



# BOOKS AS MATERIAL, VIRTUAL, AND METAPHORICAL ENTITIES

*Monika Schmitz-Emans*

**ABSTRACT** *To talk about books can be a metaphoric operation. Because books have always been conceptualized as metaphors for the texts they carry, it is easy to see them as both 'real' and 'symbolic' objects of a complex semiotic nature. This article shows several ways in which the book is exposed as a material object used for the production of manifold semantic layers. Apart from metaphors, the codex itself can be worked on like in Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* or altered like in Tom Phillips' *A Humument*. The effects of alteration and destruction on books can be shown on the book's body or in artwork or comment surrounding the (invisible) book as in Gérard Wajcman's *L'interdit* or Keri Smith's *This is not a Book*.*

**KEYWORDS** *Book, Bookness, Codex, Metaphor, Material, Matter, Raymond Queneau, Marc Saporta, Bryan Stanley Johnson, Tom Phillips, Konrad Balder Schäuffelen, Jonathan Safran Foer, Marcel Broodthaers, Stéphane Mallarmé, Keri Smith.*

**DOI** *10.13154/bmt.1.2016.11-27*

“Cercavo un libro [...].—Non è per leggere. È per fare. Faccio delle cose coi libri. Degli oggetti. Sì, delle opere: statue, quadri, come li vuoi chiamare. Ho fatto anche un’esposizione. Fisso i libri con delle resine, e restano lì. Chiusi, o aperti, oppure anche gli do delle forme, li scolpisco, gli apro dentro dei buchi. È una bella materia il libro, per lavorarci, ci si può fare tante cose.” (Calvino 1979: 149)

## BOOKS AS MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC OBJECTS

As Michel Butor (1964: 104–123) explained in his treatise on “The book as object” (“Le livre comme objet”), books are both material and symbolic objects. With regard to these different dimensions, one might even say that the word “book” refers to different significates both of which, again, are signifiers for other complex significates. But as the physical and the symbolic book are often confounded, their respective meanings also interfere: The word “book” firstly of course refers to a concrete material object, usually a stapled collection of paper sheets bound together at one side of the staple. The same word, then, is used as a metonymy for texts and even for the messages or contents themselves that are mediated by the text. Thus, “working on a book” does usually not mean to create a stack of paper sheets and bind them together, but to write down arguments and ideas, to explain matters, to narrate stories etc. “To read a book” correspondingly means: to read texts, to decode meanings, to interpret. It is, however, also connected with a physical act of handling a paper object. (Books in this sense of material objects can, strictly spoken, not be read, but they invite us to do many other things. We can take them into our hands, we can turn the pages, we can tear the pages out, fold and damage them, cover them with stains, we can throw the book at somebody, use it as a container of letters etc.—and, of course we can sell or destroy it.) Material books (or ‘books as matter’) are never just neutral containers of texts and other contents. They are signs or, rather, complexes of significant matter; as material objects they have got a semantic dimension.

One reason for what we might call the semanticity of the material book is evident at first sight: As concrete objects, material books can be designed in different ways, and probably no one who publishes a book is completely indifferent about how it looks. Books can be made of different kinds of paper, they can have different sizes, shapes, and colours; covers, typography and other parts of the para-textual arrangement depend on multiple and most different decisions. The simple fact that there are alternatives makes each decision for a special book design significant, as already the choice between two options creates meaning.<sup>1</sup> If the book appears in a publication series whose covers are always yellow, the book

---

1 If you have, for instance, the choice between a white and a black book cover, it is significant to choose the white one.—Cf. for instance “The Optimist’s Handbook/The Pessimist’s Handbook” (Edworthy, Cramsie 2010).

designers do not have a choice, and the yellow cover does not have a meaning. If you publish, however, a book that is not included in this series but adapts the series' design, this 'outfit' becomes a significant message itself. Several recent examples of appropriation art are characterized by their adaptations of book series' designs.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, another important relation between the book in the first and in the second sense, between the book as physical object and as a medium of immaterial messages: They are strongly linked together by metaphorical bonds. Especially one metaphor is of crucial importance for the history of the book as piece of matter and a 'spiritual' object: The material book has always been regarded as a simile to the body of a living being. Metaphorical interpretations of books as the bodies of thoughts, ideas, concepts as their 'souls' interfere with an idea about the book whose origins can be traced back at least to ancient Roman culture: The book is regarded as another 'second' body in which the author's soul is incarnated—and when books become multiples, the author may be concerned about the fate of his doubles.

In modification of this metaphorical concept of the book as a spirit's 'body', books have also been regarded as graves. But the basic dichotomy of body and spirit as such is—according to ethnographers and philosophers—always connected to the idea of an after-life of the spirit, for instance of transmutation. Burning books as an act of censorship is meant as an execution comparable to the execution of a living person, whose body is killed in order to tacit his spirit. Eating books is a magical act of assimilating another spirit's power. Books that are designed in a way that recalls the burning or eating of books evidently point the observer not only at concrete practices of treating books but also at the metaphysical concepts behind these practices—as for instance the idea of a book as an incarnation of spiritual forces, including the possibility of metempsychosis or resurrection. Books as material entities—as 'book bodies'—can especially be considered as metaphorical objects, whenever they are designed in an unconventional way (and regardless of what concrete metaphorical meaning may be attributed to them). Their respective design can support the readability of the texts (of the book as spiritual entity), but they may also constrict or even prevent it; both kinds of book design have their metaphoric qualities. In other words: As a consequence of the fact that books have always been metaphorically modelled, described and interpreted, every material book, every 'book body' can also be regarded as a metaphorical book, a materialised metaphor.

---

2 Cf. Michalis Pichler's "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (2009). Regarding the level of content, this book is based on an appropriation of Max Stirner's "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (1845 [1844]). The cover design is borrowed from the publishing house Reclam.

The visible book bodies can be regarded as signs or representations referring to invisible books. The expression “invisible book”, however, has several meanings: it may point to destroyed books as books that belong to the past; it may refer to possible books that—as something which must still be created—belong to the future; at any rate it refers to virtual books—even to such kinds of books that are hardly imaginable. Maybe there are examples of unconventionally shaped books that are not in first respect meant to be read in a conventional sense but rather to be experienced as a piece of material and visual art. Some books perhaps demonstrate the qualities and advantages of conventional books by the way of negation. Just like the bodies of living beings, ‘book bodies’ sometimes refuse to serve, to support the spirit incorporated in them. In all these cases there are metaphorical concepts grounding the design experiments—even and with a special emphasis in cases when there is nothing left to be read because the book consequently denies this function. And in specific cases we might speak of a “virtual text” not simply hidden behind but in a way even opposed to the material text.

## **STRATEGIES OF EXPOSING THE BOOK AS A MATERIAL OBJECT**

Generally spoken, the art of book making illustrates exemplary that there is a tension but no contradiction between regarding an object as a piece of matter and as a symbolic entity (respectively: a signifier). As soon as pieces of matter are exposed in a way that stimulates the observer to perceive these objects’ materiality with a more intense regard than usual and to reflect upon it, this reflection process will also recall the matters’ symbolic dimension to mind: the multiple meanings of materials such as sand, stone and earth, of marble, diamonds, gold and silver, of iron and steel, glass and plastics, of hair, skin and flesh, of bread, water and wine. In plain words: We never perceive simply matter; we always perceive physical objects within a complex semantic horizon, objects of significant matters.<sup>3</sup> (And especially the attempt to perceive ‘just matter’—an enterprise doomed to fail—is heavily loaded with symbolic meaning.)

Among the various materials that appear as significant in their quality as materials, books as pieces of matter must be regarded as a specific case. Often books are not just metaphors but also metonyms for broad spheres of cultural practice, practices of establishing codes and values, of structuring the symbolic universe and the social world. Just because books in everyday practice and ritual contexts are usually not explicitly regarded as pieces of matter, their materiality can quite easily and efficiently be stressed by treating them as plain matter—or rather: by

---

3 Many expressions of everyday language as well as literary texts (poems, novels etc.) point to these significations attributed to physical matters, and there are multiple forms of cultural (for instance ritual) practice and institutions based on specific matters’ symbolic dimension.

pretending to do so. Actually, arrangements created from ‘book matter’ implicitly always both refer to the symbolic dimension of matter, the multiple meanings of specific kinds of matter—and complementarily also to the immaterial dimension of books. In artificial arrangements dedicated to ‘book matter’ (or to the ‘book as matter’), the different material aspects of books are reflected in order to point to their potentials of signification—as for instance the paper, the binding, the pages’ layout, typography, the codex structure—and the fact that books are spatial objects as well as spaces that may store all kinds of contents. As in many other arts, in the art of book-making alienation effects can be regarded as the most efficient means of sensitizing for both the aesthetic and the significative dimension of artifacts and artificial arrangements—of stimulating reflections about them. There is a great diversity of strategies of submitting books to estrangement effects. As one side of the broad spectrum, one may regard the different practices of creating beautiful and valuable books, books for bibliophile readers and collectors. At the other side of the spectrum, there are multiple strategies of altering and destroying conventional books.

There are multiple forms of ‘making books’ in order to point to the book as a material object and as a signifier by exposing its materiality. With regard to these forms one might roughly distinguish between some more general strategies:

- (1) strategies and practices of staging book metaphors (including both the uses of ‘book metaphors’ in order to characterize other concepts—as for instance by the expressions such as ‘book of nature’, ‘book of life’, ‘book of memory’ etc.—and the use of metaphors to describe books—as for instance in the concept of ‘living books’, ‘books communicating with their readers’, ‘books voices’, ‘books as food’, ‘books as houses’ etc.),
- (2) strategies of modifying books’ architecture by developing alternative forms (modifying, more concretely spoken, the codex structure as the most common form of the book),
- (3) strategies of altering books that already exist.
- (4) Sometimes the visible book refers to an invisible book or to several such books. In these cases a specific metaphorical sense is connected with this relation toward something beyond visibility.

## EXAMPLES

### *(1) Book metaphors*

In order to illustrate the significance of metaphoric concepts and structures one might refer to many book objects as well as to artist’s books and to unconventionally structured books presenting literary texts. The artist Martin Schwarz, pro-

ducer of numerous book objects, often stages book metaphors by taking them literally—as, for instance, the metaphor of books as living creatures, as thresholds between imaginary worlds and the real world, as ‘spaces of nature’ etc. (Schwarz 2008)—The novelist Mark Z. Danielewski conceived his famous novel “House of Leaves” (2000) structuring the book as a labyrinth, correspondingly to the different narrative levels’ contents. He both refers to the metaphorical concept of books as labyrinthic spaces and books as houses.

## (2) *Modifications of the codex architecture*

Modifying the architecture of the codex always means to question conventional uses of the book. Such modifications evidently occur in more and less irritating forms. They can be restricted to unconventional kinds of preparing the pages in a book that still has a binding; they can, however, also concern the binding and produce books without binding, collections of loose chapters, single pages or even smaller unities. Both literary writers and book artists have created multiple forms of modified book formats—often co-operating, often in the double role as writer and book designer. —The way we describe unconventional books often already indicates to the metaphors involved here—as, for instance, in discourses about mobile books. Here, the concept of mobility often implicitly refers to concepts and discourses concerning creativity, dynamics and vitality. Mobile novels presented as collections of single pages in a box respectively of books without binding can be regarded as an extraordinary and challenging genre of fictional literature. Similar to them, literary texts that suggest non-linear readings resist conventional reception and request specific strategies of approach, physically as well as with regard to interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Quite obviously, such phenomena expose their materiality and provoke questions concerning ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’, if not even ‘possible’ or ‘impossible’ reading processes. (Among the wide range of phenomena that could be subsumed under the term of ‘movable books’ there might even be examples that are not at all meant to be read in a conventional sense.) Mobile novels or poem books that are presented as collections of single pages in a box—respectively of books without binding—can be regarded as an extraordinary and challenging genre of fictional literature.

(a) Raymond Queneau’s famous sonnet machine “Cent mille milliards de poèmes” from 1961 is already accompanied by an ambiguous paratext. In principle, the reader can compose billions of different sonnets by exploring all possible combinations of the respective 14 lines of ten sonnets, because the lines are printed on strips that are inserted into the book as gills. But, of course, he can do so only ‘in principle’. As the paratext explains with seeming objectivity, it would take

---

4 Structurally both kinds of texts correspond with that kind of (mainly) musical artworks that Umberto Eco labelled as “opera aperta” (1962).

an enormous time to explore all options of combination, even if somebody read the potential sonnets speedily. And so the sonnet machine—in contrast with its ludistic character, its attitude to invite the reader to be a poet—reminds its user of the restrictedness of his or her life time, the boundaries of his or her reading and writing options and the narrow boundaries that constrict individual life. So, on the one hand, the sonnet machine can be described as a metaphor of what the reader can do—of seemingly ‘infinite’ reading possibilities—, but on the other hand, very clearly, as a metaphor for the impossible, or, more concretely spoken: for the impossibility of actualizing all those virtual books due to the finitude of our lives as readers. No matter how many texts are transferred into visibility and made readable—the major part of the virtual poems remains invisible and illegible.

(b) Marc Saporta’s “Composition No 1” (1962) consist of a box with single sheets; one might describe the object as a book that is not (or not yet?) bound.<sup>5</sup> Saporta himself has written the text in order to present it in particles. The box which is designed like a book contains 150 cards like paper sheets plus an instruction for use; the latter instructs the reader to order the paper sheets sequentially, not according to a given rule but by chance. The single text elements or ‘building blocks’ can be combined in all possible ways, as the playing instruction says. “Composition No 1” on the one hand extends (or contradicts to) our concepts and ideas regarding the novel as an artwork, but it does so in accordance with aesthetic concepts and theories about literature and reading that even seem to be affirmed and illustrated by this literary work. It is especially the concept of the open artwork (“opera aperta”) and, moreover, the discourse of reception aesthetics which finds its concretization in Saporta’s novel. The more the reader is responsible for the artwork he or she experiences, the more virtual pieces of art may be detected within or behind a concrete physical arrangement. And when those (infinite) possibilities are not only restricted to the level of interpreting and attributing meanings to a perceived artificial object, but also to the act of composing the material elements of this artwork itself, the openness of the reception process becomes even more evident. The making up of Saporta’s box book stresses the playful aspect of the reception process. It reminds of a game that is played with cards, and, thus, it encourages the reader to ludistic activities.

“Le lecteur est prié de battre ces pages comme un jeu de cartes. De couper, s’il le désire, de la main gauche, comme chez une cartomancienne. L’ordre dans lequel les feuillets sortiront du jeu orientera le destin de X [...] De l’enchaînement des circonstances dé-

---

5 “Not only the function of the book but also its form can be turned into a subject of art. In 1962 Marc Saporta wrote a novel called *Composition No. 1*, whose pages were neither numbered nor bound, so that they could be read in any sequence. There was no longer a predetermined content. The reader who had been free to disregard the author’s intentions was now forced to make up his new book.” (Dittmar [1978]: 128)

pend que l'histoire finisse bien ou mal. Un vie se compose d'éléments multiples. Mais le nombre des compositions possibles est infini." (Saporta 1962: n. pag.)<sup>6</sup>

Although on the one hand, the reader is authorised to feel as the text's master, he or she is submitted to chance on the other hand. Thus, the recipient's freedom turns out to be ambiguous. Furthermore, Saporta's book work also appears as an ironical reflection about the ambiguities of reception theory as it strongly dominated the theoretical field in the 1960s. While on the one hand the immense number of possible compositions offers an immense space of aesthetic experience to the reader, on the other hand the innumerable options can never be experienced by one single person—and this reminds him or her of his or her own restrictedness; regarded from this point of view the book that appears as infinite calls our attention to our own finitude. The metaphorical dimension constituted by a book which is at the same time a set of playing cards, is not restricted to the interpretation of the reading process as a process of playing a game, although this idea certainly plays a crucial role. As the single cards carry texts with short prose texts pointing to fictitious characters' lives, life itself is metaphorically mirrored as a game in which elements of experience can be combined in alternative ways.

(c) There have been several other compositions in which the book format has been altered in a similar way as in Saporta's "Composition". Robert Filliou's "Je disais à Marianne" (1965) again consists of a box and playing cards—96 pieces, which now actually have the size of conventional playing cards.<sup>7</sup> Both sides of the cards carry print: one side of each is showing a picture, the reverse side a sentence, always written in English, French, and German. According to Filliou, the images and sentences refer to the lives of several families. The images of the cards can be used in order to connect story elements with them; and the meanings the reader or narrator can attribute to them are not restricted. This art object—especially in its quality as an 'altered' type of book—metaphorically refers to a certain idea about life and art. Belonging to the Fluxus movement, Filliou interprets both life and art as one coherent and permanent stream—and as a kind of game that follows continuously changing rules.

(d) Looking back to the 1960s again, another example should be presented briefly in order to illustrate that unconventional books are sometimes conceived

---

6 "Der Leser wird gebeten, diese Seiten wie ein Kartenspiel zu mischen. Abheben darf er, falls er es wünscht, mit der linken Hand, wie bei einer Kartenschlägerin. Die Reihenfolge, in der die Blätter liegen, entscheidet über das Los des Mannes X. [...] Von der Verkettung der Umstände hängt es ab, ob das Geschehen gut oder schlecht endet. Ein Leben setzt sich aus vielerlei Teilen zusammen. Aber die Zahl der möglichen Zusammensetzungen—compositions—ist unendlich." (Grimm transl. Saporta, quoted in Idensen 1996: 176)

7 Filliou's book is entitled French as well as English and German ("Je disais à Marianne", "I was Telling Marianne", "Ich sagte zu Marianne") (Moeglin-Delcroix 1997: 108). There is a correspondence linking this piece of book art with Italo Calvino's narrative cycle "Il castello dei destini incrociati" (1973).

as materialized metaphors. In 1969, Bryan Stanley Johnson created a box book that, in a way, refers to the idea of human life itself as a ‘black box’, as something intransparent and enigmatic. His novel “The Unfortunates” is printed in single chapters which are not bound together but stacked in a box and, thus, can be read in arbitrary order.<sup>8</sup> The English original edition presents the novel in a blue box; the German translation provides for a black box, which—with regard to the novel’s content—is an even more suggestive object than the blue one: The novel tells about the narrator’s friend who died of cancer as a young man; it represents a process of memorizing caused by a sojourn in the narrator’s home town. The structure of the novel is not only meant to be regarded as a model of life as a chaotic and arbitrary stream in which myriads of files are cut off, and disorder rules—but also as a simile to the structure and growth of tumours. Thus, the arbitrariness, the determining influence of chance which is represented by the book’s extraordinary form, does not refer to deliberate choice and freedom, but to the lack of sense and reason, to something ‘disordered’ that cannot be brought under rational control. Correspondingly, the ‘box’ design is not just a metaphor of mystery and surprise, but has to be regarded as the simile of a coffin.

(d) The Georgian writer Aka Morchiladze has recently created a novel that resists linear reading: It is composed of a collection of single chapters, each of them forming a small booklet, which are collected in a little bag—a kind of miniaturized traveller’s bag (“Santa Esperanza”, 2004).<sup>9</sup> The booklets form groups of different colours: yellow, blue, green and orange, and within their respective group they are numbered. There are nine booklets of each colour, which makes 36 chapters altogether. Their cover designs resemble playing cards, actually referring to a card game that is repeatedly mentioned in the novel as a popular game in the country depicted in the narrated stories. A map is added to the booklets in the bag. According to the paratextual instruction, the booklets can be read in different orders: either starting with one colour pack according to the order of booklet numbers, then proceeding to the next colour and so on. Or starting first with the ‘one’ numbers, then proceeding to the booklets with a ‘two’ and so on—these two reading strategies will provide for a set of four novels composed of nine chapters—or for a set of large stories composed of four parts each. However, we can also read the chapters in whichever order we like.—The novel’s different stories are dedicated to the people of the country Santa Esperanza, which consists of different islands in the Black Sea and is populated—correspondingly to the four colours of the novel—by different groups: Georgians, Genoese (the descendants

---

8 Among the 28 parts of the novel there is one chapter marked as the first one, and another which is the final one. As Johnson says, the other chapters should be read in the sequence in which they are presented—as a staple in a box —, but alternative modes of reading are also legitimate.

9 Thanks to Natascha Gondecki for notifying me about this exceptional piece of novel and book art.

of former settlers from Italy), Turks and British colonists. There are several main characters in the novel, and there are larger units of stories, although as a whole the narrative is as complex as the history and the cultural realities of the fictitious country depicted here.

Francis Neník's recent novel (or story collection) "XO" (2012) continues the series that was decades earlier represented by Saporta, Filliou and others: "XO" is a box that contains sheets of paper which can be read in any order, so that the result appears as arbitrary. Neník's paratextual arrangement is evidently part of the game; the cover of his book-box carries a text that adapts the attitude of an explication and using instruction, but actually is of no practical use in neither function.

"So geht das: Eine Mischung aus Briefroman, Comic und durcheinanderzentriertem (sic!) Gefabel. Ohne Beispiel, ohne Bindung. Eine Heimatloseblattsammlung? Wer weiß ... Auf jeden Fall: das Vergehen einer Epoche als irdische Komödie. Und das Werden einer anderen als Grotteske. Zudem: ineinandersickernde Welten, eigenhändig vom Autor gefälschte Dokumente, nicht eine einzige bedeutende historische Persönlichkeit, keine Mauer, keine DDR, keine Pioniere. Stattdessen: 'Die Geschichte des Baus vorgefertigter Häuser. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung mobiler Wellblechgebäude.' Druckreif, wie sich's gehört." (Neník 2012, book cover)

Maybe it can be regarded as an indicator of post modernity that the paratextual rule of the reading game, now in its function as the experiment's foundation, is deconstructed.

### (3) *Altered books*

(a) Tom Phillips's artist's book entitled "A Humument" (1970–2012) has been created in a process of multiple interventions.<sup>10</sup> In 1966, Phillips was inspired by William Burroughs's cut-up technique to create something analogous on the level of book design. In a book-store he eventually detected the Victorian novel "A Human Document" by William H. Mallock (published in 1892), and he submitted the book's 'body' to extensive alterations. At first he only scored out single words, but then he developed a more refined plan—designing the book's pages in a way that was supposed to remind of medieval book design.

"I merely scored out unwanted words with pen and ink. It was not long after though before the possibility became apparent of making a better unity of word and image, intertwined as in mediaeval miniature." (Phillips 1980 quoted in Drucker 2004: 109)

---

10 For the different editions of his book, Phillips altered the respective former versions and, thus, actually created an entire series of books entitled "A Humument".

By painting the pages of Mallock's novel in a way that only parts of the original text remained readable—there are, more precisely spoken, different grades of readability, because the paint added to the pages is sometimes transparent—Phillips created a new text: the story of a protagonist called 'Toge'; his name is derived from the word 'together' and 'altogether' in Mallock's novel, just as the book's title "A Humument" is derived from "A Human Document". Phillips, as it should be stressed, created a new text by his interventions, although his text is evidently determined by the text in "A Human Document". In a way, Phillips takes the term "palimpsest" literally, as it was used metaphorically by Gérard Genette and many followers in order to model inter-textual relations. Thus, "A Humument" may be regarded as a kind of material metaphor of intertextuality: the dependence of one text on another is visualized in a way that appears as programmatic as a schoolbook example. With regard to the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the relation between Mallock's text and Phillips's text is somehow ambiguous: On the one hand, the hypertext (in the sense Genette attributed to this term) is created by a process of invisibilisation of the hypotext, on the other hand, relics of the hypotext are obviously highlighted by the creation of the hypertext—and, thus, are more clearly visible than ever before. (And who, by the way, would read Mallock's novel today, if Phillips had not submitted it to an estrangement process?) Regarded as a metaphor for palimpsest-like intertextuality, "A Humument" points to the two complementary aspects of hypertextual relations: It is the absence of the former text that gives way to the newer one, but in a process of memorizing, the old text may resurrect. In a way, the older text is never really 'absent', it is just 'covered'—as Phillips's "Humument" shows quite concretely. The book is a metaphor mirroring reading processes (but maybe other metaphorical significations might be revealed as well). To 'read' a book means, to experience both something visible and something invisible, something comprehensible and something hidden, and, moreover, the meaning of what we see and 'understand' is always determined by what is beyond our sight, physically as well as intellectually.

(b) Konrad Balder Schöffelen's book art-piece "Haus der Bienenkönigin" (1973) consists of a fragmented text which is not presented on flat paper sheets but in the form of paper rolls that were inserted into a box and can be taken out by using a forceps: The text used for this piece of art was Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographical narrative "Les mots"; the quotations, cut out of their original context, appear as aphoristic and have, thus, changed their quality as texts (Adler, Ernst 1988: 304–305). In other similar art objects, as for instance "Deus ex skatola", Schöffelen also used literary texts in order to 'materialize' them. There are different aspects from which these objects can be interpreted metaphorically. "Deus ex skatola" echoes the concept of a "deus ex machina" by altering it: it is the box ("skatola") from which surprises emerge—selected by chance. "Haus der Bienenkönigin" (The queen bee's house) refers to the art of collecting and transforming the collected matter into another substance. While Saporta and Filliou

used quite neutral titles that refer to the structure of their artworks, respectively to the use one can make of them, Schüffelen gives his object an ironical note by using a modified quotation as paratext. This example therefore sensitizes for the different functions paratexts can have when they accompany unconventionally structured books. Paratexts at any rate are important guidelines for interpretation; they propose reception modes, open perspectives, channel attention. Prologues and epilogues, instructions and guidelines for the book's use, but also titles play a major role for the reception process. And they are of crucial influence on the metaphorical potentials of the books' bodies.<sup>11</sup>

(c) Jonathan Safran Foer's "Tree of Codes" (2010)<sup>12</sup> is another quite unconventional book. The pages of the material book, the 'book body', have been cut, and there are many rectangular holes within the pages. The perforated pages overlap, so that below the single paper sheet the reader does not only see the following page but sometimes quite a number of pages. There are always several holes in the paper sheets, opening up several 'windows' to the following parts of the book, and when these windows are closed behind the reader, new windows open up. It is not easy to handle the book, as the pages resist to being turned easily. And of course, it is even more difficult to 'read' the book. The text extended in front of the reader's eyes always consists of heterogeneous particles: of the fragmented text on the side at the surface of the book, and of fragmented text elements from the pages under this surface page. Often these elements consist of single words or sentence fragments, which now interfere with the fragmented texts of other pages. Like Tom Philipps, Foer has used a former book containing a printed text as the basis of his artwork which here consisted in a process of sculpturing instead of painting. And like Philipps, he has created a new text that can be read as an autonomous text, at least in principle. The working technique as such already has a metaphorical dimension: whereas Phillipps covered large parts of the former text by layers of colour, thus detracting them from sight but not literally extinguishing them, Foer's book is a materialized metaphor of at least partial extinction: the pieces of paper cut off are definitively lost for the reader—at least for the reader of this one book, as we should add—because Foer's construction at least offers the possibility of reading the original book that was submitted to excision. The metaphorical dimension of "Tree of Codes" is substantially based on the specific book that was used. This book's title—"Street of Crocodiles"—is related to Foer's book title in the same way as "A Humument" to "A human document"; it is again a proper subset: "sTREEt OF CrocODilES". "Street of Crocodiles" is the title of a collection of short stories by the Galician Jewish author Bruno Schulz who died

---

11 Sometimes, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, in the era of reception-theory and reader-emancipation, paratexts of unconventional books affirmed central theoretical concepts in a way that was not suspicious of irony. Schüffelen's example illustrates the potential of paratexts to create another dimension of ambiguity by polyvalent paratexts.

12 See also T. G. Raptzikou's contribution to this volume.

in the Holocaust; Schulz's texts are originally written in Polish and were translated into an English version used by Foer. These short stories collected in the book that was submitted to metamorphosis by excision, depict the lost Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, the world of the old Stetl and its inhabitants. In his epilogue, Foer explains that by his cutting-out-technique he intended to visualize extinction processes in another sense. However, there is a metaphorical relation between the fragmented book that resists simple reading and, nevertheless, can be read as a collection of fragments—and the Galician Jewish culture which is the subject of Schulz's narratives. Galician Jewish culture as a whole is lost, just like the original book is destroyed. But the holes in the book speak their own language—the language of the absent. Foer's afterword stresses the metaphoric dimension of his 'bookwork' and leads the reader in a certain direction.<sup>13</sup> Ólafur Elíasson who has contributed to the paratext of "Tree of Codes" (he is quoted on the book's back cover) suggests other, although not rivalling, metaphorical readings. He associates the reader's way through the book with a walk through a city—and he speaks about the book's body.<sup>14</sup>

(4) *'Destroyed' and 'invisible books'.  
Erased texts, radically altered and silent books*

(a) Marcel Broodthaers has created another version of Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de dés" by covering the words on Mallarmé's poem with black bars. The structure of the composition was preserved, the text itself, however, was rendered illegible. Evidently, Broodthaers's piece of art refers to an invisible text. (The Broodthaers project exists, by the way, in different variations.) Jacques Rancière has comment-

---

13 "For years I had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book. I had thought of trying the technique with the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the phone-book, various works of fiction and non-fiction, and with my own novels. But any of those options would have merely spoken to the process. The book would have been an exercise. I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation. *The Street of Crocodiles* is often my answer to the impossible-to-answer question: What is your favourite book? And yet, it took me a year to recognize it as the text I'd been looking for. [...]" (Foer 2010: 138)

14 "You can fly over a city or walk through it: your movement influences what you see and how. Your body cannot help but chart the shape of a building, the time it will take to reach the other side of the intersection, spaces and gaps. It generates a personal narrative, entangled in the endless stories of the city. This also happens in books, although we rarely think about it. If the reader's movement is made explicit from one word to the next, from page to page, from a while ago to two minutes from now, time assumes a key role in our reading experience. The gaps in-between words and pages—all of the book that isn't black ink—resonate. This is precisely what happens in *Tree of Codes*, an extraordinary journey that activates the layers of time and space involved in the handling of a book and its heap of words. Jonathan Safran Foer deftly deploys sculptural means to craft a truly compelling story. In our world of screens, he welds narrative, materiality, and our reading experience into a book that remembers it actually has a body." (Elíasson quoted in Foer 2010: back cover)

ed on this work in a way that stresses its metaphorical status: he regards it as a metaphor for the distance between word and image—and as a negation of the leading ideas of Mallarmé who had intended to synthesise words, images and ideas.

“The heterogeneity of signs and forms must be reintroduced to the surface. [...] Mallarmé’s ‘modern’ project must in some sense be approached from the other side. [...] The plastification of Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* is presented by Broodthaers as an ‘image’ of the poem. We must understand this word in its full meaning. Broodthaers returns Mallarmé to the reign of the image. In a reversal of Mallarmé’s logic, he makes the image an instrument of reflection, fit for rethinking the encounter between signs, forms, objects and acts [...]. The operation which rendered the ‘spatial’ Mallarmean poem illegible is indeed in accordance with a practice of word and image which emphasises the distance between them. There is no more an alphabet of the stars [...]” (Rancière 2008: 208)

According to Rancière’s reading, Mallarmé’s book represented the concept of a congruency between the verbal and the non-verbal, which, in last consequence, made the world itself readable. Broodthaers’s elimination of Mallarmé’s readable text, however, states that the opposite is the case: The book has become a metonymy of an unreadable world.

(b) Gérard Wajcman’s book “L’interdit” (1986), subtitled as ‘a novel’ (“roman”) is a conventional book compared to those books which consist of loose chapters or single pages in boxes. However, most of its pages are designed in an extraordinary way: they contain only footnotes, while the main text is absent. Everything except for the footnotes has, as it seems, been consequently erased on these pages. Those parts which can be read—the footnotes—in their quality as footnotes implicitly refer to an invisible text. It is, however, difficult to judge whether this text was written. The pages’ layout as such, however, at least suggest that the lacking text has ‘existed’ as something that might have been placed on these pages—as the framework is present, only its content is absent. Again, the erasure of parts of a text (in this case: an imaginary text) is meant to represent metaphorically another extinction process: Wajcman’s book refers to the Shoah. The white pages are conceived as indications to the impossibility to ‘tell’ about the Shoah, to ‘represent it by positive signs’. What cannot be said should be made sensible by the book’s appearance. Only the last pages contain a text which can be read as the written voice of an autofictional narrator. At the end of the narrator’s discourse, the keyword ‘silence’ dominates his reflections:

“S’il arrive que je me taise définitivement, cela ne signifiera pas que je me suis éloigné; seulement que je n’ai plus de place. Je pourrais aussi penser qu’ainsi je rejoindrai un autre lieu, que j’accéderai à une autre existence. Dans le passé. Je retrouverai une autre

langue [...]. Le silence prononce mon absence, il me donne une place, dans le temps. Je n'y ferai plus obstacle." (Wajcman 1986: 266–267)

(c) One might regard the series of books published by Keri Smith as the playful counterpart of 'serious' projects like Wajcman's and Johnson's. All of them follow a common (and obviously popular) basic concept: Reading the instructions given by the respective book itself, the reader is supposed to treat it as a material object and submit it to different, sometimes radical alterations—even to destructive practices. There are, however, also instructions advising us to use the book as a notebook, as a medium of communication, as a stimulus to write personal texts or to draw. The books' readers, thus, are invited to regard the books as pieces of matter, to read and even write into them at the same time. Sometimes the point of this double program seems to lie in the difficulties arising from the combination of both strategies of regarding a book. There is a paradoxical trait in Keri Smith's book projects, as the books themselves invite the reader to destroy parts of them and to make their messages illegible. One of them refers already by its title—"This is not a book" (2009)—to this inclination toward paradox. The back cover informs the user of this book about its central idea:

"This object does not exist without you. You will determine the content and the final product. All will be shaped by your imagination. You must go out into the world in order to bring it to life and complete the assignments.

If it is not a book, then what exactly is it? The answer is up to you." (Smith 2009: Back Cover)<sup>15</sup>

Keri Smith has designed several other books that invite their readers to treat and alter them physically, as for instance "Finish This Book" (2011).<sup>16</sup> Again, these experiments make clear that practices of treating books as matter (up to partial destruction) are connected with symbolic meanings. And again there is a wide range of possible meanings, starting with practices of 'renaturalizing' the book as an artifice and ending with acts of brutal violence. Just a few examples for Keri Smith's instructions, quoted from "This is not a Book":

"This is an inconvenience. Take This is not a book everywhere you go for one week. You must place it in full view at all times." (2009: 1)

---

15 At the end of the book itself, there is a list of suggestions referring to the question what kind of thing this book could be: "A puppet, a protest, a revolution, a form of technology, an answer to a question, a debate, a microcosm, a quiz, a science experiment, a command, a diversion, a red herring, an artifice, a shift in perception [...]." Again, the author adds an invitation addressed to the reader: "Come up with your own versions of what they [the things 'This is not a book' could be] might look like". (Smith 2009: 220)

16 In this book, Smith also uses a quotation from Italo Calvino's novel "Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore".

“This is a recording device. Record the events of your day in point form here:” / “Make a mark for every time you enter a room.” (2009: 2–3)

“This is a Secret Agent.\* Instructions: Give This is not a book some kind of disguise to hide its identity. / \*Dispose of this note after reading.” (2009: 5)

“This is a transformation. Come up with a way to permanently alter this page. And change it into something completely different.” (2009: 21)

“This is a disappearance. / 1. Draw or write something here. / 2. erase it somehow (e.g., pencil & eraser, water-soluble ink, sandpaper).” (2009: 23)

“This is a material. Conduct some experiments to uncover the properties of this page (paper). Make a list and test all of the things you can do to it. What happens when you add things (substances) to it?” (2009: 128)

A few summarizing remarks: At first sight, one might be inclined to say that the material book—the book’s ‘body’—in many cases does not support readability, as soon as it is altered, submitted to estrangement effects, cut into slices, painted, stained, torn apart from its binding, etc. However, at a closer look one realizes that distinctions have to be made here. Often it is the book’s altered body that provides for a special kind of readability referring to a dimension of metaphors, metonymic relations and significations connected with the book’s materials and structure. In these cases, the invisible texts in which those metaphors have been coined are implicitly ‘surrounding’ the book object. Whether they are readable in a conventional sense or not, unconventionally designed books expose their own materiality—their corporeality, their ‘bookness’ as ‘bodiness’. And some of these unconventional books emphatically stress the difference between visibility and legibility—by implicitly referring to invisible books: as, for instance to lost or destroyed books, but also to possible future books, to alternative books, both on the level of structure and of content. In many cases the paratexts are of constitutive significance for the meaning and the metaphorical status of books’ bodies—starting with their titles. So, for instance, paratexts underline, or even create, the tension between legible and illegible text, and, moreover, between the visible and the ‘invisible’ parts of the book.

Generally, the production as well as the reception of books whose bodies are shaped in an unconventional way is strongly influenced by metaphors. They often can be regarded as metaphorical objects themselves. Some books cannot be read in a conventional sense. However—and especially in such cases—, there is a meaning connected to the book’s material appearance, for instance the idea of illegibility, of mute bodies, of silence.

## WORKS CITED

- Adler, Jeremy, and Ulrich Ernst. *Text als Figur. Visuelle Poesie von der Antike bis zur Moderne*. Wolfenbüttel: VCH, 1987.
- Butor, Michel. “Le livre comme objet”. *Répertoire II. Études et conférences 1959–1963*. Paris: Édition Minuit, 1964: 104–123.
- Calvino, Italo. *Il castello dei destini incrociati*. Torino: Einaudi, 1973.
- . *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*. Torino: Einaudi, 1979.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
- Dittmar, Rolf. “Introduction ‘Modifications of the Book Form’”. *The Book of the Art of Artists’ Books*. Ed. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in affiliation with The Shahbanou Farah Foundation. Teheran: Teheran Museum, [1978]: 128–129.
- Drucker, Johanna. *The Century of Artists’ Books*. New York: Granary Books, 2004.
- Eco, Umberto. *Opera aperta*. Milano: Bompiani, 1962.
- Edworthy, Niall, and Petra Cramsie. *The Optimist’s Handbook/ The Pessimist’s Handbook*. London: Black Swan, 2010.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Tree of Codes*. New York: Visual Editions, 2010.
- Idensen, Heiko. “Die Poesie soll von allen gemacht werden!—Von literarischen Hypertexten zu virtuellen Schreibräumen der Netzkultur.” *Literatur im Informationszeitalter*. Ed. Dirk Matejovski, and Friedrich Kittler. Frankfurt, New York: Campus 1996: 143–184.
- Johnson, Bryan Stanley. *The Unfortunates*. London: Panther Books, 1969.
- Moeglin-Delcroix, Anne. *Esthétique du livre d’artiste 1960–1980*. Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1997.
- Morchiladze, Aka. *Santa Esperanza*. German transl. by Natia Micheladse-Bachsoliani. Munich, Zurich: Pendo, 2006.
- . *Santa Esperanza*. Tiflis: Bakur Sulakauri, 2004.
- Nenik, Francis. *XO*. Leipzig: Ed.cetera, 2012.
- Phillips, Tom. *A Humument. A treated Victorian novel*. Fifth Edition. London: Thames and Hudson, 2012.
- Pichler, Michalis. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Berlin: “greatest hits”, 2009.
- Queneau, Raymond. *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961.
- Rancière, Jacques. “The Space of Words: From Mallarmé to Broodthaers”. *Un coup de dés. Bild gewordene Schrift. Ein ABC der nachdenklichen Sprache*. Ed. Sabine Folie. Köln: Walther König, 2008: 208–212.
- Saporta, Marc. *Composition No 1*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1962.
- Schwarz, Martin. *Das Buch-Buch. Buchobjekte, Bücherbilder. Egon Plüsch und der entschlüpfte Roman*. Winterthur: EigenArt-Verlag, 2008.
- Smith, Keri. *Finish This Book*. London, New York: Penguin, 2011.
- . *This is not a book*. London, New York: Penguin, 2009.
- Stirner, Max. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Leipzig: Otto Wiegand, 1845 [1844].
- Wajcman, Gérard. *L’interdit*. Paris: Édition Denoël, 1986.