

**Zoltán Somhegyi**

*College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates*

## **Empty Pages and Full Stops: On the Aesthetic Relation between Books and Art**

**Abstract:** Books and artworks have a long common history. Written texts, as well as the joy of reading and the act of writing them, appeared in pieces of art from early Antiquity onwards, well before the current form of the book itself was invented. Apart from indicating readers and writers, the book had also become a basic symbol of culture, education, or the attribute of saints. On the other hand, there are many artists who create special books, i.e. special one-copy and one-edition volumes, not only containing the artist's drawings or paintings but the whole assemblage of the book (and often even the paper itself) is the creator's own work. From the Early Modern Age and especially from Romanticism onwards, the sketchbook of the artist grew rapidly in its importance. In this paper, however, I would like to survey another aspect: when the book, and especially its material property or physicality, serves as the basis of the creation of a novel artwork. In other words, I focus on pieces of art where the book is not simply a depicted motif or an attribute and it is not even a newly-created book-art object. Hence my current examination aims to analyze the phenomenon of the book, as how its materiality and referential ability may inspire the artist to further develop considerations on cultural, social and political issues. Works by Sophia Pompéry, Ákos Czigány, the art collective Slavs and Tatars, Jorge Méndez Blake and Carla Filipe are analyzed.

**Keywords:** artworks; books; sketchbooks; Sophia Pompéry; Ákos Czigány; Slavs and Tatars; Jorge Méndez Blake; Carla Filipe.

Can we be optimistic and see a revival of books? Or can we at least be less pessimistic and hope for their survival? On the one hand, we regularly hear and read complaints about the declining reading of books, on the other hand, certain signs should still make us somehow hopeful. For example, the sheer number of new books published each year – even if sometimes in a significantly lower number of copies than some decades ago – and the renaissance of cover design shows that for many the several millennia-old objects remain significant despite all the threats coming from, among others, disinterest in reading and digitalization in publishing. And the increasing popularity of various slow-movements can also find allies among readers of long books, instead of accepting to be satisfied with the high-paced text with ephemeral significance we are regularly bombarded with.

For our current discussion about the aesthetic relationship between books and art, there are plenty of connection points between these two cultural phenomena. For example, art can be analyzed and artworks can be reproduced in books. Books can appear in pieces of art, what's more, they can become artworks, not only as a special artist book (i.e. special one-copy and one-edition volumes created by the artist), but also as raw materials for installations. And just like books can become artworks, also pieces of art can inspire authors or serve as a central plots in novels.

Books and artworks thus have a long common history, and in two recent publications we can see a nicely illustrated survey of this. In *Books Do Furnish a Painting*, Jamie Camplin and Maria Ranauro (2018) focus on the cultural history of the book, based on its representation in art pieces over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> David Trigg's *Reading Art: Art for Book Lovers* (2018) is also a lavishly illustrated visual anthology of great works, mainly focusing on the appearance of books in pieces of art and the representation of people reading. However, he adds examples of the aforementioned process too, when the book becomes material for installations.<sup>2</sup> From these volumes, the reader can survey how written texts as well as the joy of reading and the act of writing them appeared in pieces of art from early Antiquity onwards, well before the current form of the book itself was invented. However, apart from indicating readers and writers, the book had also become a basic symbol of culture, education, or the attribute of saints.

However, there are some further areas in the examination of the relationship between art and the book as a form that we can add to our analyses, and that were not mentioned in the above volumes. For example, the sketchbook of the artist, that grew rapidly in its importance from the Early Modern Age and especially from Romanticism onwards. Although it may at first seem to be of secondary importance, some outstanding examples can illustrate what a broad range of aesthetic and artistic considerations a sketchbook can trigger, i.e. that a sketchbook may contain invaluable information about both the artist's own ideas and about novel approaches and tendencies of art. Just think of for example Villard de Honnecourt, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century French sculptor's survived parchment that contains many visual notes, including also textual references to forms drawn 'from life' – the expression that despite its ambiguity and doubtfulness in the context still indicates the start of a crucial turn in Western art, i.e. the idea that instead of the pure copying of the already existing material in model books, the invention of a new mode, creation of new forms based on the direct observation of the actual object can also be an adequate means of artistic and creative process. Or, another example of high importance is the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian painter Canaletto's survived sketchbook, published in a modern facsimile edition by Giovanna Nepi Scirè.<sup>3</sup> In and through this sketchbook we can observe the artist's way of notetaking, working method, ideas, ideals and artistic solutions, that will then help us to better understand the features of his *capriccios* and *vedutas*, as well as the convoluted connection of these two genres to each other and to reality.

<sup>1</sup> Jamie Camplin and Maria Ranauro, *Books Do Furnish a Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> David Trigg, *Reading Art. Art for Book Lovers* (London, New York: Phaidon, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Giovanna Nepi Scirè, *Le Carnet de Canaletto* (Paris: Canal Éditions, 1997).

So far I have quoted rather classical connection points between books and artworks. In the following section, however, I would like to focus on another aspect: when the book, and especially its material property or physicality, serves as the basis of the creation of a novel artwork. In other words, I will focus on pieces of art where the book is not simply a depicted motif or an attribute and it is not even a newly created book-art object. Hence my current examination aims to analyze the phenomenon of the book, as how its materiality and referential ability may inspire the artist to further develop considerations on cultural, social and political issues. In this way my five examples below do depart from books, or from some parts and aspects of them, but in none of them will the book itself appear in its regular form and function. What's more, in some cases even the content of the book becomes less important, compared to other characteristics and to the symbolic features it might bear and refer to.

A functional and at the same time symbolic aspect of the book and of the text in it serves as the basis for the poetic and conceptual works of Sophia Pompéry. What we see at first of the Berlin-based artist's series titled *Und Punkt* [*And Full Stop*] are undefinable amorphous greyish spots (Figure 1). Later however we learn that the pieces are photographs taken with a special microscope, reproducing the last full stop of several love novels of over two centuries, ranging from Goethe's *Werther* (1774) to Ingo Schulze's *Adam und Evelyne* (2008). For the series Pompéry was working with the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin and the Rathgen Research Laboratory, and always used the first edition of each book. For the viewer of the pieces the most surprising aspect is that in such an enlargement the points are not necessarily round at all, e.g. the full stop of the *Traumnovelle* by Arthur Schnitzler (1926) or the aforementioned *Werther* are for example rather square-like, and even the "rounder" ones are irregular and messy, thus challenging our primary concept of the roundness of a full stop. At the same time, as Tobias Roth wrote, the artist creates a special "typographic intimacy", which also explains why all the full stops come from love novels.<sup>4</sup> In this way also our idea of the efficiency of the finishing of the story is challenged or at least questioned, seeing how the final act of the author, the last point, may float away.

While Pompéry took only a point from a book, my next example, Ákos Czigány, in certain aspects, took even less. In his series *Darwin Online* the photographer created artworks by composing together the blank pages of Charles Darwin's works (Figure 2.). Just like Pompéry above, when creating his conceptual works, Czigány used the first edition of the books, but instead of photographing them, took the material from the extensive online archive of Darwin's texts. When Darwin's books were scanned, all the pages were digitalized, even those which, for normal editorial reasons, like chapter divisions, did not contain any text. The artist selected these and put them together, without modifying the colors, appearance, resolution and especially not changing their order. The final pieces are nevertheless not entirely and simply blank pages, for several reasons: the printed text from the other side of the digitalized empty sheet may partially be visible

<sup>4</sup> Tobias Roth, "Und Punkt. Gesammelte Schlusspunkte von Sophia Pompéry," *Signaturen. Forum für Autonome Poesie*, December 26, 2013, <http://www.signaturen-magazin.de/und-punkt.html>, acc. July 20, 2019.

due to the strong light of the scan, and in many cases signs and elements of the natural decay of the book – brownish spots, effects of moisture, folds of the pages, etc. – can be observed. The assembling of the blank pages will thus result in an abstract image having lost its resemblance to the original book, where each of the individual pages make the contexts of science, art and media meet in the textual gaps. Naturally the blank pages can also stand for a wide array of potential considerations on the gaps of meaning, missing links in the chain of evolution, and not lastly on the thrilling ambiguity of preserving and using knowledge – for this last aspect see the dichotomy between printed and digital, and the digitalization of the material decay of the original.

Especially this latter aspect – i.e. the investigation of the ways of gaining and consuming knowledge – can connect Ákos Czigány's work with my next example, a series by Slavs and Tatars, where, despite the different appearance, the experience and experiencing of the materiality of the book will become essential in the interpretation of the pieces. The analyses of the social, historical and political realities – as well as of the multiple possible issues connected to their transformations – and a country's, a nation's or a group's struggle for finding and maintaining its cultural coherence throughout the vicissitudes of history are examined in the works of the art collective, Slavs and Tatars, who examine the cultural and geopolitical changes of the Eurasian region. They are particularly focusing on the mixture of cultures, religions, traditions, languages and forms of expressions from the former Berlin Wall to the Great Wall of China – hence their artist name “Slavs and Tatars”, referring to the dominant groups of these vast lands. Their interest is nicely illustrated in an ongoing series titled *Kitab Kebab [Book Kebab]*, where, quoting from their website: “A traditional kebab skewer pierces through a selection of Slavs and Tatars' books, suggesting not only an analytical but also an affective and digestive relationship to text. The mashed-up reading list proposes a lateral or transversal approach to knowledge, an attempt to combine the depth of the more traditionally-inclined vertical forms of knowledge with the range of the horizontal.”<sup>5</sup> Obviously, among the titles we can see works of authors from the wider region, and hence the direction and dimension of gaining knowledge gets very much in parallel with the discovering of the interwoven histories of the populations and nations of their research area – ‘area’ in both geographical and metaphorical sense.

In the following two examples, the power of books and the power of culture symbolized by the book is more directly connected to social and political issues. Both were shown at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial. The first one is Jorge Méndez Blake's work, as part of a series of installations, built inside the exhibition space that the artist had created on several occasions and versions. It consisted of a solid brick wall, which however, after the first superficial glance, shows a significant irregularity: the artist added a book in the lowest row of the bricks that naturally broke the regular pattern of the construction, resulting in a growing crack in the wall, a potential opening of an architectural and urbanistic form of which the primary aim is closing, division, separation and exclusion. Throughout the series Blake uses different books, the one shown in the 2013 Istanbul

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.slavsandtatars.com/cycles/regions-d-etere/kitab-kebab>, acc. July 20, 2019.

Biennial was Kafka's *The Castle*. Naturally the work is open to many readings, some of which I mentioned in an earlier essay, starting from the inaccessibility of complete knowledge: just like K. in Kafka's novel cannot understand the situation and series of events he finds himself in, we are also unable to take out the book to read its content.<sup>6</sup> Besides this – or better to say, despite this – it can also remind us of the power of critical thought that may break through walls. This latter aspect was highlighted in a more recent version of the piece, installed in December 2018 in New York, where the artist built Kafka's *Amerika* in the wall, and we may easily understand why the actuality and references of this text is important for the Mexican artist.

In my last example, the book's actual content has a less direct connection with the final work itself, it becomes and is used to symbolize culture in general and to analyze its current threats and challenges. In Carla Filipe's work titled "Rorschach-Installation", old books, taken from the artist's favorite bookshop Moreira da Costa in Porto are shown. The beautifully aged volumes are however partly eaten by bookworms, and the delicate, fine lines and holes of this dereliction appear symmetrically on – or in – the open books. This naturally makes them resemble the random forms of Rorschach tests, originally used to examine a patient's mental state and personality disorders. In Carla Filipe's work, however, the test is not applied on an individual but for the survey of the state of culture on the level of the entire society, by testing the mental preparedness and ability of its individuals to care for the human culture. Therefore, on the one hand we can agree with Fulya Erdemci, curator of the 2013 Istanbul Biennial when writing in the catalogue that the books "focus on the cultural impact of the global financial crisis at the local level, reminding us that if culture is abandoned, it will gradually disintegrate and be overpowered by nature."<sup>7</sup> Adding to this interpretation however, we can also understand that the Rorschach test-like lines involuntarily caused by the bookworms are thus testing us not only whether we can simply understand the signs of the current dereliction of human culture, but also challenge us whether we can find solutions for its proper maintenance and care – for our own cure.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all the differences in the above examples, we can see as a connecting point that the artists are not merely experimenting with new forms and appearances but by alluding to the symbolic strength of the book as an object, and by departing from the material properties and from the physicality of the book, they examine curious questions of art and literature, pressing issues of contemporary society, politics and most importantly the actual state of human culture, as well as the threats we need to face when caring for this culture and cultural objects. These works show us that books can contain and maintain culture, but they themselves can often and easily decay. Worse, however, their decay directly leads to our own.

<sup>6</sup> Zoltán Somhegyi, "Art (out) of separation. Aesthetics around the wall," *Serbian Architectural Journal* 6, 1 (2014): 17–28.

<sup>7</sup> Fulya Erdemci, *Mom, am I barbarian? 13th Istanbul Biennial Book* (Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2014), 75–77.

<sup>8</sup> See also: Zoltán Somhegyi, "Barbarians instead? Fragile dichotomy at the 13th Istanbul Biennial 2013," *Contemporary Practices. Visual Arts from the Middle East* 14, 1 (2014): 14–21.



**Figure 1:** Sophia Pompéry, *Full Stop*, 2013. The last full stop of the book *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, [1. Edition]. – Weygand, Leipzig, 1774. Part of a limited edition set. Pigment print on paper, blind embossing, 38 × 28 cm. Photo credits: Sophia Pompéry, VG-Bildkunst



**Figure 2:** Ákos Czigány, 16 blank pages from Charles Darwin: *Het uitdrukken der gemoedsaandoeningen bij den mensch en de dieren. Vertaald door Dr. H. Hartogh Heys van Zouteveen. 's Gravenhage: Joh. Ykema. 1873*, 2009–2010. Archival pigment inkjet print, 35,5 x 55 cm. Courtesy the artist and Várfok Gallery

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Article received: April 15, 2019

Article accepted: June 23, 2019

Review article