

Living Photographs or Silent Films? The Flipbook as a Critical Object Between Tactility and Virtuality

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Abstract

This paper deals with the specific ways artists use the flipbook in order to abandon the exclusive model of medium specificity in favor of an integrative and dialogical model of interacting media. A particular focus will be laid on the ways, artists since the 1960s stress the muteness of the flipbook in order to address historical, medium-specific, and socio-political issues. It will further be argued that in more recent years the flipbook became an appropriated means to reflect upon significant cultural changes in a contemporary society of mass communication.

Résumé

L'article retrace les différents usages artistiques du folioscope depuis les années 1960. Dans un premier temps, le passage d'une approche autoréflexive vers un intérêt pour l'interaction entre différents médiums sera abordé. À cet égard, un accent particulier sera mis sur la manière dont les artistes explorent le mutisme du folioscope afin de réfléchir sur des contextes historique, relatif au médium et socio-politique. Dans un deuxième temps, les exemples plus récents des œuvres de Tony Oursler et de Rabih Mroué serviront à montrer à quel point le folioscope est encore aujourd'hui un moyen adéquat pour commenter les changements culturels et sociaux dans une société de communication de masse.

Keywords

Flipbook, Photography, Film, Intermediality, Communication

Based on the animation of photographic sequences, the flipbook has its origin in the history of the 19th century's optical entertainment devices and the tradition of silent films in early cinema. Within the context of an anti-modernist and intermedial approach in 1960s art, the flipbook became popular among artists as a means of ludic exploration of both popular culture and as a "theoretical object," (Schulz, 2005; Krauss, 1999) allowing an investigation of the line between illusion and disillusion at play in the encounters between diverging media such as photography, film, and the book. In this essay, I will particularly focus on the complex dynamic between animation and muteness as an inherent quality of the flipbook. In fact, many artists such as Gilbert & George, John Baldessari, and, more recently, Tim Ulrich, Sigrun Köhler, and Tony Oursler, explore the flipbook's incapacity to accompany moving images with sound. Assuming this, I will argue that since the 1960s a shift can be observed from the flipbook's use as a way to defy common ideas about artistic media to a means of exploring social, political, and psychological issues with regard to the act of communication and the transmission of information. Ending with a closer look at Rabih Mroué's multimedia installation *The Pixelated Revolution*, I will suggest that, with the rise of digital culture and the Internet as a social network, the flipbook is anything but an obsolete medium or nostalgic art form. It is rather used as an appropriated means to reflect some crucial issues of contemporary media culture, such as the distinction between physical experience and the immateriality of digital images, or the balance between intimacy and distance.

Optical Toys

As an entertainment gadget, the flipbook has a long tradition. Already in the 19th century it was invented as an optical toy to create the illusion of movement by flipping pages containing gradually varying images.¹ The first patent of a flipbook, introduced by John Barnes Linnett in 1868, gives a concise definition of the so-called kineograph:

"Producing optical illusions by presenting to the eye in rapid succession a series of pictures of objects representing the objects in several successive positions they occupy when in motion, and thereby producing the impression of moving objects."² (fig. 1) Later, in 1882, Henry van Hoebenbergh obtained a patent for what he called "optical toys." In the description of his patent, he emphasizes for the first time the after-image effect, based on the short persistence on the retina of the already gone image. He writes: "My invention relates to that class of optical toys which depend for their action upon the well-known phenomenon technically termed 'persistence of vision,' in which the impression of an object is maintained for a perceptible time upon the retina of the eye after the object itself has disappeared from view."³

Another patent was introduced in 1886 by Arthur Andrew Melville under the name "the living picture book," and at the end of the 19th century, Maximilian Sklandanowsky produced small booklets called "living photographs," containing a succession of photographs. "Kineograph," "optical toy," "living picture book, and "living photographs:" the terms that label the flipbook in its early years are quite telling. They point to the fact that the flipbook is a device that inscribes movement, an object sold in toy stores or given away as advertising gift, a book that animates pictures, and more specifically, a series of photographs that turn into moving or "living" images. To put it bluntly, the flipbook demonstrates how photography becomes film. Indeed, Maximilian Sklandanowsky, known for having displayed the first moving picture show to a paying audience on November 1, 1895, created his small bound

¹ The catalog *Daumenkino: The Flip Book Show* (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Köln: Snoeck, 2005) provides a comprehensive survey on the history of the flipbook.

² British Patent n° 925; see: http://www.flipbook.info/brevets/brevet_linnett.htm (accessed April 15, 2015).

³ United States patent n° 258, 164; see: http://www.flipbook.info/brevets/brevet_hoevenbergh.htm (accessed April 15, 2015).

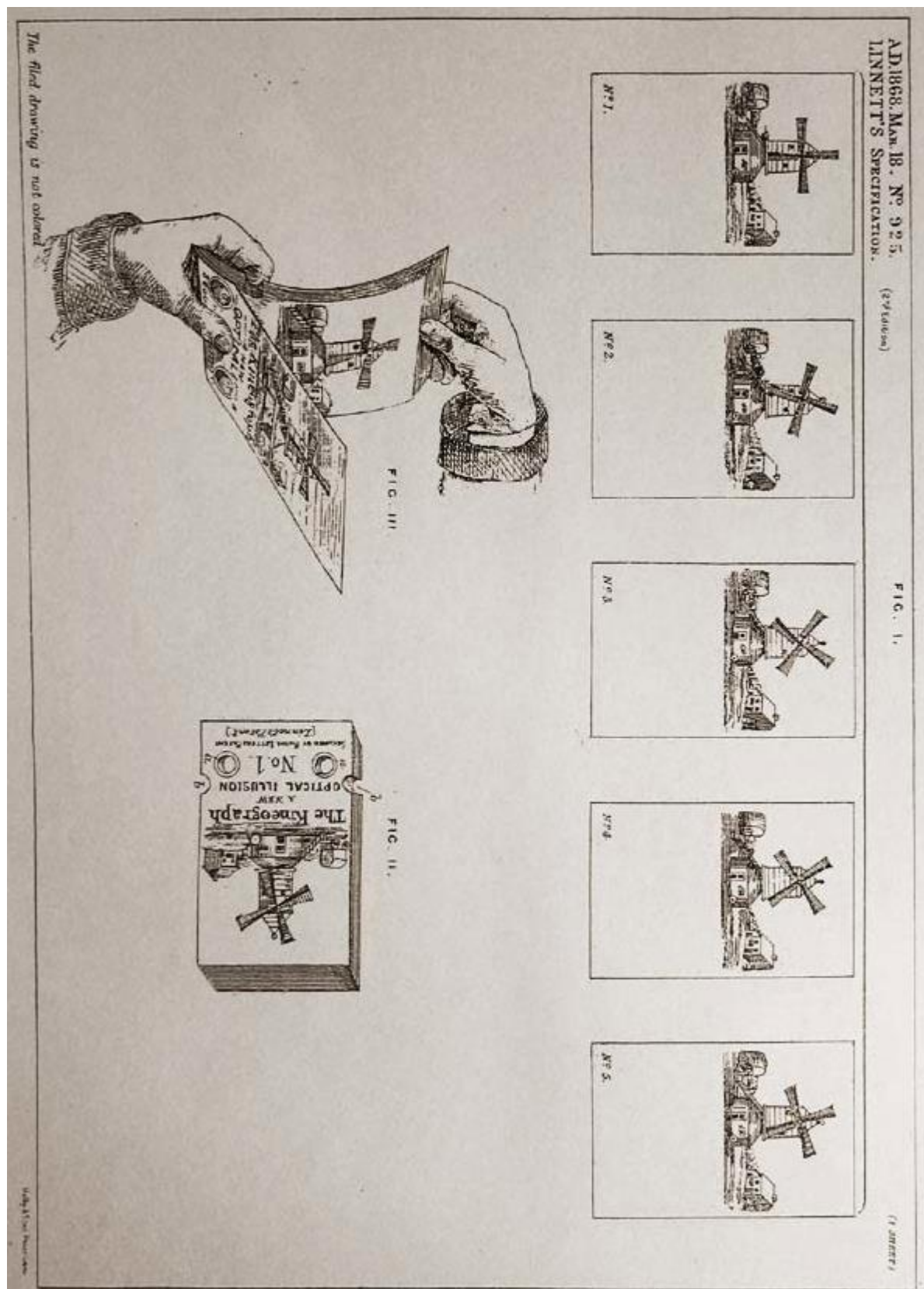


Fig. 1 Illustration from John Barnes Linnett's patent (British Patent no 925), 18 March 1868.

booklets on the basis of cut-outs from his films in order to make money for his business. (Saekel, 2011: 315; Castan 1995)

The Flipbook as Artwork

In the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, the flipbook was never considered a serious form of art. Only around 1960, artists became increasingly interested in the flipbook as an artistic medium, and since then a large number of artistic flipbooks have been created. Several reasons have been advanced to explain the overwhelming success of the flipbook in the postwar avant-garde. In an essay on the flipbook, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix states that the artistic discovery of the flipbook would partially rely on this ludic character and its origin in popular culture. (Moeglin-Delcroix, 2006: 376) In this regard, the flipbook serves as a means to breach the barrier between high and low art forms. In fact, many flipbooks produced by artists obviously stand within the 19th century tradition of innocuous and ludic optical toys created for mere entertainment. Sol LeWitt's *Cock Fight Dance* from 1980 is exemplary in this respect. Both title and content refer to the cockfight as a blood sport for entertainment and betting, which is still quite popular in Latin America and Asia and which, in the United States, only became illegal in all fifty states beginning in 2008. But whereas a cockfight is held in a ring until one of the cocks is dead or severely injured, LeWitt's book tells another story. Clearly, the battle scene does not take place in a sports arena but in a space for free-running chickens, and the main threat doesn't come from an adversarial cock but from a cat that watches the disputing cocks with great attention. This kind of slapstick-like scenario has evidently originates in the tradition of humorous flipbooks of the 19th century.

As a second reason for the enormous popularity of the flipbook in contemporary art, Moeglin-Delcroix emphasizes its self-reflexive character. Based on "the solidarity between eye and hand, between vision and the manipulation of the pages" (Moeglin-Delcroix, 2006: 378), the flipbook could make explicit the specific quality of the book as an object to be read. In contrast to traditional aesthetic concepts associated with the fine arts, such as contemplation, composition, and the idea of the pregnant moment (Lessing), artists' books—and in particular flipbooks—imply their performative use. In other words, a flipbook is a demonstration of its own use as a book. If a main characteristic of an artist book is, as Johanna Drucker suggests, that it "interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention," and that it is "self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form," (Drucker, 2004: 3) then the flipbook would be, in Moeglin-Delcroix's reading, a particularly effective form of the genre. Gottfried Bechthold's *Flipbook* from 1973, for example, confronts us with the very act of what we actually do: turn the pages of a book in order to access its content.

Linked to this argument, a third reason for the rise of the artistic flipbook has been advanced by Christoph Benjamin Schulz—the participative character of the medium. The user of the flipbook is not condemned to the passive role of viewer but becomes an actor who must animate, quite literally, the work of art. As Schulz puts it: "The spectator decides over the pace and perceives thus the changing effect under changing conditions. They are toys, with regard to their handling, and *philosophical toys* concerning their substantial significance. Movement and, related to it, illusion [...] becomes predictable and thus: comprehensible, understandable." (Schulz, 2005: 75, my translation) Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that numerous flipbooks created by artists during the 1960s and 1970s can be situated between the two poles of an analytic, self-referential, and media-critical position, on the one hand, and a playful, narrative tendency, on the other.

The Flipbook as Intermedia

Based on these preliminary remarks, I would now like to elaborate on the flipbook's nature as a hybrid art form that connects various media such as photography and cinema, but also drawing, sculpture, and music. As Schulz rightly observes, the artistic influences of the flipbook may be drawn back to two discourses: expanded cinema and the artist's book, each exploring the specific qualities of their respective medium while, at the same time, exceeding the boundaries of their conventions. (Schulz, 2005, 72-85) Indeed, as a book both based on still images and mimicking cinema, the "living picture book" transcends the specificity of the book and opens out to other media such as photography, cinema, or drawing.

Peter Downsborough's *WITHIN (TIME)* (1999, written in 1987) is a significant example



Fig. 2+3 Peter Downsborough, *WITHIN (TIME)*, 1999 (written in 1987). Courtesy the artist.

of a reflexive book that implies its own commentary, less by drawing on the specificities of the book as such than by crossing various media (photography, drawing, film, and sculpture) that interact and comment on each other. (fig. 2+3) As the artist remarks, time is here “represented by a line which starts from the midpoint of the vertical dimension of the book,” while rotation is “represented by a series of photographs of a person [...] [that] have been taken of a person while that person has been rotated full circle...” (Küng, 2011: 173) The passage through time is thus directly linked to the motion through the book. Yet the real subject of the book is the complex interrelationship between different modes of time. The thin line, functioning as a watch hand, represents clock time that passes inexorably and irreversibly. The fact that there are twenty-four lines, each associated with a different view of the represented woman, reminds us further of the fact that classical cinema is based on the projection of twenty-four images per second. Robrecht Vanderbeeken claims that “due to the quick succession of prints, flipbooks manage to illustrate the underlying principle of film,” (Vanderbeeken, 2009: 151) and this is certainly true for Downsborough’s *WITHIN (TIME)*. But the mechanical, filmic time contrasts here with other temporal regimes, such as the reading time of the viewers, which is individual, reversible, and stoppable. The rotation of the camera around a human head, finally, echoes the way that sculpture is ideally experienced. To apprehend a sculpture completely, one must walk around it. *WITHIN (TIME)* is then precisely what artist Dick Higgins famously defined as *intermedia*: a “conceptual fusion” of various media—book, photography, film, and sculpture—that reveals the very principles according to which these mediums operate and how they are perceived. (Higgins, 1984: 16)

John Baldessari’s *Zorro (Two Gestures and One Mark)* (1998) represents another kind of intermedial space. In the book three prominent gestures from classical cinema are strung together. It begins with Jean-Paul Belmondo’s famous gesture of brushing his thumb across his lips in Godard’s *Breathless* (1960), which is followed by a scene from the film, *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), where the hero marks his initial on a wall with his sword. The last scene is taken from Michael Curtis’ romantic drama *Casablanca* (1942), in which we see Humphrey Bogart laughing before becoming serious. These prominent films and gestures, reproduced in the book, are engraved in many of our memories, where they mingle with other images from the same films or other films in order to constitute what may be called our cinematographic consciousness. But here these gestures are isolated from their filmic narrative, from their story, so-to-speak. Taken out of their context, they lack drama. In other words, they are precisely what Jeff Wall describes as the gestures of modernity: “mechanistic movements, reflex actions, involuntary, compulsive responses.” (Wall, 2007: 85) Yet, the exposure of their factual banality contradicts the fact that each of them marked—and still mark—our perception of cinema and, more generally, of popular culture as such. From this viewpoint, *Zorro* is more than an “optical toy” or a collection of “living photographs.” Rather than being a book on cinema that mimics the procedures and the contents of a film, Baldessari’s *Zorro (Two Gestures and One Mark)* is a book about the influence that cinema and its gestures have on our consciousness and our perception.

The Muteness of the Flipbook

It is not by chance that all these gestures are silent gestures. There is no sound; no one is speaking. I will now focus on flipbooks that reveal what a book is not able to do, what it lacks or of which it is devoid. In comparison with cinema, the most obvious “deficiency” of the flipbook is the absence of sound. There are numerous flipbooks that reveal their muteness as a way to address historical, medium-specific, and socio-political issues.

In 1973, Baldessari made a flipbook that explicitly addresses this inability to produce sound. *Throwing a Ball Once to Get Three Melodies and Fifteen Chords* is a small booklet that

contains a series of images showing the artist doing exactly what the title says: throwing a ball. Three lines colored in red, yellow, and blue function as formal markers, indicating the position of the artist's hands and his left foot as they shift according to the artist's movements. The lines thus transform the performance into a formal composition, and constitute at the same time the staff for a musical score. As the book's title suggests, these lines function as equivalents of three melodies, while the number of pages correlates with the fifteen chords on which the melodies are supposed to be based. The musical composition depends on the pictorial composition, which, for its part, results from the banal and non-artistic corporeal act performed by the artist. The incapacity of the book to produce sound and music reflects here the arbitrariness and non-sense of the visual composition as well as the absurdity of the musical score. As Douglas Eklund astutely notes, failure as both subject and strategy appears in Baldessari's work since the mid-1960s in order to overcome traditional aesthetic ideas and to suggest a visual order of a different kind. (Eklund, 2009: 80)

A few years earlier, in 1971 and 1972, the British artist duo Gilbert and George realized two flipbooks that are closely connected with their performances as living or singing sculptures. In *Somerset House* (1971), the two artists stand and converse together in front of the eponymous, neoclassical building in central London. The banality of the scene reminds one of the first photographic flipbooks and, of course, of the first silent films produced at the end of the 19th century. This nostalgic character is emphasized by the muteness of the book, referring to the muteness of early cinema. Furthermore, the flipbook, as "living" photographs, constitutes an ideal medium to reproduce the artists' performances as "living" sculptures. The incapacity of the book to record the artists' conversation evokes complex historical and ontological dimensions. Historically, it refers to the muteness of film, and ontologically, it reminds us that sculptures do not speak.

Yet Gilbert & George do speak. They even sing. In 1970 at Nigel Greenwood Gallery, they performed for the first time as a "singing sculpture." Standing on a table, their hands and heads covered with metallic powder, they mechanically moved to a recording of Flanagan and Allen's song *Underneath the Arches*. Two years later, in 1972, they produced the flipbook *Oh, the Grand old Duke of York*. It begins with the printed words of the English nursery rhyme *Oh, the Grand old Duke of York*, which tells the story of the Duke of York marching his army up and down a hill. On the following pages we discover a series of photographs that show the artists stepping down a staircase and disappearing finally out of the picture frame. As is well known, *Oh, the Grand old Duke of York* is also sung as an action song that becomes faster with each repetition. Thus the reversibility of the act of flipping through the book as well as the possibility of accelerating the pace correspond perfectly with the text and the performance of the song. Yet beneath each photograph the unvarying words "No UP, no DOWN" keep the action in suspense: there is as little real action as there is music to hear.

These artistic flipbooks from the early 1970s have in common a dialectical logic. On the one hand, they provide an ideal means to reproduce an action or a performance. Manipulated by a reader-viewer, the flipbook satisfies two major concerns of the neo-avant-garde: performativity and participation. On the other hand, their muteness both points to a historically earlier stage of technological media and ironically, hints at an imperfection, something that is missing or has to be added by the reader, a failure that makes us aware of our own attitude towards what we see and what we hear or, more precisely, do not hear. Susan Sontag writes in her 1969 essay "The Aesthetics of Silence:" "But whereas formerly the artist's good was *mastery of* and *fulfillment in* his art, now the highest good for the artist is to reach the point where those goals of excellence become insignificant to him, emotionally and ethically, and he is more satisfied by being silent than by finding a voice in art." (Sontag, 2002: 6) When Sontag interprets the artist's silence as a "reluctance to communicate" and a desire to free oneself "from servile bondage to the world," the flipbooks discussed above might be understood as a literal

and ironic comment on this attitude.

The Act of Communication

More recent examples of such speechless flipbooks function quite differently. In Tim Ulrich's *Kanzumichhörn?* (1995), we encounter a woman who shouts something to us. The title of the book suggests what she is shouting: "can you hear me?" The immediate answer would be: of course not! Since a book cannot speak, we recognize the question as a rhetorical one. The printed letters floating out of the woman's mouth confirm this paradox. They do not form words. They remain senseless, and in the end the woman looks at the reader, apparently puzzled over her own voiceless-ness. The flipbook's muteness allows Ulrich to pose questions about the act of communication in general and about the difficulty of expressing our emotions through words in particular.

In a humorous way, Sigrun Köhler addresses the problem of communication on a broader sociological level. "Je dis rien" is the title of a flipbook she produced in 1993, in which the reader discovers a mouth with a three-day beard and a cigarette butt between its teeth. "Je dis rien:" once again we are confronted with the truism that a book says nothing. But given the dubious appearance of the protagonist, one might also be inclined to imagine a scene with which we are quite familiar from crime movies: police arresting a suspicious person, saying "I will not speak without my lawyer present." The muteness of the book reinforces here the socially or politically motivated refusal of speech.

Whereas the two previous flipbooks combine image and text in order to demonstrate the limits of both the book as a medium and language as a means of communication, Berwyn Hung's book *Absolutely Incomprehensible* (1996) explores the difference between hearing and seeing, knowing and believing. The images depict a mouth articulating words. Intuitively, we suppose that the spoken sentence is identical with the title: "absolutely incomprehensible." Yet we are not sure. If we are not experienced in lip-reading, we remain doubtful, and quite rightly, it seems, because if the reader were able to decipher the spoken words, they would no longer be incomprehensible. The incomprehensibility of what is said is the very condition of the

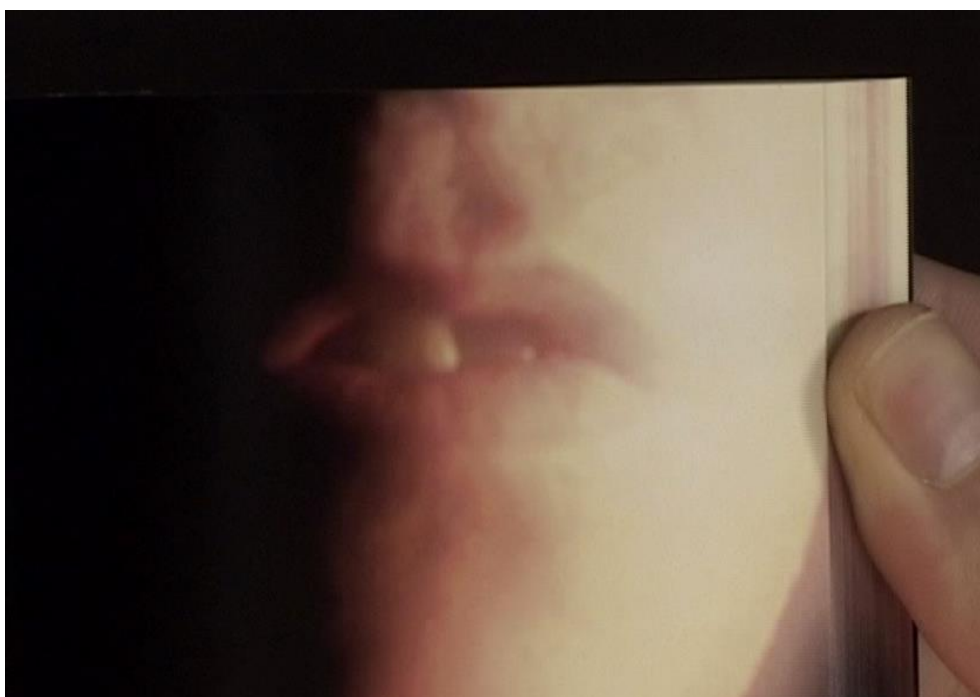


Fig. 4 Tony Oursler, *Untitled (I Love You)*, 2002. Flipbook, 48 pages, 12,9 x 6,4 cm, Visionaire Nr. 39 Play, Visionaire Publishing, New York. Courtesy the artist.

work's meaningfulness. It is the dumbness of the book combined with the animation of the images that produces this ambiguity and leaves us unsure about the meaning of this speech act. Tony Oursler's flipbook from 2002 is certainly the most intriguing and fascinating of these silent language exercises. (fig. 4+5) Once again we see a mouth saying something to us. This time, we do not need subtitles to understand the message from the artist's lips: "I love you." But this tender confession contrasts sharply with a grimacing mouth, the anonymous character of the close-up fragment, and the uncanny atmosphere created by the fuzzy chiaroscuro, out of which the partial face emerges. This uncanny effect is closely connected to Oursler's interest in



Fig. 5 Tony Oursler, *Untitled (I Love You)*, 2002. Flipbook, 48 pages, 12,9 x 6,4 cm, Visionaire Nr. 39 Play, Visionaire Publishing, New York. Courtesy the artist.

spiritualism and the idea of communicating with lost loved ones through machines. His installation *Influence Machine* (2000) relates a 19th century history of parapsychology with technological progress and modern communication methods. (Oursler, 2013: 132) In an interview with Michael Kimmelman from 2001, the artist states with regard to his video art: "It's about conjuring up psychological stages, about conjuring up internal spirits, and reimagining ourselves through technology." (Kimmelman, 2001: 29) And he adds: "Although in many ways they allow us to communicate better, all systems of information, whether semaphore, Morse code, or basic encryption, degrade the signal as well as the quality of communication. Herein lies the contemporary dilemma: although we are flooded with information and in constant contact, we are also more isolated and somehow less informed by our environment. All humanity is forced to conform to the strictures and engineering specifications of current technology, although flesh and blood can never be translated into signal and noise."⁴

⁴ See the artist's homepage:

http://tonyoursler.com/individual_text.php?navItem=text&textId=81&dateStr=Feb.%2025,%202014&subSection=Articles&title=Antennas/Pods (accessed April 15, 2015). Reprinted in the catalogue *Vox Vernacular* (Oursler, 2013: 130). This citation is also from the interview with Kimmelman, but, contrary to indications in the catalog, not printed in *The New York Times*.

This dilemma plays a central role in his flipbook. Its failure to communicate the artist's message of love to the reader reveals the inability of all forms of communication and media to transmit feelings, or as the artist states, to translate flesh and blood into signal and noise. At the rise of the 21st century, the flipbook is certainly not the most fashionable form of communication. But its hybrid position between the visual and the haptic, as well as its inherent paradox of performing muteness, or speechless speaking, provides a compelling metaphor for the increasing loss of authentic corporal experience in an age of digitally transmitted and generated communication. With this perspective, the flipbook becomes what Rosalind Krauss called an obsolete medium. (Krauss, 1999: 290) Released from its functions as entertainment gadget or means of communication, it becomes a theoretical object, which means an object that allows one to reflect upon significant cultural changes in a contemporary society of mass communication.

Tactility and Drama

In Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution*, displayed at documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012, the flipbook is used as a critical tool to address recent trends concerning the creation and the transmission of fraught images within a networked, digital culture. (Scorzin, 2015) (fig. 6-8) Conceived as a scenographically staged multimedia installation, *The Pixelated Revolution* consists of various elements—a video clip of a live lecture-performance, a series of seven printed portraits, a projected video, an 8mm film, and seven flipbooks on a table. They all refer to videos taken during the Syrian Civil War that were uploaded to the Internet. Produced by Syrian protesters with their mobile phones, these videos show their makers filming their own deaths, caused by regime soldiers shooting at them. When Mroué states that these images document “a war against the camera, or against the image,” (Lambert, 2012) he deliberately situates them within recent discussions about a shift in mass media culture from a war based on weapons and soldiers to a “war of images,” where images are deployed to fight the enemy and

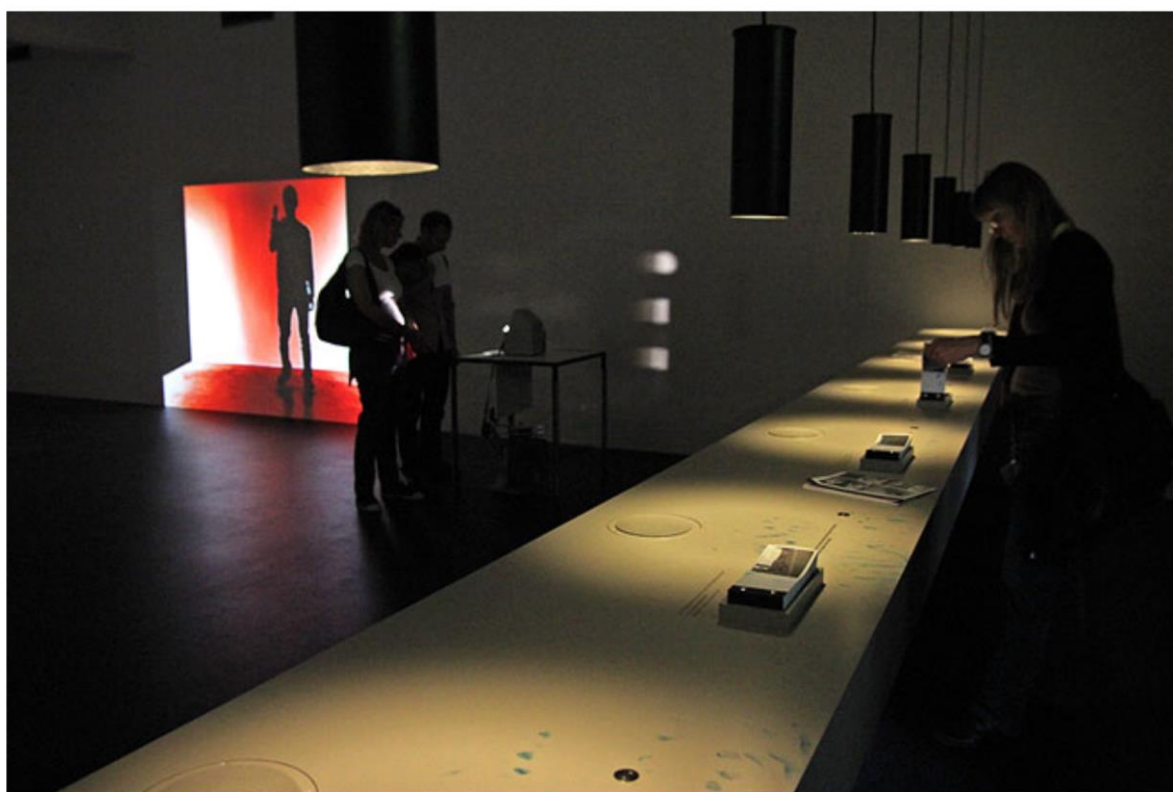


Fig.6 Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, installation view, documenta 13, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

to depict possible futures. (Mitchell, 2011: 2)

In this case, the images were taken to bear witness against a terror regime, and that is exactly why they are targeted for destruction by the snipers. Uploaded to the Internet, they become part of a global flow of data and information, where they must compete with other images in order to attract the attention of viewers. Isolated from their production context and circulating in contemporary social media, these representations of real violence run the risk of turning into a fictional spectacle, consumed by Internet users on their home computers. Comparing the Internet with Greek tragedy and comedy, Mroué recognizes that the Internet, even though a potential platform of political transgression and protest, fictionalizes information and transforms it into an abstract drama. The Internet, he writes, “is constantly changing and evolving. It is a world that is loose, uncontrollable. Its sites and locations are exposed to all sorts of assaults and mutilations, from viruses and hacking procedures to incomplete, fragmented, and distorted downloads. It is an impure and sinful world, full of rumors and unspoken words. Nevertheless, it is still a world of temptation and seduction, of lust and deceit, and of betrayal.” (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin, 2012: 25)



Fig.7 Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, installation view, documenta 13, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

In this world, the image is mobile, transient, and fragmentary. Before one realizes what he is looking at precisely, one is already distracted by the next image on the screen. As Martin Lister writes about digital photography, they “exist in a number of states that are potential rather than actual in a fixed and physical kind of way.” (Lister, 2013: 8) To counter the fugitive and pervasive character of networked images, Mroué aims, in his installation, to deconstruct the snipers’ videos and the way that they are encountered on the Internet by transferring the digital material through various analog techniques: for example, the large prints of the shooters, the soundless, 8mm film *Double Shooting*—showing the eye contact between the protester and his murderer in an endless loop—and, of course, the small-scale flipbooks produced from the videos. On the one hand, this kind of dispersal of video fragments across different places and media forms reminds the viewers of the fragmentary way by which he perceives images on the Internet, and it hinders him from passing immediately to other matters. As Mroué puts it: “This

way, the visitors have to try to reconstruct the quick internet video in their heads.” (Lambert, 2012) On the other hand, the haptic and tactile character of the elements seems to retranslate the virtualized and fictionalized images into a real space, the aesthetic space of the gallery.

The flipbooks are of particular interest in this negotiation between the reality of the factual event, the virtual realm of the Internet, and the artistic setting. Installed on a table, each of the seven flipbooks contains the images of a found video clip from a protestor filming his own death. Fixed to inkpads and illuminated by spotlights, they are accompanied by the YouTube addresses of the videos and the sentence: “To watch the video, press the button and flick through the flipbook. Match the pace of the images to the audio.” The loudspeakers embedded in the table surface permit visitors to hear the sound of the videos and to manipulate them according to their duration, each between eighteen seconds and two minutes. The haptic and participatory character of the flipbook demands the viewers’ participation and interaction, while the adding of sound, usually missing, makes him aware of both the physical character of the original event and the absurdity of reconstructing this event through any form of representation. In fact, it is nearly impossible to synchronize image and sound. As Lotte Fasshauer observes the fingerprints left on the table by visitors, resulting from contact with the inkpads while turning the flipbooks’ pages, are “suggestive of criminal evidence,” involving viewers in the depicted crime because their traces signal complicity. (Fasshauer, 2012) From this point of view, the spotlight—simultaneously a means of interrogation and of theatrical lighting—has the ambivalent purpose of illuminating the real crime and of transforming it into an aesthetic event, a staged tragedy.



Fig.8 Rabih Mroué, The Pixelated Revolution, installation view, documenta 13, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

Conclusion—The Flipbook as Obstacle

Ultimately, the flipbook's critical potential vis-à-vis today's networked images, as a means "to deconstruct them through reflection and by re-reading them in a human, personalized manner," (Downey, 2012) lies in its intermediate position between the virtual and the physical, between the object and the image, and, last but not least, between vernacular and artistic traditions. As we have seen before, already the avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s used the flipbook because it showed a way out of the modernist impasse of autonomy and specificity, towards a participatory conception of art as intermedial. Beginning in the 1990s, with the advent of digital media, the flipbook was threatened with becoming a nostalgic medium due to its physical character and its origins in 19th century visual culture, which stood in sharp contrast to the immaterial, networked images of the Internet. But for some artists, such as Tim Ulrich, Berwyn Hung, and Tony Oursler, it is precisely the haptic quality and the historical roots of the flipbook that provide a means to reflect on our media society's paradox of physical embodiment within a world of disembodied images. "Flesh and blood" (Oursler) are hardly compatible with the virtuality of the networked image, lacking physical location. Particularly in Mroué's multimedia installation, the flipbook resists the transformation of real events into immaterial, transient representations. The demand of physical contact and the resulting traces of fingerprints as unique identity markers make the flipbooks function as an obstacle to any easy and superficial consumption of the images we encounter in the mass media. They invite viewers to reflect on the relationship between their own physical experiences and desires and those suggested by the Internet as a virtual "world of temptation and seduction, of lust and deceit, and of betrayal." (Mroué)

Rather than being an obsolete medium, standing for a regressive position of media nostalgia, the flipbook provides a critical means to understand what Claire Bishop identifies as the principal challenges for artists in today's digital media culture: "the troubling oscillation between intimacy and distance that characterizes our new technological regime" and the "incommensurability between our doggedly physiological lives and the screens to which we are glued." (Bishop, 2012, 436) Yet, contrary to Bishop's antonymic position, the flipbooks discussed above suggest that in our media society, tactility and virtuality are not mutually exclusive, but must be conceived of as entangled conditions of access to a world where every physical act or event may affect the circulation of images within social networks, and vice versa.

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