New Thoughts about Books: The Production of Contents, Uses, and Access

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Publishing as Artistic Practice, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2016. Sous la dir. d'Annette Gilbert
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Guan Xiao : prévisions météo, Bordeaux : capcMusée d'art contemporain ; Paris : Ed. du Jeu de Paume, 2016

Masaki Fujihata, Paris : Anarchive, 2016, (Anarchive ; 6). Sous la dir. d'Anne-Marie Duguet
Pierre Redon : les sons des confins, Paris : Loco, 2016

Provoke: Between Protest and Performance: Photography in Japan 1960-1975, Göttingen : Steidl, 2016

- 1 "Are, bure, boke" –literally "rough, blurry, grainy"–, three words around which the history of postwar Japanese photography has been built. Moriyama Daidô and Nakahira Takuma are two fine examples of this aesthetic that runs counter to photojournalism and the "beautiful image", especially since their contributions to the magazine *Provoke*, which was published over just a few months between 1968 and 1969. Since then, their out-of-focus and contrasting photos have come to represent a "Provoke style", a term which evasively describes almost all of Japanese photography since the 1960s. Up until now, *Provoke* has been systematically seen from a formal angle, if we set aside its production context,

which was that of the late 1960s, at the height of that period of political and social protest, in Japan and all over the world. The brief of the exhibition about *Provoke*, which was recently held at the Albertina in Vienna,¹ was to deconstruct the mythical aura acquired by the magazine in the realm of photography, and broach it like a link “between protest and performance”. Using lots of reproductions and translations of period documents, the exhibition catalogue reconsiders the connections between the magazine *Provoke*, the Japanese protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s², and the books of photographs resulting from those demonstrations. For its part, the last section of the catalogue, which is as voluminous as it is painstakingly documented, retraces the liaisons between photography, performance, theatre, and experimental dance, which find in the magazine’s printed dimension a medium in which to develop. Including *Provoke* in these different artistic and political contexts makes it possible not to see the magazine just as an attractive recipient, but, on the contrary, to render our reading of it more complex, while at the same time raising an issue which is, in the end of the day, quite simple: for those photographers and artists, why the recourse to publication? Sadly, the contributions to the catalogue fail to offer any clear answer, despite the topical nature of the question.

- 2 Some recent publications do nevertheless invite us to re-think the status and role of art books, in particular from the standpoint of their methods of circulation and distribution, and their production networks, by also introducing the matter of the fluidity of the possible shifts between books and digital technology. Pierre Redon has thus published *Les Sons des confins*, with a box containing a photobook, a booklet with a handful of essays, and a set of tarot cards designed by the artist. This publication is based on a series of “sound walks” which Pierre Redon took along the river Loire, during which he met local people and proposed various hypnosis sessions. The set of divinatory tarot cards acts as a key to the digital phenomenon, because the act of drawing cards makes it possible, with a tablet or Smartphone, to trigger acoustic creations and recordings made during the hypnosis sessions, which people can listen to in their own homes, or outside. In the latter case, the itinerary must be followed precisely where the artist has gone, at the pace of recordings defined by the tarot cards, which start automatically thanks to a geo-localization system. *Les Sons des confins* forms an elaborate edition, “dispersed or rather distributed in different media,”³ printed and digital alike. The acoustic dimension of the publication goes hand-in-hand with our reading of it, but without upsetting its nature, while at the same time re-creating the conditions of the walks and the group ceremonies organized by the artist. It stems, above all, from a complement to the reading—by making the strange atmosphere of the printed edition that much denser—which is organized around magic, ritual, the primitive, and the occult.
- 3 The book *Masaki Fujihata*, published by Anarchive, ventures a step or two further into this “expanded field”⁴ of publishing, going beyond the strict boundaries between books and digital technology. Published in the form of sixteen booklets brought together in a binder, this careful publication goes back over all the works published to date by the Japanese artist Fujihata Masaki, whose activities have been based since the 1970s on experimentation and the “remarkable appropriation of technology”⁵ such as 3D printing and scanning. From then on, it is in no way surprising that his book makes use of augmented reality technology. Using a Smartphone, it is possible to have access to different contents (videos, sounds, 3D maquettes, etc.), which are activated as you read. Fujihata Masaki’s published proposal finds its relevance in the fact that “it couldn’t afford

to merely be demonstrative of its technology,”⁶ and because it incorporates the question of uses in its form. The page’s stability and the animated elements become entangled, and the augmented reality then serves as an interface between the paper medium, which is what the book is, the artist’s multimedia works, and the reader, giving a new material form to the information, and to the experience undergone by the viewer-cum-reader.

- 4 But without having recourse to any kind of technological system to accompany our reading of books, many recent publications illustrate the way book production is susceptible to digital technologies and to household uses of computers. Conceived as “a lengthy composition arranging quotations, film excerpts, titles and slogans, and phrases gleaned from here and there,”⁷ Fabrice Croux’s artist’s book *Pur Jus* thus refers, in its contents, to the abundance of sources available on the Internet. As in a digital drift from one site to another, the reader also comes upon contents as diverse as the words of a song from Jacques Demy’s *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*, a dialogue taken from *Conan the Barbarian*, a passage from Tzvetan Todorov’s *Introduction to Fantastic Literature*, and Tim Ingold’s *Walking with Dragons*, conversations overheard in the street, extracts from interviews given by Fabrice Croux, and “texts generated by videos where he lets Youtube draw up the (highly defective) automatic sub-titling for the hearing-impaired.”⁸
- 5 With *Prévisions météo*, the book which accompanies her exhibition at the Jeu de Paume, the Chinese artist Guan Xiao, for her part, proposes a visual version of copy-and-paste, using images (static or animated) collected online, which she juxtaposes and mixes in order to produce new compositions. Echoing the system of hyperlinks that we find on the Internet, she favours relations between images rather than the content of images taken in isolation. This contamination of the digital in the editorial structure of the book goes hand-in-hand—just as in *Pur Jus*—with iconographical decisions which evoke the computer: the reference to dialogue boxes in video games and the GIF (Graphical Interchange Format) animations broken down and multiplied on certain pages for Guan Xiao; the drawings made with ASCII, as well as the *Chimères* created from screen captures for Fabrice Croux. In both instances, the borrowings are not simply aesthetic, because these books are fuelled by the way the Internet works and is organized, in particular the effects produced by the profusion of available contents, their juxtaposition, and the fragmentation and dispersal of the discourse. By opening up the book’s contents to the digital culture, they are testing a style—be it textual or visual—which is not fixed, a style “informed as much by the fragmentary and the continuous as by the fixed and the moving, the theoretical and the documentary, the impersonal and the individualized, the textual and the visual, the original and the copy.”⁹
- 6 These artists, just as in the case of earlier augmented editions, do not set physical media against digital media (books and magazines versus computer and tablets), but rather focus on the uses made of them. In any event, this is no longer a time for refusing to get involved with the virtual domain and the printed domain. For Annick Lantenois, the digital culture “engenders [in the editorial domain] a deep-seated movement reconfiguring practices, apprenticeships, economics, and ways of producing knowledge and the various fields of creation and, consequently, their status,”¹⁰ but it has not brought about the oft-announced “death of the book.”¹¹ Furthermore, the anthology of writings compiled by Gwen Allen, titled *The Magazine*, plus the collective volume *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, do not make any distinction between printed publications and online publications, but rather constantly mix the two in their respective lists of contents. This is confirmed in various practices: a publishing project like *The Serving Library* (by Stuart

Bailey, Angie Keefer, and David Reinfurt) is based, for example, on the production of texts available on a dedicated website and on the design of volumes printed twice yearly (the *Bulletins of the Serving Library*), which borrow online texts.¹² Here, the digital and the printed are linked in a cycle which associates both to such a degree that all contrast is ineffective. Taking the evolving aspect of digital technologies into account, and integrating it, are a manner of re-thinking published art: re-thinking the book's uses with Fujihata Masaki, re-thinking the text's style with Fabrice Croux, re-thinking the production of printed images with Guan Xiao, and re-thinking the accessibility and dissemination of contents with *The Serving Library*.

- 7 At the present time, many publishers and artists are conceiving their books by factoring in new uses and contexts with regard to the art publication: "Fluidity, network, complexity of sources and exchanges, sharing authority, new forms of transmission, nomadic, hybridized art practices involving creation, quotations, and interpretation."¹³ To discuss the role of these published forms, the authors of *Publishing as Artistic Practice* have decided not to be interested in the book for its physical qualities (book as object), but rather to consider the publication as an act of publishing. Here, talking about publication, Annette Gilbert makes a clear distinction between the fact of "making public" and the action of "making a public."¹⁴ In fact, by way of their dissemination and the networks (social, formal or informal) wherein they circulate, art publications help towards the emergence of groups of readers more or less scattered throughout the world. The writings brought together in *The Magazine* likewise present certain periodicals as the expression of a geographical alternative to the predominant artistic order (South American magazines, and those coming from the former USSR) or of a political and social alternative (feminist, gay and punk magazines),¹⁵ just as *Provoke* and certain books of photographs of Japanese protest made it possible to bring groups of demonstrators together in the 1960s. The goals laid down since the 1960s are still topical: diffusing forms and ideas, making access to them easy, kindling the creation of a group of readers. Without being concerned with conventional opposites (between book and computer, between physical content and de-materialized content, between work of art and cultural object), and no matter how varied they may be, the new published forms are updating a tried and tested model, whose entire economics is based on the opening-up and de-compartmentalization of media, categories, genres and players.

NOTES

1. The exhibition *Provoke. Between Protest and Performance: Photography in Japan 1960-1975* was held from 29 January to 8 May 2016 at the Albertina in Vienna, before travelling to the Fotomuseum in Winterthur (28 May-28 August), LE BAL in Paris (14 September-11 December), and then the Art Institute of Chicago (28 January-30 April 2017).

2. Among the claims made by the demonstrators, we can mention the review of the security treaty with the United States, the end of the American occupation of Okinawa, and the cessation of the construction of a new airport at Narita.

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6. Fujihata, Masaki. "A Love for the Visual Arts", *Masaki Fujihata, Op. cit.*, booklet no.2, p. 15
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11. On this subject see: Ludovico, Alessandro. *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894*, Eindhoven, Rotterdam: Onomatopee, 2012.
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