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## An Altered Book by Cara Barer

### Alexandra Chasin

Although it has no visible story, characters, setting, premise-no beginning or end-and not even any legible language, Cara Barer's *PDR* is a book. As such, I recommend it. *PDR* is a book about books, no matter what else it is, or used to be, about. It is a paradigmatic example of a contemporary trend toward "altered books." Like other altered books, *PDR* is a piece of sculpture. It is also a photograph. Magritte's famous painting of a sentence about a pipe asserts that the sentence is not a pipe, and neither is the accompanying picture; conversely, the word, the picture, and the idea of pipe suggest that all three *are* pipes (or the negation would make no sense). Likewise, *PDR* suggests that a book may be many things in addition to being a book.

Like a book, *PDR* works symbolically, through visual and material modes, re-presenting abstract ideas (or *meaning*) as well as embodying physical principles and enacting social values. Also like a book, *PDR* is three-dimensional and designed to be apprehended through visual more often than auditory and tactile senses. But Barer's book complicates the issue, calling attention to the materiality of books, their physicality, objectness, manipulability-qualities that inhere in all books-though we rarely speak of Literature in these terms. With Literature, you can't tell a book by its cover; with books, the cover is the thing itself.

Like Literature, Barer's photograph presents itself as Art, demonstrating that books function differently in different contexts. The book's new state as a work of art is clear in its framing by the artist, including her description of her work, but also her rendering of the re-presented book in the idiom of art photography, its exhibition in galleries, etc. The location of the object, its value, the way people talk about it, all of these situate Cara Barer's altered books, as well as her photographs of them, as art objects.

As an art object, *PDR* strips the literary values out of the book partly by making it impossible to read as written and published. Conventionally, Literature transcends the book form-after all, no ideas could have been harmed in the production of this art object, could they?-but this sculpture and photograph foreground and enhance the value of the mere vehicle of whatever ideas had been contained therein. Here, aesthetic value is re-placed in the lowly physical object that is the book's carcass, from which the literary spirit has departed. Thus Barer's book sculptures represent, for some viewers, a kind of violence. I, for example, was raised to view dog-earring pages and writing in the margins as sacrilegious, offensive *to the content* of a book. Breaking a spine had moral implications. Barer has more than broken the spines of the books she has altered. She has called into question the status of the book at this moment in cultural history.

For other viewers-the dog-earers and margin scribbles?-the book's non-literary uses are commonplace; books support small children on adult chairs at the dining table, or hold doors open, provide hard surfaces on which to write, press flowers, hide secret documents. In this way, Barer's book sculptures have an affinity with the use of U.S. flags to patch the seat of your jeans. These relocations of sacred objects call forth strong reactions.

As sacred objects, books cannot be altered without calling values into question. Altered books cannot *not* raise questions about the meanings and uses of the book in this particular historical moment, a moment in which digital technologies are challenging long-held assumptions about reading, writing, and their media. For hundreds of years in the West, since long before the emergence of the printing

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press, the *codex* has been the dominant reading mechanism. The codex is the form of the book in which many pages radiate out of a central spine; it has proved to be a particularly versatile technology of reading, as against the tablet and the scroll (earlier modes of text delivery), and so far still works better for long-term storage than newer technologies. Durable though it is, the codex itself is undergoing a challenge in the digital era. Some readers feel that the development of new media—the accelerating proliferation of new technologies of content delivery—commits violence against the book as a form, with grievous aesthetic, cultural, and moral consequences. . . .

For my part, I appreciate the way in which *PDR* pictures the codex in crisis. It is unknowable just yet precisely what this crisis is producing, what new meanings, forms, and functions will emerge with the new technologies, and what will be lost. It is too soon, too late, and too simple either to lament or celebrate. The democratic promise of the new may never be realized without being appropriated or contravened, and the loss of humanism is a superstructural effect that can hardly be laid at the foot, or feet, of electronics.

Look at your electronic reader. Is it a book? Does it house a book? Is it a delivery mechanism for a book? Is it the future of the book? The electronic reader certainly has some kind of primary relationship with the book—the designed similarities, as with page turning/swiping and the familiar aspect ratio, are the least of it. Much more fundamentally, the idea of a material object as the arbitrary delivery mechanism for some content that transcends the materiality of the medium—that idea is preserved in the reader. Because or in spite of this, the electronic reader cannot help but call the question of the form and function of books.

What is knowable is that many current alarms use the same terms as the alarm over cheap paperback printing in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. For 18<sup>th</sup>-century men of letters, mass printing threatened to feminize, and thereby bring about the end of, Literature. For many critics today, the Literature that survived that new technology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is under siege again with the newer digital technologies. I appreciate the way *PDR* begs the question while-or *by*-obscuring any literary values. The old book could have been *War and Peace* or it could have been the *Physician's Desk Reference*—the photograph doesn't display any content.

Even though Barer has made significant changes, the original state of *PDR* as a conventional book, in codex form, remains visible and legible. I recommend looking at this image—and at altered books more generally—as an invitation to rethink the book, to think through the continuities and discontinuities between codex culture and digital culture, their social and political concomitants, the historical problems of literary and aesthetic value, literacy itself, and the multiplicity of manifestations of bookness. Certainly, corporations and courts are thinking through these things. Readers and writers must engage these questions—or be engaged willy-nilly. I recommend suspending certainty about the aesthetic and moral implications of current changes. Now that it's too late, it's time to re-read the book, with-and without-reference to Literature.

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