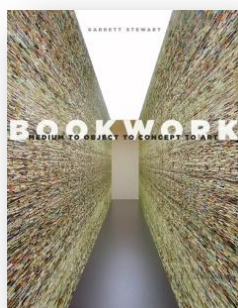


# The Art of Demediation: Conceptual Materialities of the Book(-)work

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Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork. Medium to Object to Concept to Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 272 pp. ISBN 978-0226773919

The beauty of ruins? That they're no longer good for anything. – Fernando Pessoa, *Book of Disquiet*

Words may murder the thing. – Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork*

**T**here are books that are no longer good for reading. A book, *when a book is not a book*, refuses the preconception of being a text in book format, or, otherwise, a mechanism of typographic sedimentation of literature. The anti-book, the book without text, turns itself to dysfunctional book-work sculpture, namely the *bibliobjet*. The *bibliobjet* is a spurious object, deceiving its own medial nature, banished from library shelves, and sheltered in museum galleries, to be seen by the viewer (not by the reader). The exile in materialities, transfiguring the instrumental object into a disused artifact, symptomizes the decay of the book hegemony as quintessential machine of culture in contemporaneity that is marked by the ubiquitous of postmodern digital virtuality. Nowadays, “[t]he iconography of the codex is repeatedly memorialized at the moment of its own passing reign” (STEWART, 2011:9). This is the idiosyncratic guidebook, suggested to the viewer-as-reader by Garrett Stewart, throughout *Bookwork* (2011), a hardcover codex whose format is, at the same time, an academic textbook for extensive reading, and an art book analogous to a museum catalog (a book to be viewed, while sitting at a table): an art book that includes a myriad of graphic representations that document the book as art.

In *Bookwork*, Garrett Stewart renders a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to the field of Book Studies, and, particularly, to the phenomenon

of book-objects. The work is an up-to-date, important and ambitious treatise, the book as sculpture. Moreover, the book aspires to inaugurate a general theory: the art of demediation. Stewart attempts to preclude, from his analysis, the influence of literary studies, as the author himself announces in the introduction (entitled “Frontmatters”): “[t]his study thus operates at the collision of two disciplines and the elision of a third. In it, art history impacts book history over the absent [sic] of anything like literary reading” (xviii). Page after page, however, the literary rhetoric is permanently lurking over a deeper and broad theoretical substrate (in the Humanities), which enriches the inquiry. In the first place, Garrett Stewart is the James O. Freedman Professor of Letters at the University of Iowa; hence, his way of looking reflected in the text’s formal description, elaborated elocution, and hermeneutic exegesis. In fact, the concept of demediation, as we shall see, derives from the detexted condition of the *bibliobjet*, as if the book and text (medium and message) were an inseparable and mutually defining entity: a type of technotext. Moreover, the research is framed by selected ideas of Gérard Genette, Régis Debray and Thomas A. Vogler. In addition to the literary background, Garrett Stewart cites art theorists John Roberts, Michael Fried, Johanna Drucker and Thomas Crow, media theorist Marshall McLuhan, artists Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Kosuth, and writers Jorge Luis Borges and Henri Bergson. He gathers these heterogeneous and complementary theoretical viewpoints in order to develop multiple lines of inquiry to the book-object investigation, from Modern to Postmodern artistic practices, namely “the refusal of primary *immediacy* in the work of art” [emphasis in the original] (9). The refusal of immediacy evidences the reconfiguration of medial transparency, that is, the book not as a privileged time-space mechanism for literary experience, but as a texted unchained and autonomous diptych, investigating not only the autonomy of literal space of representation (the page), but also “the psychomechanics of reading” (215).

The subtitle, “Medium to Object to Concept to Art”, defies the reader to foresee the dialectical passage of aesthetic reconceptualization of the book as an objet d’art, and a praise of ruins (e.g., the works of artists Anselm Kiefer and John Latham). The *Passage* of Matej Krén, an installation of a corridor flanked by piled codices, graphically pictured on the front of the book jacket, symbolizes the work’s conceptual pathway that blends itself into the history of the book as art (chapter 2). Garrett Stewart designates this dialectical route as the art of demediation (as opposed to remediation), and this is the text’s central argument. The dialectics of demediation reverses the dialectics of remediation by corrupting the rationale of Marshall McLuhan’s media determinism: “in the art of demediation the *absence* of the old medial form becomes the content of the new work” [emphasis in the original] (1). Demediation opposes likewise both the concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy, simultaneously and paradoxically. Garrett Stewart declares that demediation works “to highlight a common effect of refused *immediacy* in the

experience of verbal and visual textuality” [emphasis in the original] (9). Refusing the immediacy (the illusion of transparency), the disused bookwork asserts the literal space (the saturation of the medium), although, opposite to hypermediation, demediation refuses the instrumental facet of the medium, exploring instead the deceptive translucidity of mediation through an apparatus of disuse, or, in other words, through a negative materialistic translation of medium communication efficacy. According to Stewart, “[d]emediation, an active function of such works rather than some a priori condition, names the *undoing of a given form of transmission, now blocked or altered in the medium of its secondary presentation*” [emphasis in the original] (1). Demediation, therefore, is not an intricate quality of the *bibliobjet*. It is, instead, not only a method of artistic deskillling of the found object, through alteration, assemblage or simulation (chapter 1), but also a heuristic or reskilled reading of these object lessons, as a single object (for instance, Marcel Broadthaers’ *Pense-Bête*, or Robert The’s *The Medium*), an installation (for instance, John Latham’s *Painting is an Open Book*, or Buzz Spector’s *Malerich: With 8 Red Rectangles*), or even a planar graphical representation (painting or still image) of the bibliographic form (for instance, Idris Khan’s *every... page of the Holy Quran*, or Natali Rakuzin’s *Chuck Close*). Both artistic deskillling and reskilled reading imply defiance to cultural conventions or social consuming rituals of transmitted information.

According to Garrett Stewart’s art-historical overview, the provenance of the paradigm of demediation dates back to Modernism, particularly to Synthetic Cubism, and to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades. “Duchamp (...) uproot[ed] real things, already-made objects and transplant[ed] them wholesale into the zone of aesthetic (re)consideration” (219-220), including *readybounds* or book simulations. Stewart gives particular emphasis to John Roberts’ Marxist reading of Marcel Duchamp’s work, specifically to the ideas of deskillling and immaterial labor (rather than material labor), artist as programmer, and “disalienation of intellectual labor on the public’s part rather than the author’s” (57). The Duchampian gesture of appropriation and ironical aesthetic adaptation of found objects (a politics of resistance against the allure of bourgeois artistic values and gaze) enabled the posterior emergence of Conceptualism, which considers the idea (or concept) as the fundamental aesthetic category, and hence undervaluing the artistic craft and masterful execution. Therefore, the Conceptualist agenda infers a twofold effect: on the one hand, the metamorphosis of medium to thing to idea (of book to book-work to bookwork), based on the method of deskillling; on the other, the idea of reskillling, which is the viewer-as-reader’s appeal to “*Learn to Read* – and to do so even in the absence of legible text” [emphasis in the original] (21), dismissing a “thirst for the medial immersion in textual experience” (21). The avant-garde movements, like Modernism or Conceptualism, tend to investigate the processes of strangeness via disruption of stimulus-response protocols. Applied to bookwork, the cutting

edge bibliographic artistic experimentation liberates the anti-book, a political dissident object, from the chains of the textual dictatorship, making the viewer-as-reader aware of “a [self-reflexive] thought about aesthetic experience” (11), and also resetting a conscious approach (to decipher through both visual grammar and the mind’s eye) in order to “look anew, think again” (171) the detexted metabook.

The suppression modes of medium transmission efficiency, instigated by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde movements, connect themselves with the communication breakdown of the book as machine: “a manifold mechanism, time-determined in its successive operation, human-scaled, content-dispensing, and duplicable” (28). The bookwork combines the negation of text with the absence or distortion of at least one of the modes cited above, not only investigating the medium-specific reading environments, but also the intermedia synapses (technological ecology). In other words, the *bibliobjet* is a metabook that “yields up a rhetoric of the rhetoric” (233), sometimes mirrored by other representation apparatus, such as sculpture, painting, photography, architecture, or mixed-media installation. Thus Garrett Stewart argues that when “remediation is so extreme (...) it turns to demediation” (228).

The perfect model of the *book-off* would be the a priori abstract codex as synecdoche of the totality of books. In *Bookwork* prologue, properly designated “Exhibition in Mind”, Garrett Stewart imagines a virtual installation of conceptual book(-)works, silenced as thought objects. The idea of a perennial and universal book is equally echoed in the “Endpapers”: “the ultimate nonbook is the study imagined rather than constructed bookwork: the ideational model (...) of a fashioned instance. Extrapolated to (an)archival scope, the nonbook can in this sense become all books at once, virtual prototype, rather than single codex, model and discard in one” (222). In another way, some book-objects, Maurizio Nannucci’s *Universum* (1969), for example, are sculptural metaphors of a Borgesian utopia: the infinite book as metonymy of culture, namely the library of Babel. Nevertheless, the bookwork is not always completely wordless. In reality, the power of its discourse rises from the transaction between title (text) and bibliographic materiality; hence the poetics of ambiguity, a type of Cratylism indeterminacy, challenges the viewer-as-reader to multiple hermeneutic approaches to rethink the unexpected polysemic *bibliobjets*’ latent meaning. Ultimately, every book is good for reading. But only a few books self-question the nature of book-ness.