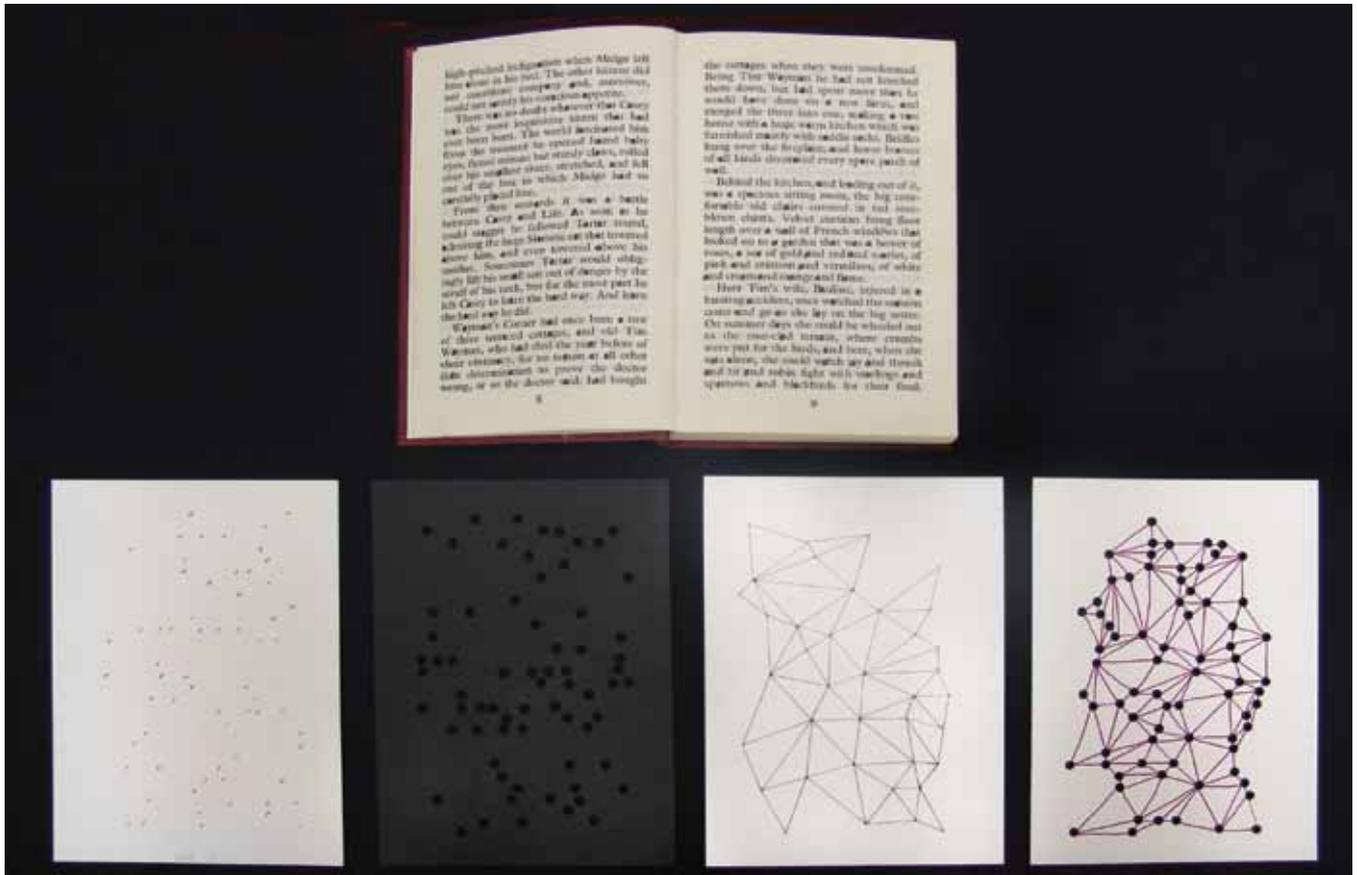


Books Unbound



In 2011, American academic Garrett Stewart surveyed artists using books as a sculptural medium in *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*. In this text, he identifies ‘bookworkers’ as a group of artists who ‘set about reworking a found volume rather than fashioning a new one for publication or display’.¹ This essay will sample four contemporary ‘bookworkers’ engaging with bound books in involved, process-heavy methods. Whether it is through deconstruction and collage, tangible language mapping, physical alterations of the actual pages, or painstaking duplication, these artists ask us to reconsider the boundaries of the printed and bound book.



Elizabeth Willing is a Brisbane-based artist whose practice is concerned with the social structures surrounding the consumption of food. Willing's fascination with food and eating extends to printed imagery found in vintage cookbooks where photographs are reproduced in glaring detail and garish colours. She deconstructs cookbooks to create large collages and is primarily drawn to those printed during the period spanning the 1960s to 1980s. Her preference for this era stems from practical reasons: the photographs depict dishes where every component is in focus. Contemporary cookbooks favour a shallow depth of field making the imagery difficult to deconstruct and collage. Willing carefully knits together the reproductions to create variegated collages of textures and ingredients. Starting with primarily Australian cookbooks sourced from op-shops, Willing expanded the series while she lived in Europe to include collages made with German books. When considered cumulatively, the imagery of the collected cookbooks begins to map and chart the diets and cuisines of a specific place or era.

Beginning in 2011, the initial collages were composed to create long banquet scenes. Drawing on imagery with similar colour palettes and props, Willing blends the photographs together to create linear collages that are often displayed wrapped around the walls of a room. From this starting point, the stew series was conceptualised, featuring imagery of unidentifiable meats and brown casseroles, a dish that saw resurgence in popularity in the 20th century.² In an example made for the exhibition *Art + Food: Beyond the Still Life* (2012), Willing seamlessly melds imagery to create a mottled blotch of unidentifiable ingredients presenting an unappetising depiction of mid-century cuisine. In *Flesh* (2015), created during her residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Willing extracted all of the photographs from the German cookbook *Fleisch – und Aufschnittplatten – meisterhaft präsentiert*³ and assembled the imagery into a sprawling repetitive pattern. In this piece, Willing distils the information contained within a single book into one artwork, rendering the cookbook unusable in the traditional sense. Her work instead highlights what Colman Andrews, co-founder of *Saveur* magazine, notes as the real value of cookbooks, not the 'culinary formulae they provide but in what they tell us about the times and cultures out of which they come'.⁴

Lezlie Tilley is an Australian artist living in Newcastle whose practice is conceptually based around ideas of process, chance aesthetics, and ordered geometry. Her series *Pages from an A-less Novel* (2012), exhibited at Brenda May Gallery, exemplifies the labour-intensive process central to her practice. As her starting point, Tilley takes a single page of printed text from the 1968 novel *Casey* by British author Joyce Stranger,⁵ a book Tilley chose from her personal library randomly. Using a somewhat Oulipian methodology⁶, Tilley then marks every letter 'a' on the page with a dot, replicates the dots exactly onto large sheets of paper and connects them to create abstract geometric shapes. These shapes were enlarged and laser-cut in acrylic for her 2012 exhibition; and for her 2015 solo show *Soundings* at The University of Newcastle, they were drawn on small sheets of paper that were hung in a grid, a presentation more aligned with the book format. Tilley's generative process reveals patterns within language and

A. —

Lezlie Tilley, *An a-less novel + process*, 2012, ink on found book, colour pencil on perforated paper, 22 x 28 x 3 cm (book), 21 x 15 cm (paper).
Courtesy the Artist.

B. —

Elizabeth Willing, *Flesh*, 2015, collage of all the images from the book *Fleisch- und Aufschnittplatten - meisterhaft präsentiert*, 70 x 100 cm.
Courtesy the Artist.

C. —

Elizabeth Willing, *Stew*, 2012, collage, 100 x 100 cm.
Courtesy the Artist.

manifests these arrangements into physical objects through meticulous mapping. The random chance arrangement of dots connected by straight lines form compositions of many triangles. Tilley titles each work based on the physical location of the text in the book – for example, *Chapter 1 – Page 7*. By naming the works in this manner, Tilley directly recalls the source material that has been rendered and reduced to an angular shape.

In Finnish artist Emma Rönnholm's sculptural practice, she transforms everyday materials to make the familiar feel unfamiliar. In addition to using books and newspapers, Rönnholm manipulates other quotidian materials in her work including coins, collectable figurines, and lace gloves. The 14 books in *Niin kuin ei olisikaan (Like Nothing Happened)* (2013) were selected for their ubiquitous presence in Finland; they are a series of novels published by the Finnish Readers Digest (*Valitut Palat*). Rönnholm's focus is on the physical shape of the books, not the content, so she remakes the covers, removing the identifying title, before processing the interior pages. To create the work, she glues together the pages and then carefully splits the paper down the middle of each sheet. The arduous nature of such an undertaking is immediately recognisable; the thinness of each page presents what would appear an impossible task. The sheet division is not always clean, sometimes patches of the page are left behind leaving little islands of text and fracturing the book's information.

Rönnholm engages this concept of preservation versus destruction in other bodies of work. *Tiivisteet (Concentrates)* (2013) sees her 'processing' newspapers where the daily paper is boiled and the pulp is compressed into a roughly shaped ball.⁷ Returning to Stewart's *Bookwork*, he observes, 'book art, in the sense of book sculpture, begins in disuse'.⁸ Rönnholm engages this idea of 'disuse' in the creation *Tiivisteet*, beginning with an act of destruction. While technically each ball contains all of the news printed on that specific day, the text is rendered unreadable. For Rönnholm, the project is also a reflection on her personal and repetitious ritual of breakfasting over the morning paper. She began *Tiivisteet* as 'a kind of synthesis of the ever repeating breakfasts' and produced the work over an extended two-week period.⁹ The concept draws certain parallels with American Fluxus practitioner Alison Knowles and her durational work *Identical Lunch* (1969), where her daily habits of consuming the same lunch evolved into a performative gesture. Knowles gathered receipts, written accounts, and photographs of her lunches to create an artist book as evidence of the endeavour. In this regard, the newspaper balls from Rönnholm's breakfast act as physical evidence of her ritualistic dining customs.

Thai artist Dusadee Huntrakul's series *Tracing Aihwa Ong's 'Buddha is Hiding'* (2013) was commissioned for the 2013 Singapore Biennale. The work is comprised of 60 individual pages of Aihwa Ong's 2003 book *Buddha is Hiding* carefully copied in graphite.¹⁰ Huntrakul traces the page of the book, physically replicating the machine aesthetic of the printed word through a manual process. The sheer scale of the mundane task was conveyed in the Biennale display where the pages were hung one after

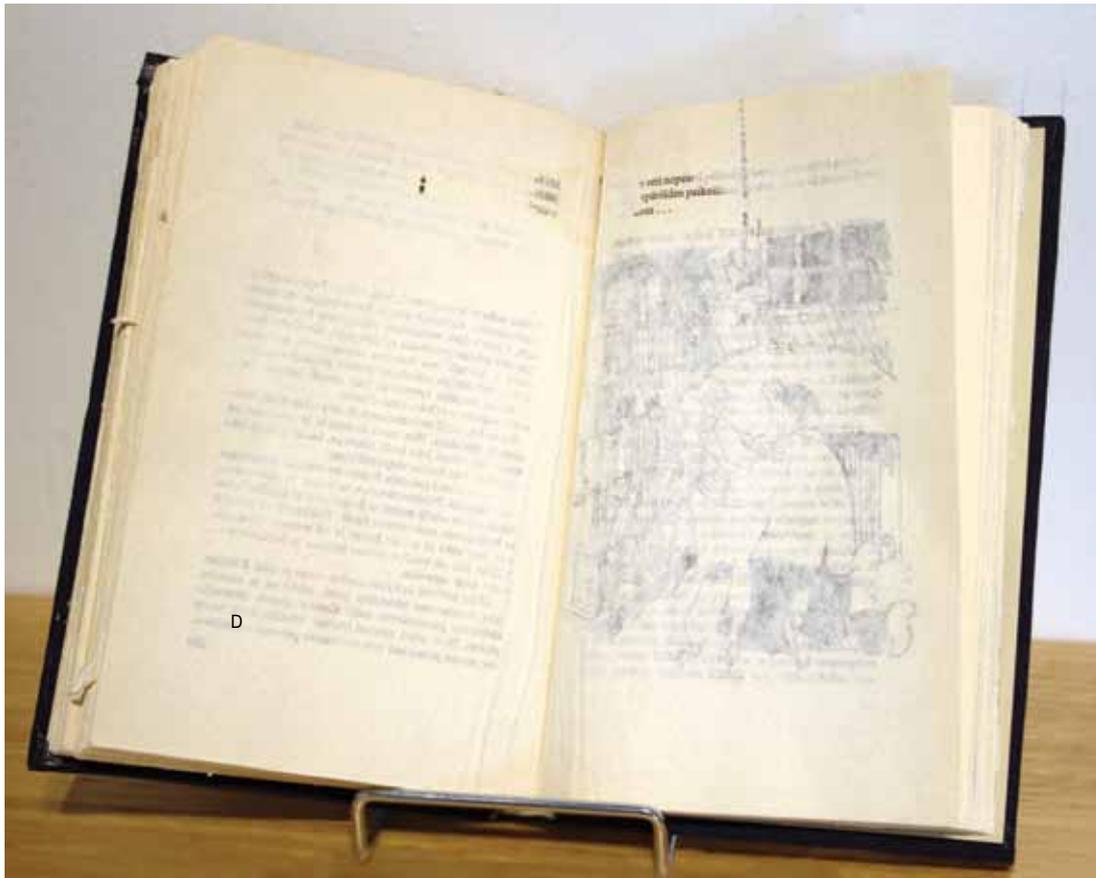
another in a procession wrapping around an entire room. Such a display allows the viewer to slowly circle the room and read Ong's text. With this artwork, Huntrakul raises questions concerning originality and authorship within the artistic process such as: What determines artistic value or an original artwork? Where does the copyright of such work lie, with the author or artist?

Whereas Rönnholm sought to render the contents of her books illegible in order to focus on the physical characteristics of the book, Huntrakul removed the text from the bound book format in order to focus on the information contained within. In this manner, although the pages are freed from the codex format, Huntrakul's work is more akin to the tradition of hand-copied illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. As noted in the Biennale artist folio, Huntrakul uses the drawings as 'a means of contemplation [to consider] his own cultural values after his own immigration from Thailand to the United States'.¹¹ In this way, the work becomes a meditative and reflective exercise.

Cutting, tracing, mapping and slicing are a number of methods employed to both extract information and manipulate the format of the bound book. In an era of ebooks and digital media, collectively these practices place significance on the physical form of the printed word. The deconstructed books made by these 'bookworkers' interrupt conventional communication and transmission of information. In some instances, like the language mapping by Tilley and the sculpted books by Rönnholm, the text is rendered illegible. In contrast, Willing compresses all of the visual information contained within a single book into an artwork the viewer can 'read' instantly and Huntrakul replicates printed text enabling contents to be readily conveyed.

NOTES

1. — Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011, p. 21.
2. — Alan Davidson, 'Casserole', *The Oxford Companion to Food*, ed. Tom Jaine, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.
3. — First published in 1992 by Theo Wershoven, the book details presentation techniques of meats and cold cuts to create decorative platters. The repetition of the rolled meats and the focus on the single topic are two aspects of the cookbook that appeal to Willing.
4. — Coleman Andrews, 'Cultural Context & Roast Chicken', *Cookbook Book*, ed. Annahita Kamali and Florian Böhm, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2014, p. 7.
5. — *Casey* is a narrative about a cat and his various relationships between other animals on the farm. The author, Joyce Stranger, was a biologist who specialised in animal behaviour.
6. — The French Oulipo writers of the 1960s generated their work within constricted parameters as a means of prompting new ideas. For the Oulipians, and to an extent Tilley, the restrictions are proactively embraced as a system to facilitate the creative process.
7. — The newspaper used by Rönnholm is *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest subscription daily newspaper in Finland established in 1889.
8. — Stewart, *Bookwork*, p. 25.
9. — Emma Rönnholm, email message to author, 21 August 2016.
10. — *Buddha is Hiding* by anthropologist Aihwa Ong is an examination of immigration by Cambodians to the West in order to flee the oppressive rule of the Pol Pot regime and their subsequent experiences as Cambodian-American citizens of the United States.
11. — 'Artist Folio', *Singapore Biennale*. Accessed 30 July 2015. http://www.singaporebiennale.org/downloads/folios/Dusadee%20Huntrakul_Final.pdf



D. —
 Emma Rönnholm,
Niin kuin ei olisikaan
 (*Like Nothing Happened*),
 2013, installation/
 series of artist's books.
 Courtesy the Artist.



E. —
 Emma Rönnholm,
Tiivisteet (Concentrates),
 2013, installation of
 boiled newspapers.
 Courtesy of the Artist.