

‘Eye-Mind-Design-Production’: An Interview with Johanna Drucker



Our first interview is dedicated to the scholar and artist Johanna Drucker, the Martin and Bernard Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. She has taught at several universities, including Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Virginia. She was the founder of the Media Studies program at the University of Virginia, where she was between 1999 and 2008, and it was while there that she became involved in digital scholarship. Two major projects from those years are *Artists' Books Online: An online repository of facsimiles, metadata, and criticism* (2006) and *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (2009). Before taking her present position at UCLA, Johanna Drucker was a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center (2008-2009). She visited the University of Coimbra in March 2012, as consultant for the ongoing research project on Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*, and taught a seminar for the Doctoral Program in Advanced Studies in the Materialities of Literature. In September 2012, a retrospective exhibition of her work, organized by the Center for Book and Paper Arts, was held at Columbia College Chicago, *Druckworks: 1972-2012, 40 Years of Books and Projects*. For

those who are less familiar with her work this catalogue provides the best possible introduction to her extraordinary intellectual and artistic trajectory.

Who is Johanna Drucker? In a recent radio interview, when asked ‘are you a poet, an artist, a fiction writer, a scholar, a designer or an aesthetician—or aren’t you the kind that tells?’ she answered ‘I’m a writer who makes books.’ That is perhaps the shortest and most accurate presentation one could make. She is a writer who makes books, but I have to add that it is the particular sustained feedback between writing and making that has given us her extraordinary body of literary, artistic, and scholarly work – in my view, a body of work by one of the most brilliant and inventive minds of our time. This sustained feedback between writing and making has been going on for 40 years, and it has opened up new literary, typographical, and conceptual landscapes. Book artist, poet, fiction writer, visual artist, book historian, art critic, typographic designer, printer, digital scholar. And yet not many people are aware of the scope of her critical interventions and of her engagement with contemporary artistic practices across different media. In Portugal, for instance, she seems to be known almost exclusively as a book artist and design historian, even though her work has engaged ongoing critical debates in the fields of visual arts (both modernist and contemporary), critical theory, history of writing, artists’ books, visual writing, design history, and digital humanities.

Although we only met in January 2008 at the University of Virginia, my conversation with Johanna Drucker started in 1995, when I first read *The Visible Word* (1994). This conversation has continued almost uninterrupted since then, and it has helped me to learn about and explore new ideas and new fields of knowledge. It is part of the wonder of books and writing that they will put you onto unforeseen tracks, which you can only begin to see in retrospect. Her theoretical and artistic production constantly metamorphoses into new conceptual and material forms that engage critical, aesthetical, and political questions that are crucial for the present and future of the arts and humanities. After all these years, I still find myself trying to catch up with her writings and with her makings – always an article late, always a book late (a new book, *Graphesis*, 2013, is forthcoming from Harvard University Press), always an exhibition late (a new show of her works and projects is hosted by the San Francisco Center for the Book, May 24–August 24, 2013), always a digital project late (Museum of Writing, an ongoing digital scholarship project with University of London, is also underway). How can she write it? How can she make it? She is a writer who makes books, an artist who makes books, a thinker who makes books, a scholar who makes books – someone whose many forms of making and writing engage with the materiality of signifying processes in visual, print, and digital media.¹

Manuel Portela

¹ The following interview was made by John D. Mock, Catarina Figueiredo Cardoso, Ana Paula Dantas, and Manuel Portela in December 2012.

1 A retrospective exhibition of your work was held at Columbia College Chicago in September 2012 (*Druckwork 1972-2012: Books and Projects*). Reflecting back on 40 years of work as typographic designer and book artist, how do you describe your experiments with the possibilities of visualizing written language for narrative and poetic effects?

I've always understood writing as an intellectual conception and material production simultaneously. I don't *think* texts without *seeing* their format. The particulars of layout, organization, *mise en page*, and other structuring principles are integral to the composition even if it is a block of unbroken prose or lineated poetry. No doubt this is because I've made so many of my own books—designed, typeset, printed, bound them—that, for me, writing is *design* as well as composition.

Many of my books were produced using letterpress, starting in the early 1970s. This gave me a more immediate understanding of the material properties of language than most writers have, I think. Holding language in your hands does that. The act of standing at the type case with a composing stick that gets heavier with each word you set makes you very aware of the weight of words and length of lines. Of course, with metal type, when you run out of letters you have to rewrite your texts when there are no more “k’s” or “P’s” in the case.

My early conviction that the graphical forms of language production were integral to meaning production met with a certain amount of opposition in the poetry world where clean, clear, typographic setting was considered the ideal. This was true among the Language poets, for whom the mantra of language-as/is-material did not extend to graphical qualities—which they considered trivial, at least in California. The word, it seemed, was to remain free of the taint of embodiment. Using other methods of production expanded my range through digital means, phototypesetting, press type, and painted/calligraphy, but letterpress taught me structure and discipline. Any font can be made to look good if it is set correctly, given the right spacing.

But after all, printing is a trade, and even the design production for print was part of that trade in the decades before desktop computers made professional means of production accessible to non-professionals. Before the 1980s, training for the printing trades did not require a college or art school degree, but experience on the shop floor with machines and technical equipment. The class divide between production and conception remains an unacknowledged hierarchy in the arts. But having access to the means of production and knowledge of how to use them made the difference for us in the 1970s when the only way to produce a book or page of type was to either pay for it to be done professionally or do it ourselves. I was a writer and artist who made books, so I had to have access to production skills and equipment since I certainly didn't have any money. I bought a letter press (\$200) and type (also \$200) because they were cheap and re-usable. Labor costs simply came out of my own time and effort.

I'm particularly interested, now that digital media offer new possibilities for writing spaces, in developing what I call a 'diagrammatic' approach to writing as a spatial, graphical practice in which the organizing structures are understood as part of the semantics. This simply means taking into account the ways format structures meaning. We distinguish marginalia from text, headers from notes, commentary from references—all through graphical means. But we can imagine that in a digital space, with its variable scales, flexible displays, and multi-dimensional arrays, we might produce a new form of intertextual play, interlineation, matrices and networks of commentary that support forms of argument that were difficult in print. Manuscript production is far more flexible than print (which is rigidly square by virtue of the technical infrastructure) or digital platforms, but developing software that would support such flexibility for composition and display might provoke new writing practices.

2. What major differences do you find between your earlier and later work? Which works would you select to represent those different stages?

Except for the outright juvenilia, I don't divide my work into earlier and later as much as into various themes, all of which persist: the visual materiality of language, received narratives about women's lives, news and the discourse of contemporary life, weather as a metaphor, the tension between figure and ground, the question of how aesthetic form obtains identity within the broader culture, and an exploration of the relation between entities and events. Academic and creative investigations have gone side-by-side. I often think of the incidental pairings that occurred because books were written/produced in the same period – *Through Light and the Alphabet* at the same time as the research on *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, *The Word Made Flesh* with *The Visible Word*, *Century of Artists' Books* and *Narratology*, *SpecLab* and *Subjective Meteorology*, *Feminae Fabulae* and *Digital Humanities*, or even more recently, *Graphesis* and *Stochastic Poetics*. Since I've been working on creative and critical projects in a sustained way since the 1980s, that all makes sense. Except for *Dark* (1970), which is really *sui generis*, all my books have had theoretical underpinnings even before I was involved in academia. *Twenty-six '76* and *From A to Z*, done in 1976 and 1977 respectively, are complexly conceived with regard to bibliographical structure, writing under constraint, and exploration of the material properties of typography.

3. How do you see the 'artist book' form evolving? Do you envision the possibility of entirely digital artists' books?

• Hard not to envision that possibility since it is all around us, in the mainstream as well as in the areas of digital arts and literature, design for digital humanities projects, and for creative explorations. I've given a few talks in the last year about the augmented and expanded book, citing work by Amaranth Borsuk, Steve Tomasula, David Small, and others. I think it's exciting to imagine the ways textual forms can evolve using digital means—

both the back end information structures, the processing of texts through data mining and analysis, and the front end of display. The first generation of electronic writing practices were somewhat hampered by the difficulties of learning code. So much time had to be spent on getting basic skills that the writing was less compelling in many cases than the experiments in structure. But that incunabula period of electronic writing is still well-worth study because of the innovation and imagination it embodied, as you know.

4 You established an approach to artists' books different from Anne Moeglin-Delcroix's. Anne Moeglin-Delcroix published in 2012 a revised edition of her *Esthétique du livre d'artiste 1960-1980*. Do you think these differences are kept in this new edition?

I'm embarrassed to say that I haven't read her new edition, so I can't comment in an informed way. I'm not particularly interested in orthodoxy, and the approach to artists' books that involves making definitions by which some works are excluded from the field and others included interests me far less than examining what is being produced, and developing a critical vocabulary of distinctions. Artists are not bound by prescriptions, and the range of work being produced under the rubric "artists books" is incredibly varied. Some of it is more interesting than other work. In her first edition, Moeglin-Delcroix was very attached to conceptual work, spawned in the 1960s artworld, as her critical touchstone. I consider that only one of several major moments in artists' book history—along with the "book beautiful" in the Arts and Crafts movement, the Russian avant-garde, the livre d'artiste, 'zines, literary publications, graphic novels, and other aesthetic contributions. As a critic and historian, my task is to be able to describe books, their contexts of conception and production, place them responsibly within a longer history and a larger framework, and help develop a basis on which judgments and assessments can be made. Many in the artists' book community don't want that to happen. They prefer a feel-good absence of criticality. By contrast, many critics want to circumscribe the field and dismiss much of what is being produced. The first approach leads to sloppy thinking and uninformed production, which is a waste of time, and the second leads to provincialism and a needless narrowness of vision. Why go that route when the richness of the field offers so many opportunities to create critical dialogue that informs practice and vice versa? Moeglin-Delcroix made an important and intelligent contribution to the field, but so did Roger Keyes in the catalogue publication for the exhibition of Japanese book art, *Ebon*, most of which would be at odds with Moeglin-Delcroix's definitions. Why exclude one and not the other? The critical understanding of what a book is as an aesthetic object, how it works, is fed by study across a variety of works and approaches.

5 In your writing and teaching we find a feedback between artistic and research practice which suggests that there is an alternative mode for humanistic knowledge production. How important is your artistic practice for your research and theoretical work, and vice versa?

The advantage of creative practice is that it is unfettered from constraints of convention, peer review, judgment of others, and the requirements that structure academic, scholarly, or critical work—at least it feels that way at the time it is being made. I need both. If anything, I hope to bring the two practices more and more together in the future, letting the language play of creative work infuse critical writing with imagination. I admit to being tired of writing academic books, but intellectual excitement never flags. We do not have a well-researched reference on the history of mise-en-page, for instance, in spite of the wonderful work of Henri-Jean Martin and other (mainly) French scholars. I'm fascinated by this, but also, the history of classification systems and their graphical forms. I've done some work on the development of graphical notation systems for meteorology, and of course, on the transmission of knowledge about the alphabet. So these are all topics to be engaged ahead as scholarly projects (or not). But the exhumation of long-lost or little appreciated graphical expressions from the archives of human knowledge always stimulates imaginative response as well. The two realms feed each other since they each rely on different disciplines. Creative work involves eye-mind-design-production, the work of the hand and body, touch and intuition, but with decades of practice. When I was printing *Stochastic Poetics*, I felt like I could just paint with letterpress, spread the letters on the bed of the Vandercook and get them to do whatever I wanted. That's decades of experience at work. You can't fake that any more than you can artificially come to have a broad reference base for academic work. You can't upload thirty years' of reading into someone's brain no matter how much searching and text mining you do. I really do feel like a crusty old thing, full of esoteric knowledge and rarefied interests and antiquated skills, but one does accumulate a certain reference base over time.

6 In *SpecLab* (2009) you argue in favour of designing digital knowledge environments and representations in ways that embody subjectivity and aesthetics. 'Speculative computing' is how you define this model, which you oppose to the dominant 'digital humanities' model. What is the importance of developing digital tools and environments where knowledge can be experienced as interpretation?

The biggest challenge for the humanities is to invent tools suitable to our epistemological models. Humanistic knowledge is interpretative, it is rooted in the belief that it does not have repeatable results, testable hypotheses, or other features that are central to empirical methods. Even if we work to guarantee the integrity of textual records, to study the history of human documents and expressions in material, built, and recorded form, we recognize that the process of engaging with these materials is always an

interpretative act. As we know, most of the platforms and protocols for information visualization, for instance, were developed for work in business, government, statistics, or the natural sciences. Timelines are one important example, since they are constructed to be unidirectional, homogeneous, and continuous in representing time in an empirical model. But I'm dealing with Edmund Fry's *Pantographia*, a compendium of knowledge about alphabets and scripts written in 1799, and it is filled with contradictory models of historical time: biblical, calendrical, mythical, and chronological. What is interesting in that work is not to reconcile all of these to a single time scale, but to demonstrate how these models of history are held in Fry's work all at the same time. Later, they will be modified by geological knowledge, and that will introduce other temporal scales. Creating visual conventions to model these multiple temporalities is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. It simply requires thinking differently about visual timelines.

7 **In the past** five years, what (new) technologies have you, and those of your colleagues whom you most respect, found most potential in

- teaching students in classrooms or online?

Basically everything has become so much easier to use, from databases to text editors, visualization tools, exhibition building and data mining. We teach all of this to our introductory undergraduate class and they just learn how to do these things without hesitation. They may not get very far in creating a database, but they get the basics, and they create classification schemes, metadata, maps with geo-referencing, exhibits and so on. We use Omeka in our classroom, and it is certainly a great asset and of course has an excellent user community to support its development. We use ManyEyes and Voyant, both of which are excellent tools with quite low thresholds of entry. XML editors are so much more sophisticated – Oxygen has moved ahead by leaps and bounds since we first used it more than ten years ago. I'm not a super-tech whiz, but the students are so adept that we can throw a problem at them and ask them to figure out a solution and they will find it. They go searching for apps, platforms, plug-ins and software and find what they need and then kluge it all together. They use all kinds of social media software to follow each other's work, piggy-back on research, collect and organize their projects. It's inspiring.

8 **As a teacher** (or scholar or artist or all three), what personal "paradigm shift" (if that expression can be dragged out of the

- suitcase) was the most difficult to come to terms with? (And, yes, of course, every book you write deals with this question, but, taking your canon as a multiverse?)...

I'm not sure that this is difficult, maybe the opposite, but I really enjoy the fact that the students can figure out technical solutions that I can't. Just as they are not going to have decades of letterpress or book design experience to draw on, I'm not going to have decades of digital experience ahead. I wasn't born digital, and they were, and so they think differently in

terms of design, navigation, display, information organization and so on. I feel like my job becomes one of mentoring and coaching, giving them critical language and introducing them to historical dimensions, sharing the rich inventory of human expression and imaginative work that they have no idea exists, rather than being a more traditional teacher. That said, I spent many years teaching drawing, and think that that will come back as a skill people will want to acquire as a basic intellectual tool for realization of thought forms in material expression. We will come to have a greater and greater appreciation of hand-based knowledge—in the arts, crafts, trades, and other applied practices. As a culture we have lost that knowledge, and whole generations are raised without any experience of turning a wrench, hitting a nail, kneading bread. I'm not nostalgic about this. The knowledge is far more important than sentimentality would suggest. Cognitive processing and physical experience are bound up together, I believe, and so reintegrating hand knowledge and cognitive development is essential.

9 **What does** "books-in-print" now mean? What will it mean 20 years from now? (Unfair question: like asking what your favorite color is, in a different but in the same way: forecasting rarely means anything, unless it happens as forecasted).

I guess we all believe that the inventory of written texts will be available in online repositories that can be printed on demand in a variety of formats, including luxury ones that have good paper and binding. At least I hope so. But books will exist because they are still specific in their format and physical features. I'm attached to printing because of its relative permanence. I don't have any faith in digital storage long term, or curation of data, or preservation of current file formats. Will HTML have the longevity of the alphabet? Will there be a time thirty-five hundred years from now when someone will be puzzling through our digital code the way we still examine the inscriptions from the Sinai and other Western Semitic epigraphic remains? Hard to imagine. I know you set a 20-year window, but it's the bigger historical view that is difficult to reckon. Twenty years from now is like two weeks. My books from twenty years ago feel brand new to me.

10 **Still with** forecasting, though: How do you see the University situation, especially in the arts and humanities, 20 years from now?

That's the most difficult question you have asked. I think the University as we know it is disappearing rapidly, and that preserving the humanities will be hard unless we can demonstrate the value of the human record, aesthetic work, and intellectual methods specific to our fields that are relevant to the world ahead. We believe they are, of course, for the purposes of creating citizens with a view of ethics, philosophy, critical reflection, knowledge of cultural specificity and difference, structures of argument, lessons of history and so on. But the old model of the four-year training for adolescents in transition from family life to adulthood will need to expand considerably. I

think we will see a boom in mature scholars, people who are retired from their careers and are able to return to a passion they had to put aside. They want to engage in serious research and scholarship in the later decades of their lives. Other changes have to come as well, opening up academic work to a broader public, changing the revenue streams and ways we reward intellectual labor and value it in the culture. The sense of entitlement that pervades academic culture (I'm thinking of the faculty in research institutions) will come up against new realities very soon. Thinking proactively about how to restructure our labor and lives is crucial for our survival. Otherwise it will be left to the business offices and accountants.

11. **Skipping whatever** project you are currently developing, what is the next project you would like to tackle? Tackle is not the best word. Investigate?

I'm still working on the design of the database memoir of all the books I never wrote and/or wrote and never published... as well as finishing *Graphesis* (which will be published as part of a new Harvard University Press series), and developing the alphabet historiography study (as per my discussion of Fry, above). But I hope to get to the diagrammatic writing project ahead—hopefully next. At some point I want to return to a serious study of what I call “the meteorological tongue,” – the language and graphics of weather as a complex system. Those are both projects that have been on my list for awhile, like promises awaiting fulfillment. I usually get to things eventually. “Write Graphic Design History” was on my task list for a few years. And then Emily McVarish, and I actually did it. So, I'm hopeful.

12. **Whenever I see** your portrait my memory takes me to Visual Arts as if letters would embrace your curly hair. Which alphabet is this brain that lights in blue your colored writing?

Celestial alphabets, of course! Those finely wrought and somewhat cryptic letters pulled from the stars and only lent to humankind....