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TO FIGURE OUT WHAT IS HAPPENING: An Interview with Johanna Drucker

Shaw, Tate. *The Journal of Artists' Books* 21. Spring 2007.

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Johanna Drucker needs almost no introduction to *JAB* readers; she has been a revolutionary explorer in the small world of artists' books for over three decades. As *JAB* re-forms it seems essential to report on Drucker's artists' books. It must be mentioned that while her productivity of artists' books is copious by any standard, this is only a fraction of her output in general. It is fair to say that Drucker is accomplished at historicizing and contextualizing nearly any field she chooses. Drucker is the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA. She is well known for histories of the alphabet (*Alphabetic Labyrinth*, Thames and Hudson) and experimental typography (*The Visible Word*, University of Chicago Press). Her most recent theoretical publication is *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (University Chicago Press). Currently, Drucker is writing a history of graphic design. Most fitting for the context of this publication are Drucker's works *The Century of Artists' Books* and *Figuring the Word* (Granary Books). These collections were radical and influential for this interviewer. To begin with, *The Century of Artists' Books* remains a finding aid for researching books by artists unavailable elsewhere. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Drucker organized these books, not hierarchically, not chronologically, but by concept—themes, subjects, practice, and ideas. This is no small statement in a largely formalist field for which there is little consequential criticism, nor a widely accepted critical language to improve artists' book literacy in any meaningful way. Even still, much has been written on Drucker's artists' books in other fields, such as poetics. For instance, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* by Marjorie Perloff contains a poignant reading of Drucker's *The Word Made Flesh*. Or take, for example, *The History of the /my Wor(l)d*, which is also widely known. This interview was meant, in its small way, to cover several of Johanna Drucker's other artists' books that have, up until now, less written about them. It took place over email from August to December of 2006. A very small portion of the original correspondence has been cut and pasted so as to read in a slightly more interlocutory manner.

Tate Shaw: I'd like to begin with the idea of access to your artists' books, as it may relate to your perception in the field. For instance, I have on my personal shelf *Figuring the Word*, and *The Century of Artists' Books*, each containing jam-packed statements, essays, conceptualizations, classifications, philosophies, etc. My presumption is that most people in the field have read (or attempted to read) your essays, and not your artists' books. To me, as part of a later generation of book artist, an interesting

problem is presented: reading your artists' books after exposure to your theoretical work and published lectures. The nuance and complexity of thought in your critical work is paralleled, if not surpassed by your books. How do the creative processes differ for you? I get the sense from other interviews, namely "Through Light and the Alphabet" in *Figuring the Word*, that your procedures for making books begin with a book's finitude, a sense of closure in mind, whereas your essays seem to aim toward conception, a beginning—especially when it comes to books in critical terms.

Johanna Drucker: First of all, however, you can now access my books online: www.artistsbooksonline.org. We are currently trying to get the bugs out of the image viewer function so that you can have readable, as well as look-at-able, page images. That should get resolved soon. *Access to Abs* in general is a problem, and "AbsOnline" has been built (by me, here, at UVA) to begin to address that by creating a virtual collection. More on that to come, but though we all know full well this is NOT the books, it is a great way to allow the fuller corpus of otherwise distributed and unavailable material to be accessed. My one-of-a-kind books are not on here, just the editioned ones, as most of those others are no longer in my possession.

Working processes between creative and critical projects differ mainly in one respect: attention to graphical and material form of presentation. I almost always SEE the book in my mind as it comes together when it is an artist's book—and of course I have to make materials dummies and hold/feel the scale, color, texture etc. before I know if it will work. The laying out of a work into a full-scale dummy makes it come together in a closed, finite sense, that's true. Though I have to say that one thing I admired and envied in watching Brad [Freeman] work on *MuzeLink* was that he let it develop as he went along. I would like to emulate that in the next book I undertake, in part because the porousness of the project allows for much more self-reflection, internal commentary.

Critical projects almost always start with an argument, a desire to persuade, or define a position, point of view, or else they start with outright enthusiasm—as is the case with most of the things I do reviews of or write about critically. So much wonderful stuff exists and offering a reading of these works is a way to offer a way to engage with them.

TS: In my mind I have connected your essay, "Critical Metalanguage for the Artists' Book," to your artists' book *Simulant Portrait*. The essay's call and response between critical and personal voice seemed an echo from *Simulant Portrait*'s first imagetext—"her I.D. (id) auto, bio, mono graphy." Plus the private and critical voices of "Metalanguage" combine, in the end, with the book as commodity and *Simulant Portrait* happens to be the only of your artists' books in my personal collection at the moment (since I'm paying attention to access, here). I found your *Colophon* statement to be very funny and humble with regard to the use of "sophisticated equipment" to make books. Was this your first computer-made book? The limitations you faced with the type put me in mind of software as a form of inscription. On the front flap it is explained that the story, written in the future, is of the first Simulant, generated beings made after the Generics proved to be lacking, "in social autonomy and were always restrained by the conceptual limits of their programming." So my first reading of *Simulant Portrait* was that its subject was, in part, anxiety over your transition to the computer from the letterpress typecase and being forced into a collaboration of sorts with programmers. There was an obvious computer-based aesthetic at play, with the overlaying boxes, jaggy type, and pixilated faces. I believe you've already refuted, to some extent, the idea of its hypertext potential—in fact, I thought the sequence of sections was fairly straightforward. Once I had seen the first chapter, "Humble Beginning" or "Not Born," and determined how I would read it, I recognized the exact same layout structure repeated in the following six sections, and so I read them along the same paths as I had the first, setting up a systematic pattern

the way I might flip channels with a remote control, looking to particular channels to always carry a similar program. In "Metalanguage," in talking about sequence, you say, "We lift off, from the flat platform of the program, into the flight of an interactive fancy—coming and going from the finitude of pages in the places and along our own unpredictable encounter. Their order against our whim, their fixity against our interference, their sense against our disregard for it." Did you write texts to fill out various "channels" once a pattern of sequence had been established; in the same manner a reader selects his/ her reading path, perhaps?

JD: *Simulant* wasn't really meant to be a hypertext—rather to imitate the format structures of women's magazines, with their pull quotes, sub-sections, thematic organization, photos etc. The digital "photos" in that book were all just made in MacDraw. The actual photos were done with b & w glossies. I pasted the book up on a piece of glass with a light bulb under it. Brad took care of cutting the rubyliths that created the color printing. It was definitely early days. I had never really used a Mac, though I had worked on phototypesetting equipment in the mid-1970s at the West Coast Print Center, and had also created keystroke command type setting that got output digitally in the 1980s, and had done some stuff using a dot-matrix printer with both Unix and an IBM clone in the 1980s. But the Mac was a new and challenging instrument for me and I set all that type in Word and then pasted it up from printouts. I guess I was more interested in the writing than in learning how to use a page layout program, and I didn't have access to one at that point. Later we got Quark, but I think my aesthetic is so completely formed by letterpress that it is hard for me to really use digital tools effectively in a design sense. True, I do often write and/or edit to fit the format once I've determined what it will be. All those little footnotes in *Simulant* were written in a manic rush.

TS: In "Metalanguage" you mention the critical book term of a "dialogic interplay of face to face, a kind of conversation, confrontation." I didn't notice the green faces in the background of certain spreads until I was halfway through the book and the larger, display-size phrases of "Details are SUPRESSED, blanked OUT" and "Machines WHIRRING in the BACKGROUND" lead me to recognize them, finally. After rereading those larger-sized lines again, I found the phrase "Stretching her long limbs into early DREAMS" enabled me to recognize the very id, or instinctive, unconscious act of staring down books, face to face, as it were. You've said *Simulant* was in response to "Lacanian psychoanalysis in its formulation of the feminine," but did you have any Freud in mind? Were you thinking of Betsy David's *Dreaming Aloud Book Two*, also a document of the unconscious, containing face images generated by the early Macintosh?

JD: Betsy's work is of course familiar to me, and *Dreaming Aloud* had a similar pattern of slightly pixelated imagery in the background. *Simulant* is nowhere near as elegant or refined. I've always been attracted to pulp forms of language and image, and have tried to hybridize as well as pastiche my writing as much as possible—whether writing creatively or critically. That continual change of register seems useful as a way to bring references and associations into a text, through the texture, as it were. Just now re-reading H.D.'s [Hilda Doolittle] *Palimpsest*, and very aware of her use of classical syntax, as if in translation, in parts of that book. Such acts call attention to the form of language and provide an index to history and production. As for Freud, well, that was all there too of course, along with the feminist revisions and attacks, corrections and attentions—Jacqueline Rose, Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, Constance Penley—all things I'd read in those years. Freud's narrative capabilities remain seductive, even if his frameworks of analysis drift into a historical past they were more appropriate to describe. Still, the basic feminist dilemmas remain—how to become subjects of our own language, and

our own desire/sexuality. *Simulant* is really about the construction of female subjectivity, within and through and across all the many discourses of literary, popular, commercial language. That core issue remains compelling to me—and is part of what motivated the book I've just finished, *Testament of Women*, a radically irreverent retelling of Old Testament tales.

TS: I have just read *Otherspace: Martian Ty/opography* available to me in Rochester, NY at the Visual Studies Workshop collected in its Independent Press Archive. Do you see *Otherspace* as part of this particular line of inquiry in your work, the construction of female subjectivity? The book is centered on the character Jane who is receiving messages from Mars via her astrophysics lab equipment, her printer randomly chucking out paper with glyphs of the Martian language, until Jane and Mars connect in a big-bang climax towards the book's end. What I'm curious about is fairly abstract, I'm afraid. A few pages before the climax Jane discovers that what she has been studying—representations of Mars throughout history—are basically all wrong. I was reminded here of *The Gynecologist* by Joan Lyons with its visual motif of often ridiculous, man-made representations of women and their internal organs. Many thoughts came to mind regarding the book as body metaphor. For instance, when the climax occurs and the image goes to the full bleed, deep red and black and purplish spreads, I found what I knew to be topographical images didn't feel like surface study at all but the passing by of something like internal organs. At one point Jane appears to be sucked into the book's gutter as if it were a galactic orifice, the gutter as a black hole. Which brings me to subject/object relationship in the book. Jane laments her "previous constraints" with Mars and is "humbled a little by having been the object, not the subject, of an observation." This also put me in mind of your wonderful essay "Simulacral Exoticism" (from the *Figuring the Word* collection, again). You spell out how designers of a particular advertisement were conflating the familiar form of the female body with an unfamiliar language, which are old hat, patriarchal tactics for disengaging from women as subjects. Jane, on the other hand, understands what Mars is trying to communicate—she learns the Martian language. And I have to ask: did you consult the Benejah Antrim [discussed in *Simulacral Exoticism*] or something like it in your creation of the Martian glyphs for the book?

JD: Well, what to say about *Otherspace*. It has never been my favorite book, though I enjoyed the research we did on the history of images of Mars. But the book always felt too constrained by its narrative and the narrative, though imaginative enough, is just a bit too conventional in form, I think. That said, Brad did a great job with designing the printing of the book and the "maroon" color you think you are seeing is in fact a variant of the same red—I think it was PMT 404. We were working with Photoshop for the first time in a serious way and Brad figured out he could manipulate the curves in the color digitally and produce radical effects. That was a revelation. The silver ink was his idea as well, since he knew it would sit on top of the red and black and catch the light and thus be readable. I used Photoshop for that swirling type. We still had only basic digital skills at that point, though the book is quite sophisticated in its production. Conceptually, I think I prefer *Simulant* as a study in the creation of female subjectivity. It seems more pure and more literary, with a wider range of textual styles as well as a more open ended narrative construction (the browsing mode). I don't hate *Martians*, as we called it, I just think it is a bit constrained. And of course there was the production disaster of the cover going dull with that coating on it. We had no idea it would do that, so the object was never as beautiful as we had hoped. Certainly psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity were in mind for me. I think the late 1980s and early 1990s were when my interests in and conflicts with Lacanian and Freudian theory peaked. I was reading the work of Jacqueline Rose, Gayatri Spivak, Mary Kelly, and others.

As for the Martian alphabet, that is actually not from Antrim, though I love his book (it has angel alphabets, but not Martian ones). It is from the work of Hélène Smith. She was a psychic who had "visited" the Planet Mars as well as India. Her alphabet was recorded in her book from the early 20th century, *From India to the Planet Mars* [*Des Indes à la Planete Mars* by Théodore Flournoy]. Interestingly, she was working with a male student of psychics who was related to Ferdinand de Saussure—his brother, I think. In any case, I can't remember the details, but the story shows the close connection between various scholarly communities and psychic investigations, which were taken very seriously by people like Upton Sinclair (*Mental Radio*) and others.

TS: I was privileged by Brad Freeman, your collaborator on *Emerging Sentience*, who sent me a copy of the book in the mail with a note attached stating it is "based on the following question: Is conscious self awareness an emergent function of complex systems or is it the spark of life? In other words, is there such a thing as artificial intelligence in, say, computers?" Immediately, I thought of Herbert Simon's essay "The Architecture of Complexity" namely because it's one of the few articles I have read deemed significant to the AI community. What is your background in artificial intelligence theory? Has AI study influenced your work, specifically *Emerging Sentience*?

JD: I had gotten very interested in the literature of AI—in science fiction and in theory—as part of the study of the development of digital media. Films like *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, and *RoboCop* all posited interestingly distinct models of subjectivity and automated intelligence that I was drawn to. *Simulant Portait*, obviously, was one expression of that interest shifted into a feminist engagement with female subjectivity and modes of language.

The crucial question in AI theory—is consciousness an emergent property of complex systems or is it a "spark" of "life" remains compelling. I tend to fall onto the emergent side, obviously, hence the title of the work. I've read Simon, and Weiner, and Dreyfus, and many of the other classic texts in AI, of course. I got pulled toward second-generation systems theory—(Heinz von Foerster) and also theories of autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela), as well as radical constructivist psychology (Glaserfeld)—after I came to UVA [University of Virginia in Charlottesville]. These certainly influenced my thinking and my writing. The vocabulary in these works is suggestive and poetic, as is the terminology of cybernetics and information technology.

TS: Some of the most powerful imagery of *Emerging Sentience* includes domestic environs. I was reminded of your paper "Critical Issues/Exemplary Works" [originally presented at the Pyramid Atlantic Book Arts Fair and Conference, 2004, later published in *The Bonefolder* Vol. 2, no. 1, Fall, 2005], in which you briefly align by Keith Smith (also containing vivid, domestic imagery) with Webproductions books that flatten hierarchies between real and represented space. Speaking of that particular paper, has hierarchy or general systems theory influenced your metadata development for AbsOnline? Or is the vocabulary of these fields far too imprecise? If I'm not mistaken, a major strength of general systems theory, and then Simon's hierarchy theory, is that their vocabulary is suitably vague. Hierarchies can be found everywhere, which is precisely the reason to take them up. But you are calling for a much more descriptive vocabulary, correct—but descriptive as it relates to the book as a whole, conceptually speaking, not its separate subassemblies? Because in hierarchy theory, as I understand it, when you look at a subassembly of a complex thing too closely the system falls into pieces of sheer abstraction. So to scrupulously analyze a book's binding, or just its haptic info, as attempted by Gary Frost¹, for instance, makes it far more indefinable?

JD: As for hierarchies, they are an inevitability in XML [programming], but a framework of organization is useful for cognitive purposes. What I found in making the Abs metadata is that I first designed

something that was so difficult even I couldn't use it—and I had designed it. I still find that the basic problem is designing an information system/metadata that follows the order of encounter of an object while sorting the information into a logical system that makes sense. The two systems are not isomorphic. If you are asking someone to describe a book based on picking it up, looking at its cover, moving through it, and associating as they look, read, turn pages, then they will not be able to fit that experience into a Work>Edition>Object hierarchy very well at all. After all, they have the object in their hands. But the edition? Where is that exactly? These separations are not arbitrary, but they do follow a very different system of intellectual organization than the experiential encounter. I find this fascinating. And that we can keep both ideas in mind at the same time is really kind of wonderful. I'm not troubled by this kind of cognitive dissonance, quite the contrary; I think it wakes us up to these distinctions.

TS: To return to *Emerging Sentience*—and something alluded to in one of your previous responses—would it interest you to comment further on the hybridized form your writing often takes? How does this work procedurally? Is there any Burroughsesque cutting up involved? Do you have a file of words that are mediators, for instance? What does it mean conceptually to create this fusion of a general-systems-like vocabulary with words of expressive precision? My favorite text excerpt from *Sentience* is "run your exquisite hand along the cold spine of the bastard protocol mechanism." The word "exquisite" provided an avenue of thought for me. It referred (in an artists' book context) to Surrealists' exquisite corpse books, in a way, which made me wonder about the book's image to text relationships. Were the pictures and texts made independently as complex subassemblies and then brought together for the book?

JD: The piece, "Emerging Sentience," was part of a set of short pieces that were published as *Deterring Discourse* in the early 1990s. They each had new technology themes and also were responses to the closing down of public information and debate in the news around the first Gulf War. We lifted it out and condensed it slightly for this book.

The design of *Emerging Sentience* was a direct result of our collaboration on *Nova Reperta* in 1998-99. We reversed the sequence of design events. In *Nova Reperta* the back and forth activity of developing the book resulted in our setting the sequence of pages on the basis of the images. Their structure and development was set first. Though the text, like the images, had been developed as a response to the Stradanus work [*Nova Reperta*], the design of the layout followed the decisions about the image sequence. I designed that layout as a direct response to the images. That piece had been meant to work as a wall piece, but it never did—too dense, and the writing was too literary. With *Emerging Sentience* we took the distilled, edited text and I laid it out so it would read from a distance, on the wall, in a grid. The text is a double text, embedded—one text is visible and legible when it is on the wall but it is set into a smaller text where it reads as well. We taped up the black and white text print outs and kept reworking that design until we liked it independent of the images. Brad was shooting pictures, but he made them work within the design after the text had been structured. It was an interesting exercise for both of us to see the difference in these approaches.

As for the language—! My head just processes this way. I'm still trying to push this continual shift of register into a highly eclectic mode. The heterogeneity of contemporary language we encounter on a regular basis and the effects in terms of producing us as cultural/social/ historical subjects is something I am so aware of all the time. I always say my sensibility is created at the intersection of Mallarmé and the tabloid press. But of course, nothing is that simple. I don't use any mechanical devices—no word lists, no processing techniques or cut up—just the random access of memory and association as I write. Punning and double entendre paraphrase are like cross-links or hypertext phrases that let me step from one

linguistic zone to another in a jump.

TS: This fall you were very much involved with the exhibition "Complicit! Contemporary American Art and Mass Culture" shown at University of Virginia Art Museum. Your collaborator for *A Girl's Life*, Susan Bee, has work in the "Complicit!" show and her collaged and painted pages for the book are certainly apropos of complicity, very deep entanglements with mass culture, though no more or less than your writing, I would say. Do you consider your consciousness of the "heterogeneity of contemporary language" to be connected to your theorization of Complicity?

I read parts of *Sweet Dreams* last year when it came out and remember relating artists' books that would support the point of view. Could you see *A Girl's Life* as exemplifying the idea? I was curious to know your thoughts on artists' books in general, with regard to Complicity. For obvious reasons, I was reminded of the Lucy Lippard essays, "The Artists' Book Goes Public," and "Conspicuous Consumption," the unrequited dream of the artists' book in the supermarket checkout line, the warning of the '70's and '80's, "that competing with mass culture comes dangerously close to imitating it, and can lead an artist to sacrifice precisely what made him or her choose art in the first place." Funnily enough, there was a *Metrotimes* write-up on *A Girl's Life* inserted by the publisher, Granary Books, in the review copy I was reading (in VSW's collection, from their Independent Press Archive, again) that ends with the line "[I]ike all impulse items, it should be stacked by hundreds near the register. A must have!" It seems Bee's collages and your writing isn't directly criticizing mass culture so much as it is a wonderful, and yet scary product of it, which is your basic argument in *Sweet Dreams* and "Complicity!" right? *A Girl's Life* seems also to eschew all warnings for invitations. I listened to the pod-cast interview available on the UVA Art Museum's website and learned one of the show's subdivisions is Artifice and also heard your joke about production value. Was it intended to have the super slick, high production value cover as a stratagem of enticement? Is Steve Clay of Granary Books in collaboration at this stage, as well? I, for one, would love to hear the story of how you came to publish it and your other titles with Granary Books, how that relationship was formed.

JD: I think heterogeneity is at the heart of my work and thinking. The concept of subjectivity that I absorbed from structuralist and post-structuralist thought provided a model of the subject as a position, a node, produced through cultural sign systems, as well as a psychoanalytic subject (discrete, individuated through family life and experience, as well as whatever idiosyncratic workings of mind in here of a particular person). The capacity to know signs, to recognize language forms, to hear and see specificity—these are crucial elements of aesthetic practice. They are also basic to production of knowledge, of course. Elitist? Not really. The point is that in any field one knows more for having more references. Difference and distinction are everything.

Sweet Dreams and *A Girl's Life* are siblings. Since I'm always working on artist's books and on critical writings, my works are curiously twinned. *The Visible Word* has its companion pieces in *Through Light and the Alphabet*, *The Word Made Flesh*, and *History of the /my Wor(l)d*, all done during its production. *Theorizing Modernism* and *Simulant Portrait* (an odd couple, perhaps), *Alphabetic Labyrinth* and *Narratology* have their own dialogue, perhaps specific to a rather subterranean relation. *The Century of Artists' Books* is related to *Martian Typol/graphy* (our collaborations), and *Figuring the Word* was distinctly related to *Prove Before Laying*; they even share a title/subtitle. So yes, to answer your question, *A Girl's Life* is absolutely about that same relationship between fine art and mass culture and mediated life. You're quite right about the argument. I both love and fear mass culture's brutalism and vulgarity. I love its crudeness and reductions, but would not want to be subject to them in some court of aesthetics... Steve let us do what we wanted, and Susan and I have been

friends for a long, long time. Our sensibilities are tightly intertwined. As our hers and mine with those of Charles Bernstein, her husband. His polymorphous and heteroglossic capabilities are highly tuned, and I've learned endlessly from his thoughts and processes.

TS: After reading *A Girl's Life* I went back to *Figuring the Word*, the moving essay "Writing with Respect to Gender," in which you close by saying, "[t]he struggle remains to become the subject of my own enunciation, subject of my own desire. And it is in the understanding of that condition as always ongoing and in formation to which the writing seems to provide at least some access." Something about the Dawn and Becki characters from *A Girl's Life* seems decidedly unrepressed—the exuberant lines and brightly colored type, maybe. I wondered if you might comment on *A Girl's Life* in relation to this earlier essay. Where are you, or perhaps where is *A Girl's Life*, in this continuing course?

JD: "Writing with Respect to Gender" is an essay from the early 1990s. It was written when I was still newly at Columbia [University], for a seminar in feminist theory. I spent an enormous amount of energy on that piece, since it gave me permission to write about my own work and practice. The question of female/feminine/feminist subjectivity and how we become subjects of our own desire and language remains charged. I've had opportunities and privileges that still let me entertain these questions. Of the works I want to do, still, and have for awhile, there are two that are directly related to these questions. In fact, having you ask them makes me see how closely related to these concerns the projects are. One has to do with watching my own generation of poets come of age and the other has to do with seeing my women friends and peers progress along life trajectories. Obviously, very different. The first has to do with cultural frameworks for aesthetics, the second for gendered experience. The two intertwine in my life, of course, but I engage different partners, projects, and relations for them. Well, that is a bit much, isn't it, to expect I might be able to write these stories? Still, I want to, and I see them as my grown-up works. I think I am actually finally coming of age myself, odd as that might sound. I gave a talk yesterday in which I showed a bunch of my books. I printed my first book 34 years ago. Jokingly, I said to the class, how can that be? I'm not even 34 years old. But I think the point is real, which is that some projects can only be begun when a life has been really (though hopefully far from completely) lived.

TS: I recently read a Xerox copy of the book *Damaged Spring*. The images created reflexive loops for me, which were extraordinarily haunting. I related one to the Zapruder film and the Kennedy assassination motorcade, another to Jean-François Millet's painting *The Gleaners* (the heroic display of "lower class" women picking up shreds after harvest), another to photos of businessmen on the morning of 9/11, and yet another to the mournful cuts of Käthe Kollwitz. Iconic image convergences of this type are usually surrounded by discussions of photography as a means of communication and reportage—I'm thinking here of the work of John Berger and David Levi Strauss, stuff by W.J.T. Mitchell, even. Making the question ever more difficult for us, you include a prominent picture of a cell phone emanating ziz-zag waves, a face captured on its miniature screen, as if it had itself just snapped a picture by means of its inclusive camera feature. I guess my questions come from this cell phone picture and your twist on iconic memory and how entirely unsettling it is to see this reference to the ease of making pictures as figured by the time consuming process of linoleum cut. What inspired you to work with linoleum cuts for this book? My first love, art-wise, was German Expressionists woodcuts—the *Die Brücke* manifesto and the like—so perhaps it's just me, but is it fair to say that you used the linoleum cuts in *Damaged Spring* as nodes of nostalgia, to imply that something has gone missing—quite literally the case in process, when cutting away a linoleum block.

Following my loose structure of drawing connecting lines between your works, I wonder if you don't see *Dark Decade* (1995) connected to *Damaged Spring*? *Dark Decade* is your novel directed at the

1980's, correct? Was it organized similarly, based-upon the paintings included? Again, the images take on surreal juxtapositions between news media imagery and the time-consuming/honored use of what I'm guessing is paint on canvas.

JD: The images in *Damaged Spring* were cut to create a savage new expressionist feeling, so you've got it just right. I felt like nothing could be as mordant as the cuts, though as in the case of *Against Fiction* (1984) and also *Dark Decade*, the source materials were newspaper photographs. The horror and damage of contemporary life, particularly in that spring 2003, as the war drums sounded and the sense of inevitability culminated in our invasion of Iraq, while late snows fell and broke young trees, was too banalized by news imagery to register. The photographic impulse felt detached, the imagery washed in the normalcy of front-page display. So I wanted to remediate the images into a distilled and biting form, so that the emotional contortions repressed by public discourse could be exposed. I felt wary, because I didn't want the linoleum to seem nostalgic—and I certainly didn't want any of the kind of precious illustrational qualities that show in many contemporary linoleum or wood cuts to come in. Their normalcy is off-putting to me—the latter day Rockwell Kent or Leonard Baskin wannabes are so tedious in their careful cutting, as if at pains to demonstrate draftsmanship and craft. That kind of control and arty-craftsy-ness always suggest a kind of "Hallmark-ish book of the month Limited Editions Club" approach that represses any purchase on contemporaneity in favor of a sentimental, pseudo-universal bland-humanism (oh dear, and this is my nice voice!!!). In any case, that careful style had no place in the rendering of damage, only a emotive and aesthetically inflected, savage-seeming line, nervous and anxious, could communicate the anxiety and fear and upset I was feeling as I watched the ripple effect of the administration's lies on people around me as well as in the public presentation of events that unfolded. I've always been more of an expressionist than a bland humanist, and sentiment doesn't work for me, though melodrama does. Exaggeration and extremes, as Brad will tell you (!) are rather my mode. I remember our discussions as that year began, and the phrase "you can never be paranoid enough" as a kind of litany or refrain. It just seemed that from within the situated condition of knowledge (as subjects) we never had enough of an overview of the cultural condition to really see all the machinations at work. Not that there is any desire to see conspiracy, rather, in a systems-theory approach, the emergent and co-dependent forces reinforce within a system in ways that are actually outside of human agency, even as we are a medium for their instrumental action. Well, that's my naive political theory belief, in any case.

But back to the book. I did the images first, and then did dispose them through a dummy, so they would engage each other across the gutters and changes of scale and sightline. If you notice, everyone in the book is looking at someone else, except for the man who asks us to bear witness with him, kneeling at a gravestone. He looks at us.

The linoleum cuts in *Against Fiction* were highly controlled—they are all horizontal lines meant to suggest the refresh lines of a video display. But they are also news based. So, as I said, are the images in *Dark Decade*. I'm a complete news freak, though my way of processing the news is always in these detoured and pastiched modes. I don't know any other form appropriate to current life with all its contradictions and bombardments. But I can't imagine a documentary-type Dos Passos pastiche—that seems oddly too tame and within an idiom that assumes the world's brokenness can be healed into a unified social wholeness. That may be, with enough will and governance, but I'm too much of a nihilist to imagine that it is a useful descriptive mode at this point. I can't describe what I imagine should be, or even describe the brokenness of the world in relation to a presumed wholeness that is either lacking, lost, or possible. I can only try to see what is, which is to say, in that dynamic mutation of form-giving

that makes the world as much as reflects it, try to twist the condition of knowledge into being. Whenever people ask me about my writing, I always say I'm just trying to figure out what is happening.

That said, I think it's fair to say my books/projects fall into several categories, all themes I've been grappling with since I've been writing: narratives and in particular, those that come from literary and popular sources to provide the story for women's lives, news and the contortions of public discourse, language as matter/material/image, and then travel/site works (like *Cuba*). [collaboration with BF, 2006]

TS: You've called *Damaged Spring* "a work of darkly figured reportage, synthetic, contemporary, [it] interweaves personal anecdotes, tales of friends and family life, and current events," and so I wonder, would you be willing to spell out what reportage means for you? Should it include all these strands of knowledge? Are there other, similar examples of reportage that have inspired you? Or conflicting modes that leave you incensed?

JD: Reportage is my term for that figuring out—for trying to understand how one is produced as a subject of language and the cultural symbolic while also struggling with the individual particularity of historical/situated/individual identity. I've never been interested in autobiography—too fictional, too pat, too normative—but I find the problem of understanding one's self as a historically specific subject very compelling. So Guy Debord's *In Girum Imus Nocte* was a major influence on me. So is George Perec's *Species of Spaces*. And the work of W. G. Sebald. Just for starters. Reportage is distinctly associational in such a practice, since no particularity exists as an entity in any of these writers' cosmology. Identity is always relational, systemic, and particular. Individual subjectivity is both structural (position) and particular (inflection). I wanted the images and text to show that in *Damaged Spring*—to be about the attempt to describe one's position from within unfolding events. So it was written as the spring unfolded, not after the fact, though of course I edited and shaped it.

TS: I saved *Nova Reperta* for last because of its considerable importance and for rhetorical reasons. I have to admit that upon first seeing the book it repelled me. My only explanation is big and boxy (and I'm thinking here of big box corporate chains) signals commercial values and a kind of disengagement from humans. Luckily, I have been afforded a couple different opportunities to read *Nova Reperta*, since: once in Maryland, a copy in Helen Frederick's private collection, and then later in the special collection of Wallace Library at RIT. I guess my personal back-story with the book is meant to draw out what I find dominant about this work. My sense of the oversized edition in general—and this is conjecture since I don't seek them out, to be honest—is they are made for the sake of grandeur alone and have a made-in-a-vacuum quality disengaged from what is happening contemporaneously in our culture. This is not the case with *Nova Reperta*. You've said the original intent was for the book's pages to also work for wall display, but can you comment on how it's size was meant to function for readers? Was it also your intent to create an impervious thing, unmovable and unaffected by people? It's ironic, of course, that I was repelled by the book's very bigness at first, given its subject. For me there is an unyielding logic to this book that leads to double binds or traps—you sum it up well with a statement from page 25: "Banality and Ceremony cancel each other out." As you clarified regarding Reportage from before, I'm curious to know your thoughts on paradox in general, how does it figure into this work?

JD: *Nova Reperta* is in many ways a most unsatisfying book to me. I love the photographs in it, and the printing, and the writing. But I think it is an object that, as you note, doesn't promote either reading or viewing, because of the somewhat awkward size. We didn't really get to proof that book before it was printed. We were working on screen, with Photoshop images and Quark layouts, but all at a percentage of what the final was to be. I deliberately wanted the type to work as "lines" and graphic elements first,

and to be read second, so that the images would not "illustrate" the text, but they would appear integral to each other. The problem, however, is that the type is small. It can only be read up close, and the images/object are large. For this reason, the project didn't quite work on the wall either, since it was very difficult to read without being within a few inches of the pages, which meant you couldn't really "see" the photographs. A smaller scale project, in the 11" x 14" range, would have been sufficient, probably. But we felt the topic was monumental. And I still believe in the text statements and the images, and they way they work together, but I agree the scale is somehow difficult. Brad might disagree, of course. We also had the tricky problem of binding, and the solution also makes for an awkward reading situation. Laying that spine / holder on a flat surface means that the reader has to perch over the pages.

I'm hoping Brad and I will do another project that takes up some of the observational/documentary approach in *NR* and puts it into a more reader-friendly format. That's not an apology for *NR*, which I think does function in its monumental way, but rather, a concession to and acknowledgment of the limitations of that format as a way of communicating in the book format.

TS: I'm fascinated with your voice in *Nova Reperta*. As a dialogue with the "celebratory spirit" of Johannes Stradanus and his *New Discoveries* I would characterize the spirit of your writing in *Nova Reperta* as more sorrowful and dispassionate than other of your books. This brings to mind something that I don't know I can articulate without it sounding highly romantic, but I'm interested in knowing your perspective on moralization in art. The reader is often "within" your structure alongside you, wrestling along with you as you are "trying to figure out what is happening," but the perspective is different with *NR* We are looking upon the structure. It is emanating out at us. Your words and typesetting travel along communication lines and emit like rays. Experientially, the words let the images radiate through and vice versa. It's like when Clifton Meador wants to really put you in a place of his travels, and by his typesetting and layout, you experience walking down stairs or like when he points directly to a punctum in one of his photographs. *Nova Reperta* seems to be of service to us somehow—showing us sources of harmful transmittance. Do you see this book as having moral significance, to be an "Agent of Social Change," which of course is one of your categorizations from *Century of Artists' Books*? (The word moral is loaded, I know. If I were to define the term it would be in the utilitarian tradition, that which is good and right for the welfare of the average person. All these terms—good, right, welfare, average, person—are debatable of course but I'm going to let the thought stand at the risk of equivocation.) You said before that your books fall into several categories. Is it possible to place *Nova Reperta* in one or several of these?

JD: As for the voice and issues, I was certainly aware of taking a sharply critical tone, ironic and mordant, as we were considering the shifts from Stradanus's time to ours. He was hardly an innocent, nor naive, but his faith in the ability of visual representation to show knowledge was at odds with our sense that much of what controls our lives and culture rendered invisible—either deliberately hidden/concealed, or else simply not visible by nature of the infrastructure of information exchange. I didn't mean to sound didactic, and I certainly don't think *NR* would work as an agent of social change. I see it more as a document, an analysis and travelogue in contemporary culture. I'm not a moralist, I don't think, since that implies an agenda of coercion or expectation, but I do have a sense of what seems healthy or positive. I have a little birthday book of maxims given to me as a child. The one for my birthday is "Take the world as it is, not as it ought to be." When you read such a statement over and over again as a child, feeling it is your "destiny" sentence, it sinks in. I think I'm always trying to figure out what the world "is" in my work, that is. I'm sure I've said this before in these exchanges, and maybe even many times, but I think the act of making experience over into form is fundamental to that process of "figuring out what is." I don't separate the "is" from the making, the "being" in the world/experience from the "representing". I don't know how to know what I know except by trying to represent it to myself.

Notes:

¹ "Reading by Hand: the Haptic Evaluation of Artists' Books," *The Bonefolder*, Vol. 2, no. 1, Spring, 2006.

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