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Jessica Barness
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guest editors

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Book Art: a Critical Remix of *The Electric Information Age Book*

Steven McCarthy

Abstract

Operating under the theoretical frameworks of 'remediation,' 'recontextualization,' and 'critical design,' this project, titled *Book Art The Information Electric Age,* proposes an alternative method to standard book reviews and to notions of publishing. It is a critical book review with a supporting essay that includes an in-depth description of the author's hybrid digital-analog process. *Book Art* is a critical remix of *The Electric Information Age Book: McLuhan/Agel/Fiore and the Experimental Paperback* by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Adam Michaels, with cameo appearances by *The Medium is the Massage. Book Art* uses collage to reconfigure and re-imagine these books as a commentary on mediation, information, expression, communication, and authorship.

Book Art is freely available as a PDF download at
http://faculty.design.umn.edu/mccarthy/BookArt-aCriticalRemix-McCarthy.pdf

Printed copies of *Book Art* may be purchased online at
http://www.lulu.com/shop/steven-mccarthy/book-art-a-critical-remix/paperback/product-22375643.html

Keywords: authorship, book review, collage, critical design, remix

'Copy. Paste. Undo. Save as...' Digitization has fundamentally changed writing and graphic design by making both activities increasingly synthetic and malleable. The iterative process that these discursive methods embrace is fractal-like, with versions repeating in seemingly infinite ways. Instead of a typically linear progression from writer to designer to publisher to reader, texts and images — inclusive of their shared literal and visual properties — can be thought of as instantiations in an ongoing, communicative performance.

Even when a work has been made manifest in the analog world (say, a printed book), it offers itself as fodder in a digital or analog remix through scanning, sampling, and a material unbundling of the original. Consider this action as opportunity for both remediation, when new technology repurposes its forebears (Bolter and Grusin, 2000), and recontextualization, whereby uncreative "patchwriting" and digital parsing establish that "context is the new content" (Goldsmith 2011, p. 3).

The Electric Information Age Book: McLuhan/Agel/Fiore and the Experimental Paperback by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Adam Michaels is an example of this dual phenomenon. Their book discusses *The Medium is the Massage,* the seminal collaboration between media theorist and writer Marshall McLuhan, graphic designer Quentin Fiore, and producer and editor Jerome Agel: "co-ordinated by Jerome Agel" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, back cover) as well as other experimental paperback books from the 1960s and '70s.

The Electric Information Age Book (*TEIAB*) does not simply show examples of *The Medium is the Massage* and other works by the trio, it channels them. A number of full-page spreads are faithfully copied at 100% scale; similar indexical and rhetorical devices are used; self-referential asides abound. It presents itself less as critic and more as progeny, and in this regard succeeds conceptually and graphically.

The spreads depicted here are from *Book Art The Information Electric Age*, a critical remix that uses collage to reconfigure and re-imagine *The Electric Information Age Book* as a commentary on mediation, information, expression, communication, and authorship. *Book Art* also includes a number of images and texts from *The Medium is the Massage,* itself repurposed visually, stylistically, and conceptually through Schnapp and Michaels' book. The remix is an attempt to arrive at an alternative understanding of *TEIAB* and *Massage* through an unconventional, albeit relevant, process.

Collage (inclusive of photomontage and assemblage) is both an additive and subtractive process. Through juxtaposing elements from different sources or by rearranging elements within a single source, collage subverts originals — both in form and in content.

Two works served as collage-book precedents for *Book Art*; one offered literary, rhetorical, and graphical inspiration; and the other showed how analog-digital text-collage could be used as an essential part of critical writing. One book used conventional collage — cutting and pasting pieces of printed paper, while the other employed its digital parallel — scanning, sampling, and layering.
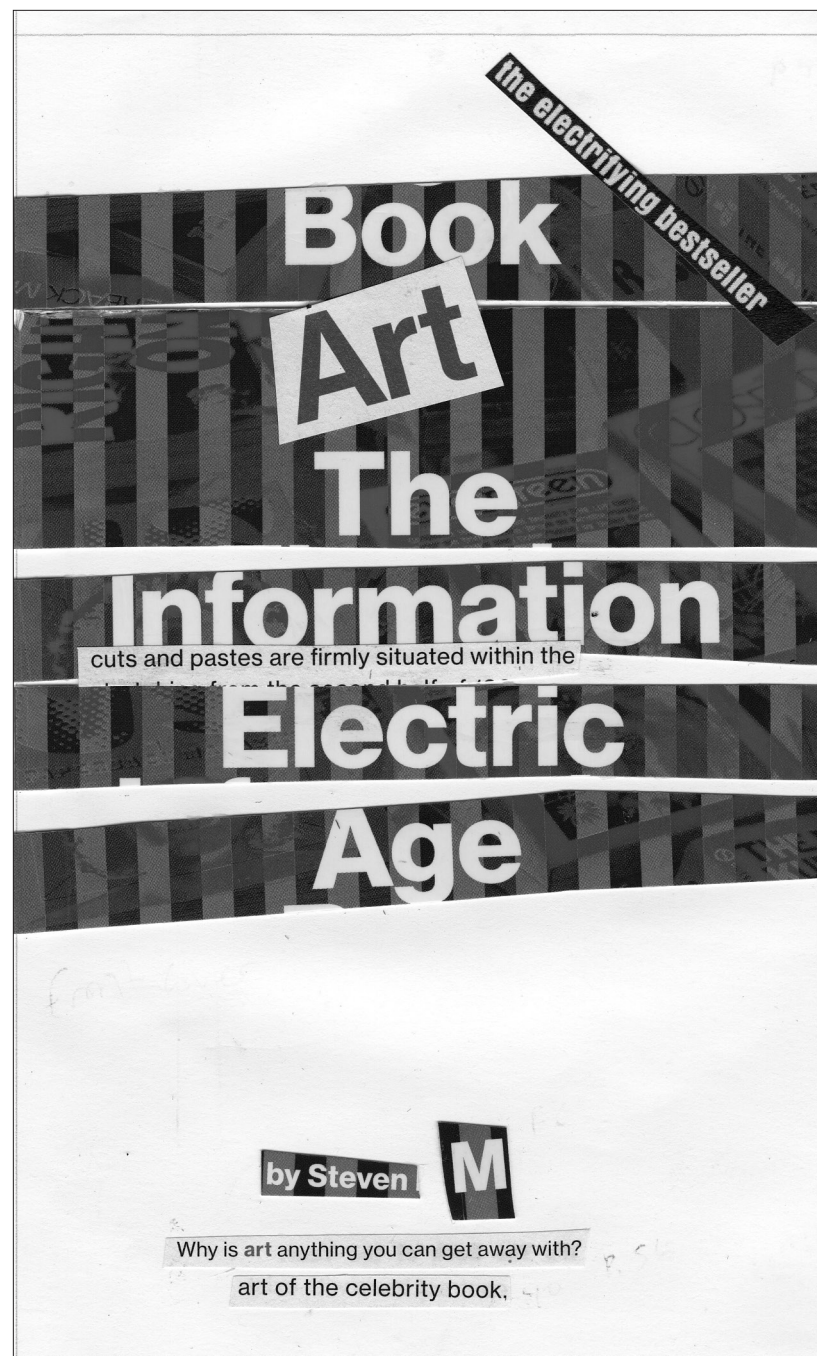
Book Art The Information Electric Age (front cover)

Graham Rawle's novel, *Woman's World*, hand-collaged from 40,000 snippets of text from 1960's British women's magazines, has a rich graphic texture while honoring the linear reading required of a coherent story (Rawle, 2005a). In *Woman's World*, Rawle's writing drove his collage decisions; he states, "In my first experiments… I allowed the found text to determine the direction of the narrative, but the writing quickly veered out of control. To tell a properly structured story, I realized I would need to put the collage method to one side and write my book in the conventional way, as a word-processed document" (Rawle, para. 2, 2005b).

The second influence, a critical examination of three books, exists in Anne Burdick's design of the MIT MediaWorks 'pamphlet' *Writing Machines* by N. Katherine Hayles (Hayles, 2002). Burdick weaves text passages clipped from the source (apparently scanned from the original printed books) into her page layouts of Hayles' text. While the texts are different materially and graphically, their overall syntax adheres to standard English. Even while it is obvious that the text was 'sampled,' it behaves in a coherent manner. Burdick "also 'bulges' passages of text for emphasis; this effect questions the page as a material surface for writing and activates the gap between writer and reader" (McCarthy, 2013, p. 55).

Book Art differs from *Woman's World* in that the writing was entirely inspired by, and based on, the texts and images found in *TEIAB* and *Massage*. Chance and juxtaposition pre-determined authorial intentionality, so no script was followed. A concept about using collage to create a critical book review was the author's guide.

Unlike *Writing Machines,* which wove the collaged elements into Hayles' scholarly text primarily for their literary properties, *Book Art*'s approach is more visual and non-linear. It is part Punk, part Fluxus. Simultaneously using quantitative parsing and qualitative criticality, *Book Art* critiques through visual form and literary and pictorial content.

Some of the dominant themes in *TEIAB* — repetition, self-awareness, collaboration, humor, and experimentation — were considered when aggregating the words, pictures, and excerpts of text that would illustrate these ideas. *TEIAB* is not just an historical explanation of *Massage*, but a homage to it and, to a considerable degree, a reenactment of the book and its genre. The author's intention was to continue this trajectory as a critical commentary on publishing, literary and design criticism, and design authorship.

Book Art literally repurposes *TEIAB* and *Massage* by cutting them up and pasting them into a new work, one possible interpretation of remediation as defined by Bolter and Grusin, which can include a reverse trajectory from digital to analog, from new to old. As *Book Art* leverages unique artistic production (individual creation), mass reproduction (unlimited cheap paperback books), and reader-ordered digital publication (on-demand PDF file), perhaps it does subsume the *Massage* era while commenting on and leveraging present media. Unlike the remediation of Issuu.com, a digital publishing platform that replicates books online with tropes like page turns and gutter shadows, *Book Art* embraces a digital-analog hybridity.

Theories like Goldsmith's, the uncreative parsing enabled by digital tools and processes that mine data devoid of human aestheticism to reveal alternative patterns and meta behaviors, were influential to the creation of *Book Art*. In contrast to machine filters, however, human parsing is subjective based on one's humanity. Some collage elements were aggregated based solely on their material properties: the bold blue type within *TEIAB*'s text, for example; but when gluing them down, the author kept finding opportunities for poetry or parody. Furthermore, the objectivity of authorial intervention is inherently suspect if founded on the shoulders of Schnapp and Michaels, and on those of McLuhan, Fiore and Agel, themselves subjectively authorial.

Book Art uses on-demand digital printing, both to participate in the "thin paperback books" (Heller, S. in Schnapp and Michaels, 2012. p. 13) genre that *TEIAB* and *Massage* so successfully exploit, and to leverage the benefits of digital production when appropriate. Lulu.com offers the relative best of both worlds: professional-grade production comparable to mass manufactured offset printing, and limited edition printing inherent to the world of craft book production. The per unit cost for *Book Art* is less than $5 for a perfect bound pocketbook in four color process, printed when ordered. At 74 pages, it is thinner than *Massage* (160 pages) and much thinner than *TEIAB* (240 pages).

Prior to printing, a master paste-up template that mimicked the 'mechanical boards' typical of graphic arts production in the pre-digital design era was created as a canvas for the *Book Art* collages. 'Non-photo blue' guidelines (an invisible color to the era's high contrast photostat cameras) and black crop marks were rendered. This faux mechanical board's live area was 6.875 x 8.5″, the same size as a Lulu pocketbook two-page spread, which matches the sizes of *TEIAB* and *Massage*. Ironically, these anachronistic templates were created in InDesign and printed on an ink jet printer.

The collages were created in spreads and in multiple page sequences, as one can imagine Fiore and Michaels working, gluing things down incrementally, and adding related elements as they were found. These elements, words, lines, passages, pictures and fragments, were mostly cut out and occasionally torn.

Besides the paper templates, tools consisted of an X-Acto knife, a Uhu glue stick, a pencil, and scissors. There are 321 individually applied collage elements in *Book Art*, some two page spreads taken verbatim and others a single word on a piece of paper one-half by one-eighth inch.

These were the self-imposed rules of production: only the words and pictures from *TEIAB* and *Massage* would be used to 'write' and 'illustrate' the book, every snippet would be cited to its source, and work would be performed at 100% scale directly from the original. No attempt was made to clean up the spreads after they were scanned: erasure marks, glue residue, creases, and the mechanical board guidelines remain as evidence of a hands-on process.

researcher as much as designer.

Fiore's design

Fiore's account may be taken as authoritative:

"Authorship"—in the sense we know it today

Agency

"I didn't write anything for that book,"

"McLuhan, Fiore Write on

Produced by
Jerome Agel

EDITED BY JEROME AGEL

Produced by
JEROME AGEL

PRODUCED BY JEROME AGEL

**Co-ordinated by
Jerome Agel**

*Book Art The Information
Electric Age* (select spread)

"OK, WHAT'S THE MESS AGE?"

TEIAB p.151

an irreverent mix.[17]

TEIAB p.42

cuts and pastes. the razzle-dazzle of

TEIAB p.197

A Synergistic Collage

TEIAB p.153

into the mix. In some cases,

TEIAB p.42

TMITM p.118

you
you
you
you
you

your Case
your
your

TEIAB p.91

TEIAB p.192

Jerome Agel

Adam Michaels

MARSHALL McLUHAN

Quentin Fiore

Jeffrey T. Schnapp

TEIAB p.38

TEIAB p.5

TEIAB p.51

TEIAB p.14

TEIAB p.5

TEIAB pp.52–53

All three TEIAB p.229

Book Art The Information Electric Age (select spread)

TEIAB
p.8

8

(nein

anh

TEIAB
p.36

TEIAB
p.10

10

11

TEIAB
p.11

TEIAB
p.96

100

TEIAB
p.98

106

Alex
was
ou

TEIAB
p.100

100

TEIAB
p.153

ORIGINAL $1.95

$1.50

TEIAB
p.161

TEIAB
p.100

(feedback loop)   ditto

TEIAB
p.118

In this solo Kahn-Kahn by the one-man megaton

TEIAB
p.166

a horse's head hovers

TEIAB
p.196

worthy of a radical rag with

TEIAB
p.44

TEIAB
p.44

overground and underground

how the human sensorium is stretched,
stressed, and shaped by the new age.

TEIAB
p.86

TEIAB
p.37

caressing every craggy cranny of

casting his collaborator in a convenient

TEIAB
p.69

the marketing tools of the
movie industry were mobilized to build a market.
A mysterious ad

TEIAB
p.37

Agel's agile use

TEIAB
p.38

TEIAB
p.239

Jeffrey T. Schnapp

writes

TEIAB
p.36

*Book Art The Information
Electric Age* (select spread)

Dear Mr. Lakein: I am three and
one-half years old. You're right.

Dear Mr. Kubrick:
I am three and one-half years old.
You're right!

[*Name withheld on parents' request*]
Champlain, New York

Dear Mr. Schnapp: I am three and
one-half years old. You're right.

[name withheld at the
parents' request]
Champlain, New York

Dear Mr. Agel: I am three and
one-half years old. You're right.

Dear Mr. Kahn: I am three and
one-half years old. You're right.

30

Dear Mr. Agel: I am three and
one-half years old. You're right.

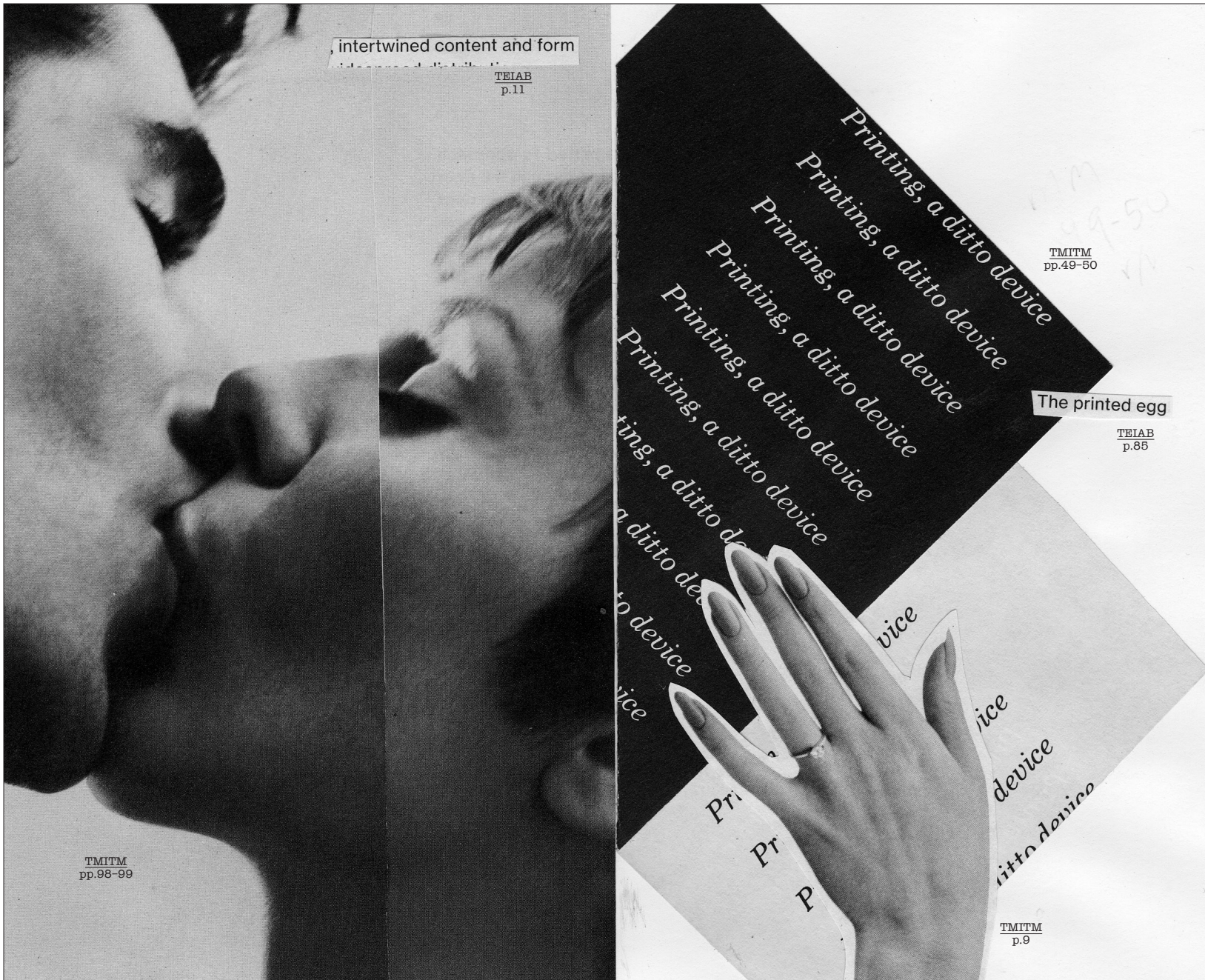[name withheld at the parents'
request]
Champlain, New York

recursive patterns whose syntax is continuously

*Book Art The Information
Electric Age* (select spread)

Book Art The Information Electric Age (select spread)

a single total book: TEIAB p.30

Book of the Now: TEIAB p.30

even philosophical works will pre-
sumably use the same means, TEIAB p.31

TEIAB p.31

the flexible, elastic, photo-driven medium   of the future.

TEIAB p.31

new age of advertising,
the   modern magazine,
TEIAB   photo chronicle.
p.31

forge a new verbal-visual vernacular. TEIAB p.32

TEIAB p.33

a simplified universal grammar   of cuts and pastes.

"not intended only for professionals…but made
instead for the general public." TEIAB p.34

the playful interlacing of argu-
ments made typographically in the text's main narra-
tive with arguments developed through image-caption
sequences. TEIAB p.35

TEIAB p.36

documentary books

"The photographs are not illustrative,"
"They, and the text, are coequal, mutually
independent, and fully collaborative."[7]
TEIAB p.36

to transfigure a mass of particu-
lars into a mass epic and mosaic composed
of the everyday TEIAB p.37

TEIAB p.131

TEIAB   black TEIAB
inside back cover   p.128

read
TEIAB   Blau
p.58   TEIAB
p.217

*Book Art The Information
Electric Age* (select spread)

the

cut-and-paste

BOOK

razor in hand:

vulgar-successful graphics-design

A success or a failure?

Book Art The Information Electric Age (select spread)

threw these books into sharp relief.
TEIAB p.10

TEIAB p.38 — TEIAB p.15 — TEIAB p.14 — TEIAB p.27 — TEIAB p.55 — TEIAB p.41 — TEIAB p.37 — TEIAB p.14 — TEIAB p.39

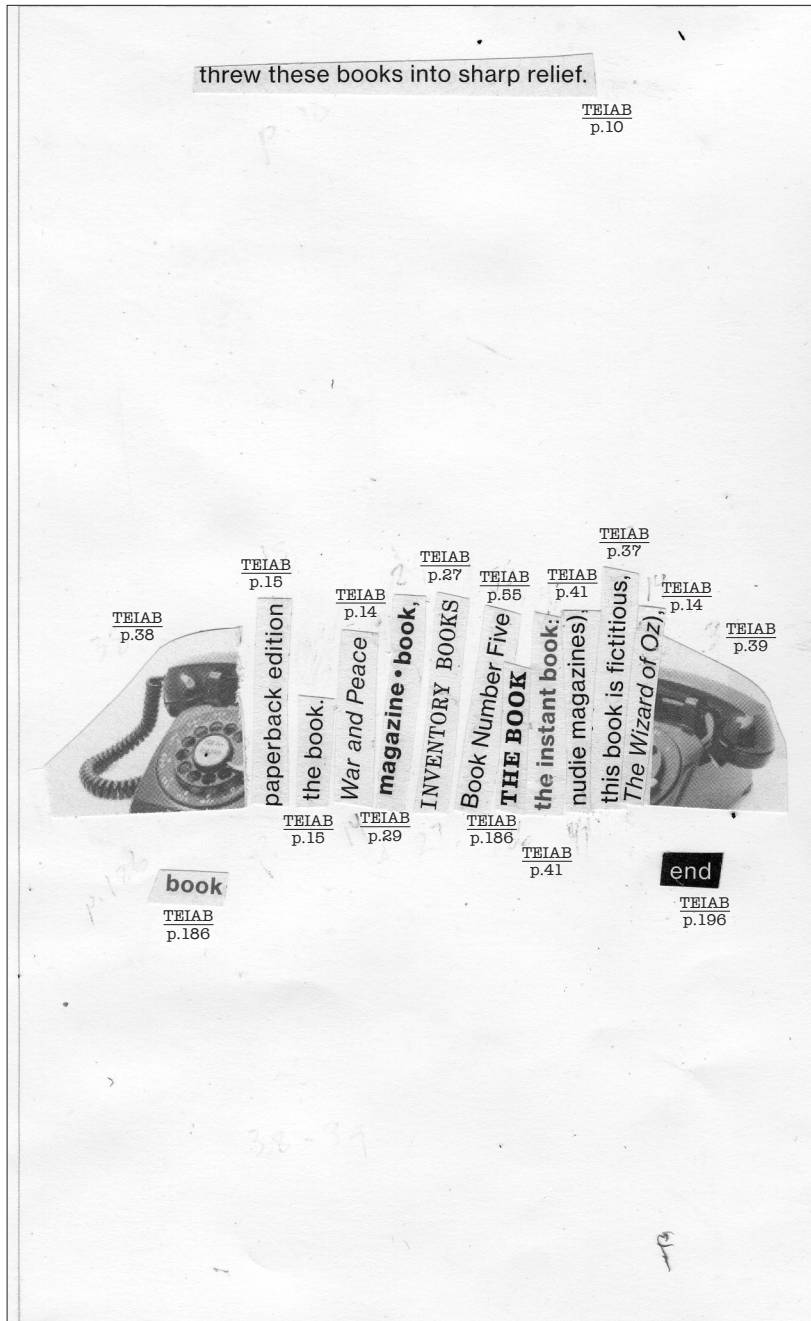paperback edition / the book. / War and Peace / magazine • book, / INVENTORY BOOKS / Book Number Five / THE BOOK / the instant book: / nudie magazines, / this book is fictitious, / The Wizard of Oz)

TEIAB p.15 — TEIAB p.29 — TEIAB p.186 — TEIAB p.41

book
TEIAB p.186

end
TEIAB p.196

Book Art The Information Electric Age (back cover)

The spirit of both *TEIAB* and *Massage* would be embraced by being experimental graphically, being irreverent of canon while respectful of new theory, and by being aware of the media implications of the book. The evolution of design authorship, as manifest in both books, makes the subject and process of both paperbacks highly compelling. The blurred and inverted roles, the unconventional processes, the symbiosis of form and content, the high degree of personal agency — all combine to make *TEIAB* and *Massage* memorable, and now, inextricably linked to, and through, *Book Art*.

Because both books were cut up, second copies were on hand to reference intact page numbers, to check a page's verso to ensure that something better on the opposite side was not erroneously cut, and, of course, to preserve the book for posterity in the author's personal library. In the digital realm, cutting and pasting rarely sacrifices the original — it is all additive. Working materially with knife and glue involves commitment, consumption, and loss.

It is likely that only *Massage* had a solely analog life: typewritten manuscript, Xerox mock-ups, darkroom chemistry photography, photostatic reproduction, mechanical boards for paste-up, galleys of photo-type, hot wax adhesion, non-photo blue guidelines, film overlays for separations, pre-press stripping, and other pre-digital methods. Although eventually an offset printed book, *TEIAB* was likely 'born digital': online searches, word processing, digital scans, page layout and image manipulation software, digital type, desktop printed proofs, emailed electronic files, and so on. *Book Art* is a hybrid: computer generated templates, hand-made collages, flatbed scanned TIFF files placed into InDesign, typeset citations, and a PDF file that was exported and uploaded to Lulu. Readers will have a choice between an electronic file and a printed book.

Unlike using digital tools to parse a text in Microsoft Word (searching, changing, etc.), all the words and phases used in *Book Art* were found through visual and spatial perception. The collaged syntax grew organically, as words were often found that added humor or unexpected insight to the commentary. For example, the author couldn't find the word "blue" to label a swatch of *TEIAB*'s secondary color; a workable solution was found, however, in borrowing the first half of essayist Andrew Blauvelt's last name, the German word for blue. Even if there were the ability to digitally search *TEIAB*'s text, some words would remain unfound; "brain-picker" was part of an image readable to the human eye but buried in the data of a gray scale image file (Schnapp and Michaels, 2012, p. 65).

With content from the *Massage* book, an additional collage technique was utilized: some pages were folded before adhering, simultaneously revealing recto and verso sides. This enabled the author to show two partial pages at once, demonstrating how Fiore would sequence words and pictures for maximum cinematic effect. The single fold created a triangular front-back shape that, besides serving as a dynamic pointing element, challenged the 'material surface for writing.'

Book Art belongs to a third generation with genetic ties to both parent and grandparent while going off in a new direction behaviorally (the paperback equivalent of a rogue grandchild). "Behaviorally" is stated to denote the serendipity and intentionality of the collaged design. A digital interpretation of behavior suggests the unintentional errors (or artistically intentional) that occur through digitally glitched artifacts, which are perhaps analogous to genetic mutations.

This approach is validated by *TEIAB* author Jeffrey Schnapp's remarks in a *Design and Culture* journal interview. "Critically and creatively excavating the genealogy of pre-digital experiments with interactivity seems to me a rich avenue for establishing freshly textured models of interaction with books. Remediating print culture is one of the great tasks of the digital era." (Guffey, Michaels and Schnapp, 2014, p. 101) The sentence presciently sums up the rationale for *Book Art*; even the verb "excavating" references the physical nature of 'mining' a text with scissors and knife.

Book Art comments on Jeffery T. Schnapp's writing (a page dedicated to Schnapp's penchant for alliteration, another to the recurring letter from a three-year old child, one of which is addressed to "Mr. Schnapp"), and on Adam Michael's design (typographic hierarchy, cinematic pacing, references to books' structural properties like margins, gutters, folios and the fore-edge). It also addresses both *TEIAB* and *Massage*'s concerns about time and space, and the way *TEIAB* channels *Massage* through strategies like copying, repeating, repurposing, and parodying.

One reproduction common to all three books, and indicative of repurposing as performance, is the spread from *Massage* showing a close up of a human eye; this image is also reproduced in the book *Design Writing Research* by Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller (1996). As analog reproductions, the image quality suffers a bit with each copy. *Book Art*'s version adds the collaged caption, "create… *iconic* double-spreads," (McCarthy, 2015, unpaginated [Italics in original quote]) as a commentary on the idea of becoming iconic, even memetic, through constant reproduction.

Schnapp admits that he and Michaels "…sought to 'contaminate' the style of our book with its objects of study, at once playfully and critically echoing, reworking and remixing features of what we call 'inventory' books." He continues, "…there are layers of ironizing and even pastiche" (Guffey, Michaels and Schnapp, 2014, p. 93).

Book Art attempts to take this notion further — more contaminated, more playful, an inventory of *de*fects, and pastiche galore! — using snippets from *TEIAB* to justify its own existence. "Might this *process*-centered understanding of the book not be a plausible, even compelling, interpretation?!" and "GrAnd son of *Massage*… As a book that proves it own point, as an example of itself" (McCarthy, 2015, unpaginated [italics in original quotes]).

Book Art participates in the mode of making referred to as 'critical design.' Critically designed messages and "objects may function in the traditional sense, but their main goal is to contribute to the field's discourse as polemical actors" (McCarthy, 2013, p. 25). While some critically oriented designers, "have distanced themselves from today's commercial design world, they sometimes use its mechanisms to pose

questions about technological, social, and ethical questions. Their ambivalent, critical position towards design and the spirited, playful form language used to express this is a constant theme…" (Z33, 2007).

Even the full title, *Book Art The Information Electric Age*, a remix of *The Electric Information Age Book* with the insertion of the word "art" (appropriated from Steven Heller's introductory essay), asserts its tongue-in-cheek subjectivity. In this context, it signifies that a single author's contrarian artistic expression and poetic commentary, self-published, makes a valid a contribution to the humanities, digital or analog. Another reference is to the 'book arts' or 'artist's books' genre, an art form that uses books' visual, textual, material, temporal, and spatial qualities for expression.

Book Art is not a book review in the traditional sense, although its approach can be simultaneously interpreted as critical, complimentary, celebratory, and participatory. It seeks to contribute to the critical discourse on the objects, processes, and systems in visual and literary language.

The book *Post-Digital Print* aptly describes the efforts of *Book Art*, "It may be worth envisioning a kind of 'print sampling,' comparable to sampling in music and video, where customized content (either anthologies or new works) can be created from past works. Such a 'remix' publishing strategy could create new cultural opportunities, and open up new 'processual' publishing practices" (Ludovico, 2013, p. 156). Even publication here in *Visible Language*, at 100% scale and with gutters aligned, can be seen as a fourth generation "processual" publication.

As a final nod to publishing and reproduction in the digital age, *Book Art* is released under a Creative Commons Attribution license. While firmly protected under the Fair Use clause of the U.S. Copyright Act as a derivative work (*and* a work of commentary), the author wishes to acknowledge the channeling of others' content.

Book Art invites other designer-critics to remix it digitally from the PDF or collaged from the print version. Of course, the process can be applied to any book: cut up, re-arrange, re-publish. 'Processual' publishing practices can redefine what it means to 'review' a book.

The quote, "All human progress is the result of standing on the shoulders of our predecessors" (Schnapp and Michaels, 2012, p. 97), is featured over a full bleed, two-page spread photograph of what appears to be a prototype of an armored personnel carrier crushing an automobile, and is a 100% scale reproduction from pages 100–101 of McLuhan, Fiore and Agel's *War and Peace in the Global Village*.

Book Art The Information Electric Age offers its shoulders to the global village. It is advised that any strain to its shoulders — being a very thin paperback book — should be followed by a text massage.

About the Author

Steven McCarthy (MFA Stanford University) is a professor of graphic design at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus. His long-standing interest in design authorship, as scholar and practitioner, has led to publications, presentations, exhibits and grant-supported research in a dozen countries. His book on the topic, *The Designer As... Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator and Collaborator: New Models for Communicating* was published in 2013 by BIS Publishers, Amsterdam. McCarthy is currently serving a three year term on the board of the Minnesota Center for Book Arts. *http://faculty.design.umn.edu/mccarthy/index.html*

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