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REVIEWS & PRESS

Emily McVarish. *Flicker*. Granary Books, 2005.

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Drucker, Johanna. "Book Spaces City Spaces." *afterimage*, September/October 2005.

Berlin in the Time of the Wall

by John Gossage Bethesda, MD:
Loosestrife Editions, 2004
37 pp./\$25.00 (hb)

Flicker

by Emily McVarish
San Francisco and New York:
Granary, 2005
48 pp./\$975.00 (hb)

Few artists' books merit full critical attention (too closely aligned with craft, too far from the critical edge of art, literature, media), but the ones that do show us how a book can function in its own specific ways. *Flicker* (2005) by Emily McVarish and *Berlin in the Time of the Wall* (2004) by John Gossage are superbly self-conscious works that use the literal form of the codex to create complex virtual spaces of experience. Because they are books, they have spatial and temporal extension in which the viewer/reader can move and dwell. These are not books "about" something, but works in which aboutness becomes a phenomenological condition, a place of potential encounter. Aptly enough, both are "about" the spaces of the city—San Francisco in McVarish's work and Berlin in Gossage's.

Flicker is an exquisite work, produced by letterpress by the artist and then hand-bound professionally in a limited edition of 45 copies. *Berlin in the Time of the Wall* is a monumental tome, produced in an edition of 2000 high-quality offset copies, printed and case-bound in China. At first glance the slimly elegant, seductive beauty of the small volume *Flicker* would appear to be miles away from the heavy weighted presence of *Berlin*. But they have more in common than their thematic focus. Each demonstrates the ways a book makes an aesthetic experience of space, an experience registered against the long history of thematic links between modern visuality and the city.

The passing urban scene—ephemeral, spectacular and dense with chance encounters, montaged and fragmented into heterogeneous formal expression— this is the mantra of modernity from Charles

Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin. However in the postmodern experience the urban landscape drops into a background role. No longer the stage on which cultural experience is produced, the city becomes a ghost world, bombed and deserted, or gentrified and upscaled, exploited for development or left abandoned and ignored in no man's land zones of discarded real estate and human capital. We have ceased to imagine the city as the collective, imaginary image of our time. Gone are the fantasies that radical change will be effected and expressed in a reordering of that topography of social relations. The spaces and places of our times exist in media and mass culture, in the real and virtual networks of communication and transport of information and ideas. That symbolic world overwhelms the real and eclipses the city in artistic imagination. Any return to the urban sites and sights as a point of departure for an artistic project is necessarily retrospective in its references, even as it insists (as both of these books do) on the immediate relevance of the experience of urban life.

McVarish acknowledges her connection to the French tradition. Though her city is San Francisco and her sensibility is contemporary, Baudelaire's flaneur is an overt reference for McVarish's "walker" and "watcher." A pedestrian is a somewhat anachronistic figure these days, almost unthinkable in our culture except in a few of the older metropolises. But McVarish's figure also moves in the matrix of news and broadcasts, radio and print that weave their soundwave line patterns as a screen of awareness mediating her relation to self and world. *Flicker* has a hint of nostalgia running through it. The Alternate Gothic type is the stuff of early twentieth-century headlines, bold and black. McVarish's prose is reminiscent of modernism's descriptive allusions, slightly abstract, charged with longing and the impossibility of getting hold of life in language. "Here and there continuity falters. Holes in its ongoing tense belong to a moment's alterity. A blinking yellow absence, a shred of moving darkness, nimbly punch the powdered ribbon of eye." Always not quite there, within the poet's reach but not to be grasped, the ephemeral and transitory scenes open like views in a highly trafficked street, only to close again just as quickly. McVarish creates the effect of rapid reconfiguration through the arduous production method in her work.

The density of these typographic and urban matrices merge McVarish's formal and thematic concerns. *Flicker* immerses the reader/viewer in a space that allows for encounter. Die-cut holes punch through the pages to show words and photographic images, making connections that emphasize the spatial dimension of the book. *Flicker's* pages aren't fixed into a series of flat openings, but are part of a sculptural form whose compositional elements connect back and forth through the book rather than only progressing in a forward, linear reading. The spaces the book creates for us to inhabit are not streets, but zones of experience, linguistically dense but in a noisy, thickly signed environment. Page after page of darkly printed patterns open only enough to let block-like, sans-serif phrases be read. Personal utterances, private thoughts, highly coded, they are the arc of intimate communication cutting across the dense field of urban zones.

By contrast, Gossage's private perspective on public space, though highly subjective, is not coded with any personal information. The 464 black and white photographs taken between Spring 1982 and Fall 1993 span the period in which the Wall came down. The Wall may serve as a symbol for any number of personal associations, but this is a book about Berlin, not Gossage. The photographs make a powerful visual argument for the divisive power of limits in a city once entirely defined by the single most charged symbolic structure of the Cold War. As a literal line of rupture, the Wall was violently fraught by the reality of its bloodied history. Flesh and spirit were martyred on that barbed wire wrapped line of ideological defense.

An instrument for dividing a world within itself, the Wall was a physical limit, and its tangible condition

made palpable its effects. But the metaphor of the Wall went far beyond its demarcation of physical space. Gossage shows that the idea of division became the defining image of Berlin, as well as its main structuring principle. Non-risible "walls" enforced other, equally rigid limits on urban populations and territories. Gossage's project was to expose the myriad of divisions inscribed within the city's spaces: lines of class and status, of economic and social distinction, of remembered and lived experience, memorialized and forgotten history and destroyed and living places.

Because he takes limitation as his theme, Gossage continually reinforces the experience of delimitation by the way his frame cuts into the perceptual field. Active looking and flat picture taking make their impact felt in what becomes an exchange. In one spread, the deep spaces of dark dense shadow-pull us in while the overhanging limits of branches that are frames define a limit echoed on an opposing page by the tangles of wire, barbed and weed-infested. The salvaged condition of nature exists as an eruption into neglected cultural zones. Interruptive vegetation bursts through the cracks in pavement, walls and fences, volunteers from a kingdom that has no regard for zoning laws. Light casts shadows as hard-edged as any concrete barrier in this world. The metaphoric play of visual codes continually shifts from the record of barricades to the formal signage of lines within frames. People hardly exist in Gossage's world. Instead we see the traces of human culture; harsh, unrelenting lines of intervention dividing the visual field.

From the very first image and openings, Gossage shows his intention to use the book as a formal motif and structuring device. The opening image shows half of the face of a young woman with a numbed wide-eyed expression. Hair cropped, eyes open, her face is set against the backdrop of what appear to be apartment buildings. Their perspectival rooflines meet in a v-shape that imitates the opening of a book. Thus the figure-ground of book space announces itself at the very outset. Deep space and close-up scales shift in the next opening. A full-page bleed on the left is a mass of trees, machines, shadows and railings, a dense matrix of layered and interconnected systems, all crossing and re-crossing each other in a thicket of values and lines. On the facing page, the smaller images of enigmatic blank and shadowy silhouettes suggest the opening sequence of a noir film. Gossage is a master of framing, his sense of image within image is dramatic, even as his control of the traditional darkroom techniques puts the full range of modern photographic vocabularies at his disposal. Densely textured images of the material world (roots, bark, trash in the urban backways and alleys) become signs within signs in a cultural inventory that is sympathetic and wry, shadowy forms looming half-glimpsed from darkness into eerie noir corners and stairs. He cites constantly from the canon of Paul Strand's architectonic formalism, Clarence White's eerie surrealist juxtapositions, Walker Evans' attention to signage, surface and ironies of context, and many others. But his project is his own: to make looking into a structured record of discovery, to figure out how to see and show the many lines of division, the walls, within the city of Berlin.

Sequence, juxtaposition and scale relations are the core of Gossage's dynamic design structures. Walls and barriers demarcate with different degrees of porousness. They enact divisions between what moves above and has to pass through, what is kept out and what is left in. They are marked as a result, even as they record what is ripped, torn, violated and damaged in the process. The timing and pacing in this book are finely tuned so that we are continually directed to move through it in a cinematic mode, held in suspended distribution in the measured order of the book.

By contrast, McVarish approaches the book as a printer and poet. Her media are language and letterpress. The rich surface and dense textures are the result of a virtuoso combination of technique and conceptual imagination. Turning type faces on their heads, printing their feet in a dense field, she

overprinted to create a flickering page as charged with light and movement as any pixelated screen. This is not the letterpress of fine press formulae or poets' vanity publishing, but the work of consummate artistry at a high level of critical function. Only a few artists have used letterpress in such a visually creative way. Dieter Rot, in his overprinted minimalist bookwork of the 1970s, made similarly aesthetic grid matrices, only realizable by actual printing. The impression and the combination of accident and precision that comes from exploiting the rigid horizontal/vertical structure of metal type can't be faked. Rot was content to execute a minimalist project of explicitly formalist permutation. That work has no content beyond its formal execution of idea. Process-driven, it is of its time as McVarish's is of hers, now. McVarish's concern is with a contemporary world in which we are charged to communicate against and through the veiling difficulties of heavily mediated experience. "Where and how are we to find that space of communication?" she asks, cutting away the dense grid of inked surface to physically make a place in which her statements, observations, scraps and fragments can register.

These are bookworks about the city: one photographic, the other painterly—each fully achieved by using the specifics of book structure in ways that open our eyes to the possibilities of that medium as an extended space. Art is the act of transforming experience into form. By structuring a potential field of encounter, these works create highly charged environments for reading and viewing. McVarish's book is immersive and performative, an aesthetic artifact of the first order. Gossage's book is dialogic and complex in its elaborate structures of sequence and reference, opening and unfolding.

Johanna Drucker is the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia and is a well-known book artist and scholar of visual and graphic media. Her most recent book, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2005. A book of creative writing, *From Now*, was published by Cuneiform Press in August 2005. She helps run the Virginia Arts of the Book Center in Charlottesville, Virginia.