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FINDING THE POEM

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ABSTRACT

The artist's book is an art form that combines material form with content. Because form and content are so intrinsically related, it provides an ideal vehicle for the teaching of design concepts that can then be applied to other fields. All the elements of art-making and meaning-making are there to be considered.

The idea will be presented that the artist's book can usefully be viewed as a form of poetry. When the artist's book is conceptualized as a form of poetry, it becomes apparent that, as in poetry, everything counts. Considering the techniques used in the construction of poetry and applying these to design will be shown to be a rewarding strategy. When this route is adopted in the making of the artist's book, it can result in an especially dense and resonant accumulation of meanings.

The paper will examine some of the techniques of poetry and their applicability for designers. In particular, the construction of symbol and metaphor will be singled out for examination, as well as the adoption of appropriate and expressive formal constraints.

The paper will examine some examples of artist's books and show how these books solve their particular problems of combining form and meaning in a manner that displays a poetic sensibility and an ability to create metaphoric objects of meaningful density and complexity. Different components of the artist's book will be singled out for examination. These will include the following: appropriate and imaginative use of materials, expressive form and shape, concrete poetry and what it can teach us about apt and meaningful layout and page design in relation to the meaning of the text, possibilities for creating expressive and appropriate covers and bindings and viewing the whole as an integrated and meaningful web of appropriately related components.

It will be suggested that the artist's book may have a unique and useful educative role to play in the furtherance of literacy, with regard to visual, written and other forms of texts.

KEY WORDS

Poetry
Text
Artist's book

FINDING THE POEM

A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

(From Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*. First published 1840)
(online unnumbered, www.wildhoneypress.com/Audio/Defense.html.)

Experience: A Relationship to Language

A small artist's book, by Greg Daville, evokes and celebrates the imagination. In appearance, the book is humble and effacing. It is pocket sized and made from inexpensive brown paper. The title, *Double Glazing the Large Glass* (Fig. 49), is a clear reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*. In the introduction, the artist comments:

For some time I have been interested in the idea of putting on an art exhibition that would be made up entirely of descriptive text, as opposed, for example, to descriptive painting. The text itself would act as a set of inscriptions for the imagination, from which the viewer could then construct an image in their own head.

. Here is an example of one of Greg Daville's spectacles for the 'mind's eye':

Something a Friend Saw

The sea front
Two old ladies are seated on a bench
They chat.
They look at the sea.
One of them pours tea from a thermos flask.
The other knits a pullover for her Grandson.
The sea rolls in and out.
Behind them is a high concrete wall.
Painted onto it
(in six foot tall capital letters)
are the words
DESTROY YOURSELF.
A gull cries overhead.
(1993:7)

The pictures are evoked through language. The book suggests that, through language, we find images for the mind. Here the written word stands in for the visual 'word'. The book can be seen as a parable about language. It sets up a relationship between words, pictures and the world. The world is a subjective world. It is in the 'mind's eye'.

Some philosophers suggest that all experience is subjective and moreover our way of relating to the world is through language. The detour of language is crucial and it is primarily through this that we are able to think and express.

One philosopher, who has been influential in shaping thoughts about the function and relevance of language, is Hans-George Gadamer. His writings suggest that our use of language is largely unconscious. Yet it forms our thinking. Here is an extract:

The more language is a living operation, the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows, from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists of what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which the whole great chain of tradition reaches us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it –what is said (Gadamer 1996:33 tr. Cited in www.wikipedia/Gadamer).

Language makes us as we make language. Gadamer's opening sentence, points to his understanding of the unawareness of this facet of language when it is a living operation. When language is a living operation, the self-forgetfulness of language creates a semblance of it being a 'real' entity rather than a man-made sign system. However, some sorts of language texts are intrinsically more self-conscious about their operations, hence alerting the reader/listener to the artificiality of the construct and to the complex relationship between language and life. These sorts of texts, which can be said to be more self-conscious and more self-reflective about their operations, include the artist's book. An artist's book is not simply a book made by an artist. It also displays a self-consciousness about how its operations relate to the world of the book and the customary codes of the book. It frequently plays with these and pushes the conceptual boundaries of the conventional book.

Poetry is another system of creating texts that, in relation to other sorts of texts, is a few degrees more self-conscious. In this paper I advocate some of the theory and methods of poetry as one route to the understanding of effective creativity. I show how methods of poetry are employed in book art (or the artist's book) in order to suggest that what is said about this one art discipline can apply to many other areas of art and design.

The reflection about our potential unawareness of language, and the greater awareness of the poet (and artist), is the first significant point to consider. It can be expressed as a number of questions. How aware is the maker of the mechanics and mechanisms of what is being constructed? How much skill, control and conscious manipulation is being exerted? How aware is the creator of the language game, (the game of texts), that is being played out? How has the self-consciousness about texts been revealed?

Consider the following example of book art:

Above the Trees

In this artist's book by John Broaddus, the concept of a book as an object containing pages in a specific order has been explored. Ordered pages imply that what is ahead is still to be revealed. Broaddus, for example, uses cut-outs and spy-holes to give us glimpses of what is to come. He self-consciously plays games with the conventional methods of book pagination. In this way he creates a text out of the pages that plays off against the numerous other texts of language, image and form that are being employed and explored.

Multiple Texts

Contemporary linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, art historian and those from other disciplines use the term 'text' in a context that is broader than the written text alone. It is used to refer to any cultural artefact that carries, like conventional written language, a code that conveys meaning. A dress or a chair can carry a text or even multiple texts.

Artists' Books are frequently comprised from a multiple of texts. There might be a text that is written, a text that is visual, text that is conveyed through form and shape, text that is imbedded in the texture. Consider the following examples of artists' books:

Octopus

This book by Julie Chen and Mc Derwit has an expressive shape. The shape suggests a water ripple. When the book is opened, the pages form a tiered well. That aspect, together with the text, suggest a descent into the depths. The form of the book operates as a text with as much expressiveness as the written words. Both elements support meaning.

Fragments of an Interior

In this book by Victoria Edwards, actual fragments of old wallpapers become the pages. These samples of wallpaper are infused with their own atmosphere and information (and hence become a powerful text that complements the written text.

Texts and multiple texts occur in all cultural forms. And for our purposes here they apply to the world of design.

I hope to demonstrate that the specialized texts that we know as poetry are constructed from principles that are especially pertinent to the world of the designer. I shall continue to do this through the route of the artist's book. To re-iterate a point already made: understanding something about the principles behind poetry is a useful doorway into understanding what is at the core of much powerful and effective design.

Inevitably, this meander will take us into the world of linguistics and some terms and ideas that are used in relation to texts will be introduced.

Poetry and Language

The most sophisticated use of language in written text is often to be found in poetry. Therefore the theory of poetry is an interesting place to start when discovering something more about how language functions. In poetry the meaning is inseparable from the form. It is easy to say this but it is more difficult to understand this and to grasp what happens when form and content do successfully fuse. Something powerful, can one even say mysterious, happens when this occurs. The following quote describes this, while talking about poetry:

Poetry may well be the art of the unsayable. A good poem lies somewhere beyond mere words. It is the intangible, an exultation in things vaguely apprehended, something which emerges out of its own form. Any poem that can be completely understood or paraphrased is not a poem, therefore, but simply versification or emotive prose (though not the worse for that).

www.poetrymagic.co.uk/whatispoetry.)

In other words, form and content come together in such a manner that the whole is much more than the parts. Poetry gives the mind the opportunity to breathe and expand and glimpse previously unseen horizons. In addition to this poetry contains an inner life. It has a quality we could call soul.

Building Blocks

While poems evolve out of materials and processes of the making process, the building blocks are words. The quote below, describes how a poetic text, from the initial building blocks of words, sets up a complex web of meanings and associations.. Ends and outcomes cannot be entirely foreseen but grow out of process. A two-way dialogue between writer and poem occurs (and after that between reader and poem).

Words, for poets, have meaning, appropriate uses, associations, connotations, etymologies, histories of use and misuse. They conjure up images, feelings, shadowy depths and glinting surfaces. Their properties are marvellous, endless, not to be guessed at from casual inspection. And each property – meaning, association, weight, colour, duration, shape, texture – changes as words are combined in phrases, rhythms, lines, stanzas and completed poems. Out of these properties the poetry is built, even if the end cannot be entirely foreseen but grows out of the very process of deployment, that continual two-way dialogue between writer and poem ([www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative writing](http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative%20writing)).

This is a good way to describe the creative process when ideas are imaginatively developed, by not only poets using words, but by artists using images or by designers using the building blocks of their choice.

Consider the following example of an artist's book by Ken Campbell, where the build up of ideas becomes the subject:

My Father's Garden

Here fragments of a poem, written as an elegy to a deceased father, appear as the poet tries out different configurations. The work builds as one progresses towards the end until the poem in its entirety appears.

Part and Whole

One essential characteristic of poetry, is the 'more sustained and elaborate attention being paid to its constituent parts ([www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative writing](http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative%20writing)). But significantly, while individual parts are being given attention, it is so they can work together to form the whole. A poem is a piece of machinery with every part working well. It is a temple built from five thousand individually crafted bricks. Detail creates the world. And the world looks different to each individual who gazes upon it.

Consider the following example of an artist's book by Ron King, which illustrates how parts build a whole and plays a game with the book convention of turning a page.:

Turn Over Baby

At first we see a front view of a reclining nude. Turning the page we see a view of the same nude, constituted from the same outline, but viewed from the back.

The scenario changes according to the viewpoint. This observation leads to a point about reading texts.

The Closed Text and the Open Text

There is a different sense in which poems (and all language forms) hold multiple texts, than the one already discussed under the heading, Multiple Texts. Texts hold no one essentialist meaning. Meanings are as varied as the readers who come to them. Roland Barthes draws attention to this and makes the point that interpretative practices can constrict meaning:

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose aesthetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure: we shall, they thought, extract from each tale its model, then out of these models we shall make a grand narrative structure, which we shall reapply (for verification) to any one narrative: a task as exhausting (ninety nine percent perspiration, as the saying goes), as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference. (Barthes, 1974:3)

To see a whole landscape in a bean is a reduction of a vast outlook to a minute dimension. Barthes protests against the reduction of meaning. The analogy of a landscape in a bean suggests that interpretative practices constrict meaning. He is critical of thinking that implies a single essentialist structure or meaning to be found behind the surface of a piece of art or the words of a written text.

To grasp this point opens the mindscape created by a poem or piece of art or design to infinities of potential meanings. Indicating the possibility of infinities of meanings is a strong feature of poetic texts.

Consider the following example of an artist's book by Gregory Green:

The Book Bomb

Hidden beneath the covers of a book is a bomb. The meanings of this image are not conclusive. Are we to understand that a book can bomb the mind? Are we to understand that the life of the book is about to come to an end? Are we to understand something else.

Interplay Between Signs

There is no single essentialist structure or meaning beneath the surface of language— that is what Barthes and the post-structuralists propose. They also propose that meanings are constituted from signs. There are only signs and the interplay between signs. The interplay between signs creates threads, skeins, tangles and webs of meanings. Meanings cannot be ultimately pinned down, are never static and cannot be reduced to a final point or a single interpretation. Meanings that are created through the constant interplay between signs are continually in flux. History changes them, so does geographic location, the mind frame and frame-of-mind of the individual sign reader/creator. The usage and interpretation of signs becomes a personal game in which individuals are the co-creators of the meanings of an artwork or literary text, and, by extension, of every aspect of their lives.

Consider the following example from one of my artist's books:

A Pattern Book

Here the wing of a butterfly takes on many mutations of meaning.

The Self Contained System

As is evident, representation of content, coherent form and emotive expression are not constrained to the meanings of words alone, or to the medium of a single text, but spill over into many forms of text. And where the texts are skilfully played and combined, the crucial element of an internal consistency is retained so that the poem, art piece or design becomes a self-contained system. The creation of an integrated self-contained system is a fundamental endeavour of all forms of art, according to some theorists. John Holcombe expands on this idea in his essay, *Aesthetics* (www.textetc.com/theory/aesthetics).(2006).

He identifies some of the crucial components that contribute towards art functioning at a high level; art should be emotionally alive; it should display internal consistency; it should have a coherent form; and it should express itself as an autonomous self-contained system.

Consider the following example of an artist's book:

Scrutiny in the Great Round

This work functions well as an autonomous and self-contained system. It was created by Tennessee Rice Dixon and Jim Gasperini, with music and sound by Charlie Morrow. This work comes in the form of an interactive compact disc. Taking its inspiration and form from the computer game, it allows the reader/viewer to interact by clicking on various parts of the screen, thereby turning day to night and one scene into another as the fairy-tale-like story progresses with its internal variety of permutations and possibilities. Artists and poets have in common the endeavour to find a new way of regarding the world and then attempting to forge a matching language for their visions.

An important point is that a matching language is attempted; and the signified is never identical with reality. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, arrived at the insight that the signified is not identical with reality and that this allows one to treat language as a self-enclosed system (Degenaar, 1986:59). A creative work starts to increase in believability and depth and interest, and that elusive quality called life, in proportion to the number of interconnections and internal relationships it sets up and weaves together in the establishment of its unique pattern, its unique self-enclosed system. For a working writer, artist or designer this is a useful insight. When a work starts to become a world that is filled with elaborate internal relationships, it can be described as its own environment.

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic

The linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, in addition to viewing language as a self-enclosed system, also views it as an arbitrary system of signs, making the relationship between signifier and signified (and between sign and reality) a man-made convention. Meaning then is not seen as something that is immanent in the sign but that comes about because of the sign's position in a set of relationships. Its position provides its difference from other signs, both present and absent.

A useful set of terms is 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic'. These terms describe the relations between signs. The syntagmatic is pictured as a horizontal axis upon which a sign takes up a position in a sequence. The paradigmatic is pictured as the vertical axis. It reveals, that attached to the meaning of the visible sign, are other related signs that are not present. Paradigmatic relations apply to different categories of words (or images): with the same grammatical function, with related meaning, with similar sound patterns, or some other grouping device (Degenaar, 1986:60).

Take the example of the following artist's book:

Primer

This artist's book by Sophie Artemis styles itself as an alphabet book. It occupies two volumes. The first is in English and the second is in Hindi. It therefore embraces two entirely

different alphabet systems and also highlights the differences in culture and cultural artefacts between the two worlds. In this example the letters of each alphabet can be seen as syntagmatic horizontal axis. The numerous objects for which every sound stands can be seen as the paradigmatic vertical axis. Although, for example, 'A' is shown to stand for apple and there is a picture of an apple beside it, we know that it also stands for all the other words that begin with this letter that are absent (but present like echoes).

For creative individuals to be aware of syntagmatic and paradigmatic ripples of meanings is to embrace and understand something more about the connotations and denotations of texts and to be able to play with them more skilfully and consciously.

The Route of Images

The route of images (image can be defined as language that evokes one or all of the five senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling) is one of the devices artists find useful in the creation of the self-contained world. This is because images have associations. Images, and their associations, often come couched as comparisons, where one thing is compared with another, which in some way can be seen to overlap. Comparisons come in many forms. There is the simile, where the likeness is spelt out by the inclusion of the word 'like' or the word 'as' (the man is like a bear). There is analogy, where pairs are compared (the man is like a bear). Then there is metaphor, more compact and potentially powerful, which takes a short cut to the comparison (the man is a bear). Then there is allegory, which can be viewed as a special form of metaphor.

John Holcombe writes about metaphor in an article posted on the Internet (www.textetc.com/theory): 'metaphors are not simply literary devices, but something active in experience, perhaps even the basis of language' (Holcombe, 2006: online, unnumbered) He puts a case for metaphors assisting in the organisation and expression of experience, as well as in the construction of alternative realities, when he says '... metaphors organise our experience, uniquely express that experience and create convincing realities' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered). And he relates all this to poetry, saying '[P]oetry, which uses them instinctively, is following a scientific truth' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered). He quotes Lakoff and Johnson: '[M]etaphors have entailments that organise our experience, uniquely express that experience, and create necessary realities' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered).

Why attempt to understand, through the route of poetry, something about the mechanisms of language and meaning, when investigating the art of design? Poetry, in a concentrated manner, highlights how language relies upon association and the connection of ideas in order to vivify experience and allow the familiar to seem strange, the old to seem new.

The Russian Formalist, Roman Jakobson, presents ideas about poetics that indicate that the poetic can be regarded as consisting of language placed in a self-conscious relationship to itself. In the poetic, language is used in such a way that the sign becomes disconnected from the object. The sign acquires independence and value. It draws attention to itself. It is not used only as a currency of communication. Jakobson describes communication as involving six elements: an addresser, an addressee, a message passing between them, a shared message code, a 'contact' medium of communication and a message 'context'. He proposes, that in a communicative act, one of these may dominate and that when the communication focuses on the message itself, then the poetic function is dominant. In such a case, the words themselves become the foreground.

Something else happens when the poetic function of language is dominant. This is the recalcitrance of the words and images to give up their meaning. 'The work of art can be said to consist of a set of relationships which resists immediate recognition', says Degenaar (1986:69), who adds:

The meaning of a poem is not on the face of the poem. It requires a journey of discovery. The structuralists would say it is typical of poetic language to resist understanding in terms of what is obvious. 'The poem must resist intelligence/Almost

successfully', says Wallace Stevens; and its distinctiveness lies in the resistance: not necessarily the resistance of obscurity, but at least the resistance of patterns and forms whose semantic relevance is not immediately obvious (Culler 1975:178-179) quoted by Degenaar, 1986:69).

It is the setting up of patterns and forms: visual, verbal, tactile and other, that is the task of the artist working with text. When it is done successfully, as happens in good poetry, the text resists intelligence almost successfully and the forms are such that semantic relevance is not immediately obvious. The best artists and designers are, in a sense, poets.

The theory of poetry is useful in understanding the sorts of meaning-making that confront creative individuals. Understanding how poetry uses images, in order to create equivalences is useful. Consider structuralism's study of the metaphorical and the metonymic. Both the metaphoric and the metonymic create equivalences. Eagleton explains that what happens when language is used poetically is that 'we pay attention to 'equivalences' in the process of combining words together as well as in selecting them: we string together words which are semantically or rhythmically or phonetically or in some other way equivalent' (1983:99). He expands upon this by saying:

... poetry similarity is superinduced upon contiguity: words are not just strung together for the sake of the thoughts they convey, as in ordinary speech, but with an eye to the patterns of similarity, opposition, parallelism and so on created by their sound, meaning, rhythm and connotations. (Eagleton, 1983: 99)

Direct and Indirect Reference

More than ordinary language, poetic language acknowledges that our experience of reality has, as Johan Degenaar expresses it in *Art and the Meaning of Life*, 'a rich texture, which cannot be exhausted by direct reference' (1986:73). This leads to the devices of indirect reference through the detour of language (1986:73). Metaphor is an ideal vehicle for indirect reference. Like our experience of reality which has a rich texture that is inexhaustible, images can be used in art in such a way as to build a richly textured language of reference and cross reference, direct reference and indirect reference. This rich layering of language is the familiar territory of poetry and of art and design where they adopt the methods of poetry and so become another form of the poetic text.

Meaning inseparable from form is what characterises a good poem and makes a good artist's book. Consider the following example of an artist's book by Mira Schor:

The Book of Pages

Here the meaning becomes impregnated into the stuff of the book's construction. Private ritual and ceremony become vehicles of psychic transformation (Drucker 1995:103). The making of the book becomes a form of ritual and fetishist activity (Drucker 1995:103). The pages are dark and discoloured in places and the text at times becomes illegible or is deliberately blotted out with white paint. The quality of the rice paper from which the book is constructed allows a bleed-through transparency to occur. The edges of the pages are weathered and frayed. In places the book gives the impression of partly coming apart, with pages half adrift. The entire book (written text and material construction and appearance) carries auratic signals of the inner distress of the author (Drucker 1995:103).

Another work, already described, where the integration of materials and meaning is also very evident is in *Fragments of an Interior* by Victoria Edwards. Here the colour and texture of the paper become a metaphor for skin and blood. The text of the poem appears to be inscribed on the body itself. Metaphor is used as a vehicle for indirect reference.

Concluding Remarks

The theory of language in general and poetry in particular can throw a good deal of light upon what constitutes powerful and effective texts, powerful and effective design. The principles outlined in the paper are, metaphorically, a universal grammar for creativity.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS USED IN PRESENTATION

Figure 1: Greg Daville, *Double Glazing the Large Glass* (1993). Hove: Jesus, Me and Satan. NAL collection.

Figure 2: John Eric Broaddus, *Above the Trees: a short novel* (1985). Unique work. Two volumes (93,93p.) 23cm. NAL collection.

Figure 3: Chen, Julie and Mc Dewitt, *Octopus*. 1992. Flying Fish Press, Berkley, CA. Edition of 100 copies, 1 volume. 27X35 cm. NAL collection

Figure 4: Victoria Edwards, *Fragments of an Interior* (1991). London: the artist. 27cm, in a box. Edition of 10 copies. NAL collection.

Figure 5: Ken Campbell, *Father's Garden* (1989). [Oxford?]: the artist. 33cm. Edition of 50 copies. NAL collection

Figure 6: Ron King, *Turn Over Darling*, (1990). (Drucker, 1995: 176.)

Figure 7: Gregory Green, *The Book Bomb* (c.1976). Springfield. NAL collection.

Figure 8: Anne Graaff, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection

Figure 9: Sophie Artemis, *Primer* (English and Hindi) (1992). London: unique work. Two volumes, 25cm. NAL collection.

Figure 10: Mira Schor, *The Book of Pages* (1976). (Drucker, 1995:103.)

BRIEF CV

Anne Graaff has recently completed a MA in Fine Art at the University of Stellenbosch. Her research paper was on the subject of artist's books and included an investigation of their relationship to the language of poetry. For many years she was an art educator and taught at the Frank Joubert Art Centre in Cape Town. She is also a Penguin author of two books about Outsider Art. She lives in Cape Town and in Paris and practises as an artist.

