



This is ~~Not~~ a Book:  
Melting Across Bounds

Gretchen E. Henderson  
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# THIS IS NOT A BOOK: MELTING ACROSS BOUNDS

Gretchen E. Henderson

This is a shortened version of the keynote address for the Five Colleges symposium on “Non-Visible and Intangible: Artists Books Respond to E-Books” at Hampshire College on November 8, 2012. To learn more about the exhibition and other works discussed in this article, scan each QR code with a mobile device.



In Clarice Lispector’s novel of metamorphosis titled *The Passion According to G.H.*, she begins with a note: “This is a book just like any other book. But I would be happy if it were read only by people . . . who know that an approach—to anything whatsoever . . . must traverse even the very opposite of what is being

approached.”<sup>1</sup> When we see or feel a book—whether an artist book, an e-book, any other book—what assumptions do we bring to that object? To that four-letter word *b-o-o-k*? Most of us likely can agree on the look of a book “just like any other book,” to borrow Lispector’s words, but to what lengths might we go to suspend our disbelief of what a book is? No antonyms for *book* exist in the thesaurus (except in verb form: *to bow out or cancel, exonerate, free, let go*), which steers me back to the verb: *to charge, take into custody, schedule, reserve*.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, to book (v.) the book (n.) is to arrest said object in time, to stall its potential evolution. “Not-books” provide an abstraction that illuminates what a book is through a process of elimination. A book is not a supersonic jet, a Pentium chip, or a pipe painted by René Magritte. But what is not a book?

In her recent “biography” *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology*, Nicole Howard writes that books “may not immediately strike a parallel with more familiar technologies. Hundreds of pages sewn together, bearing printed or handwritten material, hardly compares to supersonic jets and Pentium chips. But in fact, no other technology in human history has had the impact of this invention. Indeed, the book is the one technology that has made all the others possible, by recording and storing information and ideas indefinitely in a convenient and readily accessible place.”<sup>3</sup> If we start from the premise that the book is not booked, that it is not arrested as an artifact but also functions as a technology, an art, and mutable medium, then we see that books bear a kinetics evolving across time. The book’s clockwork may seem harder to pick apart than a watch, but there is something essential that makes the book tick, that has made it function as a portable storage system of information, as an interactive storytelling device, as a poetics of space, as both a product and process for cultivating and questioning literacies and knowledge systems, and so much more, for hundreds of years. The book nests in our psyches as a potent and potential metaphor, animate enough to stir cry upon cry of its impending death, while being very much alive and ticking. We live surrounded by and connected to so many different kinds of books that, in a sense, each deviation calls attention back to some vibrating Ur-object that may not even exist: non-tangible and invisible. A kind of phantom book.

This phantom Ur-book haunts any object that calls itself a book, multiplying its potential with each new incarnation. In *The Century of Artists’ Books*, Johanna Drucker writes:

All media have their metaphoric associations – painting, writing, sculpting, film and video – each conjures tropes in which the activity has a symbolic as well as a pragmatic value. These metaphors attach to the book’s iconic form as well as its cultural significance in so many ways that it is impossible to invoke the book as a form without some of these many phantoms attaching themselves . . . Artists’ books take up these metaphoric associations from the broader cultural function of the book form, often deliberately turning them into self-conscious gestures or even clichés. The rich cultural history of book formats –

from illuminated manuscripts to volumes of pulp fiction – is part of the language available to artists making books while new forms and formats are continually emerging.<sup>4</sup>

This “available” language for artists grows in and out of this shape-shifting history, interfacing with cultural changes, shape-shifting the book in kind. As much as books and their surrogates draw us together, their metaphors play as vital a role in the transition from pulp to pixel, scroll to screen, codex to computer, book to byte, and other alliterative leaps that practitioners and theorists have charted. By studying history, we begin to realize that the book-as-we-think-we-know-it wasn’t always thus. Pick up any rare text and ask: where is the table of contents, or the index, or the copyright page? Is anything missing? How are pagination, chapter breaks, and notes indicated? What is or is not happening in the margins? What markers bear the identity of author versus printer versus editor? How is the book bound? . . . and so many more questions that suggest that books didn’t arise at once or in isolation, but through a dense web of makers and users in a changing world. The farther back in time we go, the more latitude we give ourselves to imagine the future of the book, artistic and otherwise.

Many people reading this have a vital stake in the book: some are book artists or printers, writers, research librarians, cataloguers, theorists, programmers, and more, and all of us in one way or another are readers. To hear each of us speak about our notion of the book, individually, might mimic the Indian tale about the blind men and the elephant, where each person touched a different part of the animal—a tusk, a trunk, a tail—and came away with a different impression of what an elephant is. Without listening to the others, we have a diminished and even erroneous sense of the whole. Disparate disciplines engage with the book, from chemists who work with conservators to determine the properties of vellum or paper, to engineers who work with art historians to compare the mechanics of volvelles and moveable parts to more recent interactive features, to media theorists who place the digital revolution in terms of earlier breakthroughs in print culture, to rare book librarians who invite creative writing students to interact with unique materials and remix them in postmodern twists, to programmers and publishers who harness new technologies to extend the materiality of the book. All of these engagements and more don’t take us farther away from the book but rather magnetize us toward its kinetic core. Like the fabled men touching the elephant, we too are groping around some larger organism that no one of us entirely comprehends. By sharing and questioning together, we can imagine bridges between our perspectives and experiences and skills, between the past and future of the book – through the artists’ book – whose material form grows out and back into its content, engaging textual and visual literacies, mutually interacting to activate the book as a site of artistic practice. Artists’ books in some ways perform the book, reenacting while reimagining its inherited form.

To speak about artists’ book in the age of e-books, while keeping with the spirit of exploring what is *not* a book, I want to expand upon some of the inherent questions by focusing on one underlying question—What *is* a book?—asked through an artist’s book in the “Pulp to Pixels” exhibition that uses that very question as its title. *What is a book?* (minus the letter “a”) is part of the publishing venture of the artist, Paul Chan, called *Badlands Unlimited*. This artist’s book consists of a limited hard copy edition of one (that sells for \$500, along with two artist proofs), an unlimited e-book edition (for \$1.99), or a free downloadable PDF. Made from loose sheets of hardcover books overprinted with text and images, the undone source-books were re-bound into material and virtual book forms. Founded in 2010, *Badlands Unlimited* describes its mission: “*Badlands Unlimited* publishes e-books, limited edition paper books, and artist works in digital and print forms. Historical distinctions between books, files, and artworks are *dissolving* rapidly. We publish and produce new works by artists and writers that embody the spirit of this emerging *dissolution*.”<sup>5</sup> The words “dissolving” and “dissolution” might suggest that the book once was a



solution, an answer, or at least, something solid. *What is a Book?* is far from an answer, self-proclaimed question, part of a series of questions, leaking across material and virtual bounds.

To swipe through the eighty page virtual book is to tangibly skim a number of traditions and invite a wide array of associations across book history and varying marriages of text and image. The multi-directional text disorients a reader while accumulating quoted textual snippets of narrative about print history. As *What is a Book?* centrifugally focuses on its central question, we see that Chan is undertaking something perhaps more

reflective than radical, drawing attention to what is and has been manifesting as a malleable medium across time. *What is a Book?* focuses our attention on the evolving kinetics of this medium, as Chan defines a “book” as “a space for a particular form of attention as much as it is a thing one holds and reads.”<sup>6</sup> It accounts for a page-to-page experience, a kind of rhythm for the “body as a reader,” to enable “a full-bodied experience attenuated by a particular kind of focus” with “time as a medium.” The book thus becomes a space where both maker and reader become extensions of the book, participating in that “zone of activity” beyond which is an equally productive negative space that enables rethinking the book: by what it is not. Not unlike the claim by Clarice Lispector quoted at the beginning of this essay, Chan has said: “Maybe the only way to keep to the spirit of anything is to understand whatever it is, it isn’t it.”<sup>7</sup>

The concept and questions surrounding *What is a Book?* may be more interesting than its deceptively simple form, as it engages the present with the past and future, materially and virtually, like other books displayed in “Pulp to Pixels” whose artists are negotiating and reimagining the bounds of the book. Essentially, the book did not start to dissolve recently. The book has been dissolving for a very long time. In fact, one might say that dissolution is part of the clockwork that makes a book tick—or, to use an analogy more related to dissolution, like ice, we might consider that the book is melting.

In our Information Age, to be distracted away from instant Googled answers to focus on questions is somewhat radical. And as we wrestle with what is and is not a book, we start to feel part of the spirit of this dissolution. As books melt across e-readers to iPads to iPhones, Amazon to Google, from Kindles into the crannies of Nooks, our fixed artifactual sense of the book dissolves but also causes us to pause and question what we believe the book is. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “dissolution” as breaking up, decomposing, diffusing, liquefying, undoing the binding power of.<sup>8</sup> Elements gain the potential to leak, appearing where readers might not expect, forcing us to refocus and become more active than passive readers. Referring to his earlier project *RE: The Operation* (about the Iraqi War), Chan describes his work in terms of leaking, even “[i]n light of Wikileaks . . . as the practice of ‘leaking’ the work beyond the field of its own composition” with “questionable practices,” which he says “are the true breath and flesh of the web . . . leaked . . . smuggled . . . incomplete. And that somehow, by releasing the files online, the forms can become materials for someone else to complete something else.”<sup>9</sup>

Engaged with melting, decomposition, dissolution, dissolving, and sympathetic processes (like deforming, which becomes the logic for my own project, *Galerie de Difformité*), the book as medium starts to make legible and illegible the various cultures surrounding it. Beyond what the bibliographer Don McKenzie has described as the “sociology of texts,” one might even say there’s a possible “anthropology of the book,” as Jason Scott-Warren has proposed, chartable around figures who act as archetypal “keepers of knowledge” or around related artifacts that help us “reconstruct the place of the book in the changing textures of personal, social, and material life.”<sup>10</sup> A whole subgenre of stories centers on books and libraries, by writers ranging from Virginia Woolf to Bruno Schultz to Jorge Luis Borges. In her essay on “Ethnography and the Book That Was Lost,” anthropologist Ruth Behar draws upon a short story by S.Y. Agnon (a Polish Jewish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966) to describe how “the story itself constructs a home for the lost book.”<sup>11</sup> The book represents itself but something more. (By way of contrast, to ask another question, do we hear similar cries about the “death of the phone,” another

object that’s changing rapidly, albeit with a much shorter-lived imprint on our cultural imagination?) Beyond its many metaphors, the book “stands in a metonymy for all of the material circumstances of print culture,” writes the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg, “not just the artifacts it is inscribed in, but the forms and institutions that have shaped its use.”<sup>12</sup>

With so much networked paraphernalia, books may seem lost while reconstructed in varied virtual realms, bearing traces of their makers, readers, translators, cataloguers, dealers, annotators, theorists, and other keepers. The field of book history reconstructs these many relationships in the past, which is not to neglect emerging ethnographic efforts to survey contributions of living technologists, librarians, and others who are playing an active role in handling and shaping the culture of the digital book – no less, leaving human traces along the way. In the case of Google scans, visible fingerprints of human scanners remain on many digital pages. Even in recent months, after Google programmed an algorithm to erase these traces of labor, shadows remain as phantom fingers.

At times, theory and practice seem to grow in and out of each other, less like dissolution, and more like Ouroboros. Rather than run in circles, I want to return to the matter at hand—artists’ books, material and digital—or what might better be described as “matter out of place,” to borrow the words of anthropologist, Mary Douglas. “Matter out of place” is her famed definition of *dirt*.<sup>13</sup> To call books “dirty” may seem more fitting for medieval manuscripts and rare books than e-books or artists’ books, as Kathryn Rudy has measured the darkness of fingerprints and intensity of use and handling in medieval manuscripts.<sup>14</sup> I mean “dirty” in another way. Maybe it’s a stickier matter than melting. The book as-we-think-we-know-it is figuratively viscous. Douglas expands on her theory of dirt: “The viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable, but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible . . . Its stickiness is a trap.”<sup>15</sup> Or, if considered another way: its stickiness demands to be noticed and forces a kind of focus. “Stickiness” actually is a sought quality in web design, games, and other interactive digital projects. As one website defines, “To be sticky, a site needs both content, as well as some form of database or other programming. A web site that can get visitors to stay longer and return often is known as a sticky web site. The stickier you can make your site the better your chances of converting visitors into customers” or consumers.<sup>16</sup>

Many artists’ books are dirty and sticky, I would argue, full of matter out of place. Although we readers don’t physically leave fingerprints on pages of our e-books (if perhaps on the screens of our e-readers), nor do we carry away residue on our hands, there is something sticky about the reading experience. *What is a Book?* requires returning and upturning with its displaced headlines and page numbers, uncited sources, and layered texts and maps and pop photos, demanding to be read at different angles. Its title questions its status as a book, even as the work identifies with that label, tempting readers to look for identifiable book parts (like a table of contents, copyright page, ISBN, chapter headings, page numbers, and other markers)—many of which are there, but not where we expect them. While being oriented to this book through disorientation, from quoted snippets, we glean a mini history of the book—from papyrus scrolls to wax tablets to vellum manuscripts to Gutenberg’s press and beyond, ranging across geographies from Egypt to China to Germany, also across textual and visual literacies. The displaced, layered elements force us to heighten our focus, to filter out the visual noise, as we piece together uncited sources. Given this “matter out of place,” we are left with more questions than answers, with our hands a bit dirty, which is not necessarily a corrupting thing – like the old adage “to get your hands dirty” suggests, getting involved in doing the basic hard work of the work. The closing quoted words of *What is a Book?* speak to this: “[F]aced with a marketplace that attached so little value to modern concepts of intellectual property, authors had little choice but to engage themselves in the production process.”<sup>17</sup>

Our current moment is rife and ripe with discussions of copyright and creative commons, DIY technologies from YouTube to WordPress, to novels that are merging with games in the forms of CD-ROMs and Apps. These and much more become fodder for thinking about future artists’ books. What technologies will stick to the book? What will fall by the wayside or morph and melt into other genres? Is it possible to have a fully digital artists’ book? This will continue to be debated, as much as that tricky apostrophe in the very classification of artists’ books. But what is the future body of the book,

its future bounds? And why all the anxiety about the death of the book, almost as if it were an appendage of our own bodies?

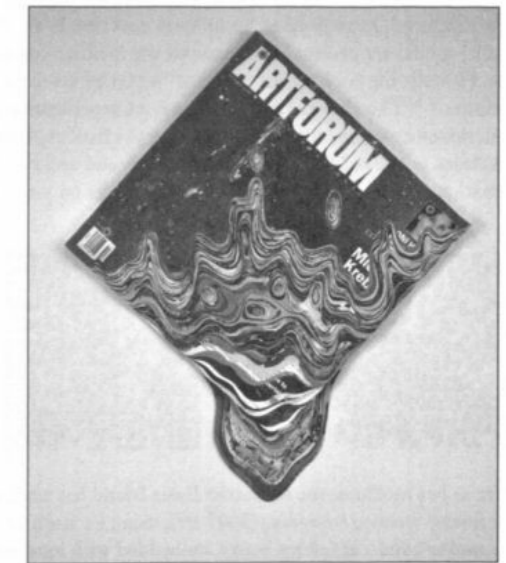
Many artists have analogized the book as a kind of body. Historical anthropomorphic identifications like spines, headers, footnotes, and appendix have aggregated around the book, and a number of book artists have drawn attention to the corpses within this corpus: from Brian Dettmer’s “book autopsies,” to Edith Kollath’s “breathing books,” to Susan Share’s “wearable books,” to Dieter Roth’s *Literaturwurst*—a digestion of the book presaged centuries earlier by depictions of St. John eating the book, also popularized in recent years through “edible book” contests. A number of typographies, like Geoffroy Tory’s *Champ Fleury*, have inscribed the human body within the very bounds of letters. Early books were made with vellum, animal skins, and quite creepily some books have been bound in human skin. Shelley Jackson’s story, “Skin,” is actually tattooed word by word on the bodies of over two-thousand volunteers. History is littered with analogies, including Heinrich Heine’s claim: “Where they burn books, they will burn people.”<sup>18</sup> William Gass has written a “Defense of the Book,” in which he says: “We shall not understand what a book is, and why a book has the value many persons have . . . if we forget how important to it is its body.”<sup>19</sup> This “body” suggests not only the spine, header, and footer of the book itself, but also the writer and reader, and other laborers surrounding the book, whether or not evidenced by traces ranging from publisher and copyright, to marginalia, to library call numbers, to those phantom fingerprints on digital scans. In terms of publishing, Debra DiBlasi (a writer, artist, and publisher of Jaded Ibis Press) recently discussed the “merging of human and machine,” outlining a number of different technologies (from cochlear implants to deep-brain stimulation to Google glasses) that are bringing us toward what she calls an “event horizon . . . transmogrifying into a new species” that indicates the “non-issue of print books over digital books.”<sup>20</sup> She notes increasing interest and acceptance of voice-, gesture-, and brainwave-controlled communication and entertainment. Her central question is: “What will happen to text?” if thought becomes a medium, where narrative is transferred via brain waves, where avatars will be our stories, and then—as she puts it—letting go of the question: “What will happen to us?”

We have no idea what the future of the book holds, artistic and otherwise, but it raises interesting and important questions—not only materially but also metaphorically—about the bounds of our humanity. That is another talk entirely, and romanticizing the book doesn’t allow us to engage with but rather sidestep those questions. Matter out of place and stickiness can seem threatening. When Mary Douglas claimed that “stickiness is a trap,” she went on to write: “it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it.” Beyond iconoclasm or even a new subgenre of horror (with man-eating books or a threat ominous enough to revive a fire brigade the likes of *Fahrenheit 451*), or an enterprise like Frederick Strong’s “The Destruction Room” (a nineteenth-century workshop in London where its founder cut up, arranged, and sold books according to his own classification system), this intent echoes sentiments by many artists, ranging from Picasso to Proust, who suggest that every act of creation is first an act of destruction. Is the book really destroyed? Or to borrow a frequent cry, is the book really dead? Not long ago in the *New York Times*, Leah Price wrote an article drolly titled “Dead Again,” chronicling how “Every generation rewrites the book’s epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit.”<sup>21</sup> She looks backward to Robert Coover’s proclamation two decades ago of “The End of Books,” comparing the threat of hypertext to nineteenth-century newspapers, even back to Gutenberg’s fifteenth-century printing press, which threatened to put scribes out of bookwork.

The better half of a century ago, Walter Benjamin claimed: “We are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance.”<sup>22</sup> Now in this next century, with arguably more melting at work, we live in an age hardly decimated of books: with print or p-books, e-books, digital books, book surrogates, the richest range of artists’ books, bookworks, sculptural books, expanded books, augmented books, miniature books, talking books, living libraries, phantom libraries, edible books, liquid books, encoded books, and a host of related enterprises and explorations. More conceptual visions of the book deviate from expected functions in reconceived forms, inviting and demanding the book to be read in spatial, temporal, even non-textual ways. Other

enterprises make visible the tracks of multiple readers, layering annotations that become stories around the story. Others change across time, rather than staying static, documenting their own change. We live surrounded by and connected to so many different kinds of books that, in a sense, each deviation calls attention back to the once-and-future phantom book that, for some, seems to embody the fate of ourselves.

In the spirit of the book that is melting beyond its bounds, I’d like to close by looking briefly at six recent books by artists who engage the concept of melting in different forms, somehow interfacing with ice. Three actually bear “ice” in their titles: *The Ice Book*, *The Book of Ice*, and *Ice Books*. All in some way are artists’ books, but they vary from an altered book and art journal, to a theatrical pop-up book of cinematic projections, to a commercially-published book by an artist, to a bookwork bordering on installation and land art, to a genetically-engineered book that is a poem encoded in a bacterium.



Francesca Pastine, *Pour Series*, 2011-12



In *Pour Series* (2011-12), Francesca Pastine engages in what she calls “unsolicited collaborations” with print issues of *ArtForum* and their cover artists, excavating the iconic journals so each issue’s pages appear to liquefy, with part of the cover intact and recognizable, appearing to melt.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in *Meet the Hubbard Glacier* (2009), by Jynx MacTavish, a benign-looking hardcover book tangibly reveals the glacier that it purports to introduce. Page-turning forces a focus away from the text, as the cut pages reveal the shape of the glacial terrain.<sup>24</sup> While not digital books, apart from their online exhibition announcements and portfolio presentations, these altered books serve as reminders that every tool that a book artist uses is a kind of technology, even when not driven by computer chips. The presentation of digital surrogates or representations also become important for archival, cataloguing, and access purposes, since artists’ books often defy genre and may be limited editions or one of a kind.





In *The Ice Book* (2010), Davy and Kristin McGuire create a “miniature theater experience” that blends puppetry, animation, and film to bring a pop-up book to life. Paper cut-outs and projections make this fantasy landscape “an intimate and immersive experience of animation, book art and performance” that tells the story of a princess who entices a boy into the forest to warm her heart of ice.<sup>25</sup> There is no text. The story unfolds through turning pop-up pages, as projected images move through the crafted paper landscapes. *The Ice Book* differs from *The Book of Ice* (2011), where Paul Miller (also known as DJ Spooky) remixes ice through a commercially-produced, heavily interdisciplinary text that is an offshoot of a larger multi-media art project based around the melting continent of Antarctica. He calls his book a translation of “a text given to us by the planet to decipher.”<sup>26</sup> The physical object of the book represents a digital interpretation, documentation, and performance of the thawing landscape, engaging QR codes to expand the book through music and archival photos and films, denationalized posters, and other paraphernalia on virtual pages of a stage.



Using ice as her medium, the eco-artist Basia Irland has undertaken a project of *Ice Books: receding/reseeding* (2007-09), using ice itself as her book material. She makes hand-carved ice books, embedded with local native riparian seeds that form “sentences,” launching the books into rivers where they melt and release their seeds into the current. Working with stream ecologists, botanists, and biologists to determine the most appropriate seeds for each zone, Irland also engages students and community members to help “read” and enact these projects. She writes, “When the plants regenerate and grow along the bank, they help sequester carbon, hold the banks in place, and provide shelter for riverside creatures.”<sup>27</sup> Christian Bök’s *The Xenotext* (in progress for the past decade) jumps beyond ecology into the mire of post-humanity, encoding a poetic text into bacterial DNA to produce proteins to yield another poetic text. He describes his experiment with a “chemical alphabet” for “engineering a life-form so that it becomes not only a durable archive for storing a poem, but also an operant machine for writing a poem—one that can persist on the planet until the sun itself explodes.”<sup>28</sup> Given the resilience of the bacterium, Bök’s “book” is projected to survive even if the world were to freeze, in the vacuum of outer space, beyond our own survival.

Is *The Xenotext* technically a book? Is it not a book? What about these other books somehow related to ice? To return to the fundamental question: What is a book?

All of these books were made in the digital age. I mention them not as exemplars—some arguably aren’t artists’ books—but tug at that definition, examples that defy being reductively called “ice books,” too, as their diverging concepts drive each form. One complaint that I’ve heard against book arts programs, generally, is an emphasis on craft at the expense of content, where development of formal skill exceeds development of complex concept. It goes without saying, book artists cannot effectively practice without learning these forms, to apprentice and acquire the language of the book, to knowledgeably break and remake it. That said, as we play with an amazing array of new technologies, it will be vital to keep this critique in mind, thinking and making hand in hand, so our new books do not excite readers merely as gimmicks or gadgets, but as they intermarry new

forms with new content, exploring our changing world and engaging with the changing nature of the book. Many questions remain. Preservation of digital-born material is a major issue, as is the question of how to incorporate technologies that may become defunct. Will we find ways to make these technologies gracefully degrade, or will their own coded communications and error messages become another layer of reading? What alternatives have we not even begun to anticipate? Throughout this evolution, we will need new ways to theorize artists’ books: projects that often defy classification, that confound cataloguers, and that raise fascinating questions that in turn can be harnessed to expand the possibilities for artists’ books, e-books, any books.

In her article “Artists’ Books in the Digital Age,” published fifteen years ago in 1997, Margot Lovejoy described how the use of technology in artists’ books is hardly a new phenomenon. She charted preceding decades that witnessed a range of experimentation with all forms of production technologies, ranging across xerox to laser, quickprint to letterpress, offset and beyond, stretching farther back in time and moving forward toward hypertext and more digital realms. She describes how “artists for whom the book is a primary medium have always been interested in technological advance,” and that that this affects notions of authorship, readership, production, distribution, originality, materiality, and an array of other considerations.<sup>29</sup> Those who are investigating electronic books, Lovejoy describes, tend to include those who wish to better reflect contemporary interdisciplinary sensibilities, where a work of art invites interactivity and can help understand “living social relations if it is in tune with the appropriate artistic and technical energy of its time.”<sup>30</sup>

By drawing attention to what books are and are not, the practice of making and thinking about artists’ books and e-books invites play and provocation in that indeterminate space where books—and where we—negotiate our own boundaries. Unmaking the book becomes a way to reflect upon what is happening, to participate and follow these questions into the future, learning from past practices to imagine new possibilities, working within and around and beyond the bounds of inherited notions. As book artists incorporate different technologies, we will continue to ask a number of questions. Beyond the basic question of “what is a book?”, we will continue to ask how future books might look and feel and act. As strategies of reading, writing, telling, and listening—and the bodies doing these activities—evolve, they will influence the future of books, artistic and otherwise. Sticky as it seems, the book as we know it has assembled over time to the technology we now hold in our hands, a mutable medium, rather than something that emerged fully formed. While it may seem fixed, it is merely frozen, with the capacity to melt again.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the concept of the melting book and the frozen book hits home more than metaphorically, also literally. The hurricane destroyed many books, notably wiping out most of the collection at Printed Matter: over 9,000 books, along with many editioned items and equipment. The Printed Matter Archive also was severely damaged, leading to the loss of important documentation related to the field of artists’ books and a record of Printed Matter’s own history since its founding in 1976. According to guidelines from the Museum of Modern Art and other cultural institutions, the recommendation for attempting to save these naturally damaged books and works on paper is: freeze them.<sup>31</sup>

Franz Kafka once said, “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.”<sup>32</sup> Paul Chan has adapted this analogy, saying, “Because we have to survive, we preserve ourselves, freeze ourselves,” and then find ways “to break us loose again.”<sup>33</sup> While still impossible to know the future of the book, or to imagine how emerging technologies will affect the shapes, scopes, and sensory dimensions of artists’ books, history invites this dissolution and reinvigoration, begging us to question and engage with what’s around us, to help shape that change. Looking backward at this malleable medium invites us to look forward, to know that the book is resilient, adaptable, versatile, dynamic and alive enough to have a gravitational pull strong enough to pose both a promise and a threat, even as we are complicit in its making and unmaking. While many might think of the book as a frozen block of pages, artists’ books and e-books are actively engaged with melting the book—not into extinction, not into nothingness, not into inertness—rather melting the book into its future forms.

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