
Exploring a different spectrum of book objects, Bookwork is a study of conceptual book art that is not meant for reading but for thinking about. These art works, to which Garrett Stewart refers to as “bibliobjects” or “conceptual book sculpture,” are considered from a variety of perspectives and lineages. This monograph provides an overview of conceptualist legacy and positions the bookwork within a materialist philosophy yet emphasizes its demediated nature, where the medium of the initial transmission (the readable book) is blocked in favor of the secondary one (e.g. sculpture).

Besides being divided into six main chapters that examine in detail the individual character of different bookworks, their collective functioning as archives as well as the political underpinnings of such works, this monograph also includes a Prologue/Catalog chapter consisting of a brilliant description of an imaginary exhibition.

While the subject matter of the book and the approach are both unique and engaging, with the writing style at times reminiscent of Italo Calvino and the storytelling evocative of Jorge Luis Borges, the analysis is at times daunting and unapproachable. Simply put, the book is far from being an accessible read suited for any audience, with an in-depth analysis that is as much theoretical as it is philosophical and an expressivity that requires a certain level of linguistic aptitude. It would be best suited for graduate level researchers and faculty or else for a reader looking for an interdisciplinary challenge coupled with an enticing conceptual topic. Moreover, a certain level of repetition renders the already oversaturated reading somewhat tedious. It does not help that the majority of illustrations are black and white, or to be fair, gray, lacking the awakening contrast. Despite these inconveniences, this book is an excellent example of writing where every word is weighted for its impact; clever word-play and insightful interpretations are abundant and captivating.

While Bookwork is undoubtedly a product of thorough research and observation, with extended endnotes, a list of illustrations, and a detailed index, a few important omissions in the lineage of book art are disappointing. Most notable is the absence of seminal bookworks by two Chinese artists during the 1980s (Xu Bing’s A Book from the Sky, 1988, and Huang Yong Ping’s The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes, 1987).

In conclusion, this well-crafted book, both physically and intellectually, would be an excellent addition to any art library.

Ksenia Cheinman, MLIS Student, University of British Columbia, ksenia.cheinman@gmail.com