offered to demonstrate something called Mosaic and I had a dim sense that it involved the internet and digital images.

As we huddled together in front of the glowing monitor, she began typing long and cryptic lines of text into an input box. At the time, I had never heard of a URL. As she patiently tried to explain the world of browsers, clients, and servers I nodded politely and pretended I had the faintest clue what she was talking about.

Images began to appear in the software window, mostly art historical stuff. I remember an Italian Renaissance version of the Madonna With Child. Then she typed in another long string of text, and after a few seconds pause, a new image appeared. How nice, I thought.

And then it hit me. She was typing in the addresses of other computers. The images I was viewing were actually files stored on machines disbursed around the world: New York, Washington D. C.,

Munich, Rome. It didn't matter where they were physically. As a matter of fact it didn't even make sense to think in those terms. In the spatial physics of cyberspace the entire conglomerate of image archives existed just on the other side of my screen.

This moment stands as a pivotal point in my life as an artist.

All of my work from that moment on has involved some type of experiment in virtual place and space. And even more importantly, I've slowly come to see that new electronic languages invite us to reinvent what we understand as narrative. What began as a souped up calculator and typewriter — the computer — has evolved into a new species of literary machine.

Books are machines too. Literary machines whose mechanisms and protocols are so comfortable and familiar that we usually fail to notice the technology underneath. Comfort renders structure invisible. We don't look at books so much as we look through them. We see the content, but not necessarily the form or the means.

Except in the case of artists' books. Book artists celebrate form, structure, and raw materiality. They start from scratch, challenge convention, push the envelope, and try to break things. They draw our attention to the object — the machine — but in a way that humanizes and softens its surfaces. In the hands of book artists, technology sings.

As new narrative machines emerge from technological evolution, some artists will inevitably migrate to these forms. They would be well-served by studying the tradition of artists' books. Here they will find the antidote to rigidity and determinism. Here lies proof and inspiration that any machine, in the hands of a poet, can foster a truly tender technology.

—Joseph Squier