

Robyn Sassen

Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface

Navigating the Bookscape: Artists' Books and the Digital Interface curated by David Paton, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2006.

ISBN 0-620-37094-7

Some years ago, I wrote an article on Artists' Books in South Africa which I premised with a quote by Ezra Pound. He said "a book should be a ball of light in one's hands". Thinking of the challenge that David Paton has set himself in curating this exhibition and masterminding this project, this quote becomes not only a poetic reading of any book, but also a literal explication of the cleavage between traditional codex and its electronic or cyber counterpart.

This exhibition aims to do several things. On the one hand it showcases what has been done with the traditional parameters set by the notion 'Artist's Book' and what can be done with the nebulous and often difficult to define medium, container, discourse. On the other, it aims to open up questions around what the digital interface can bring to the conventions of the codex. In teasing out these possibilities, Paton commissioned five artists to make work to contribute to the show, and to justify and balance their work in defining it.

But is the Artist's Book about reading, about looking, about thinking, or about all three? Is it about the artists' sense of wonder and exploration in creating an interactive thing that brings the audience as a collaborative participant in the experience of the work? Is it about the quietude invested in the act of paging through a sequenced narrative of sorts? Each commissioned artist confronts and plays with the notion Artist's Book from a different conceptual space.

Context is something honed by Paul Emmanuel, who draws from his *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)*, a series which exploits the idiosyncratic beauty, yet moving significance of blind embossed text inflicted onto his own body. He takes a conceptual step back in saying "...making and working with material objects as a way of 'cheating death'", yet "the digital world is a fragile, tenuous place, always subject to the threat of wilful or arbitrary change; the ravage of power, interruption, corruption..." In this series, he uses the touch-sensitive screen to replace the page of a traditional book, and "the cold unforgiving surface of a glass screen to talk poignantly about intimacy and alienation". *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* comprised the names of the men who died in the Frontier Wars fought in the Eastern Cape between 1820 and 1850. "The names were set in lead type and then pressed directly into my skin." He conflates the notion of touching warm skin, inflicting dents into its surface, with that of touching a computer screen in the act of changing an image, developing a concept, disassociating material. The transference of the work from literal to digital represents poetic insight into the nature of touch but also the transience of the gesture of turning a page.

Robyn Sassen freelances as an arts writer and academic. She writes regularly for numerous print and online publications, is the Contributing Arts Editor for the SA Jewish Report, and teaches contractually at several universities. Robyn holds a Master's degree in Art History and is a printmaker and book artist.