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Being Mean To Books In Order To Find Out The Meaning Of Books

A designerly exploration of
the human-book relationship

Kayla Lythgoe

**Being Mean To Books
In Order To Find Out
The Meaning Of Books**

A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Design, Massey University, New Zealand.

Warning

**The images in this book may
cause some disturbance
(especially to bibliophiles).**

A note on the writing:

As this work was conducted through an auto-ethnographic design lens, this exegesis is written with a strong personal voice.

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Abstract

Being mean to books in order to find out the meaning of books explores my own relationship with books, and their position within my practice as an emerging book designer. What began as an exploration of the future of the book turned into an attempt to understand them in their present state. In order to come to understand their physicality, the impacts of the embodied reader, and the idea and ideal that books represent socially.

This research was conducted through an auto-ethnographic design lens, putting my own relationship, tensions and preferences with books at the heart of the work. Through a series of practice-led making — or unmaking — I engaged with books, breaking the unspoken rules of interacting with them and testing the limits of my own habits. I began with arguably the meanest act (*Burning a book*), I was reluctant, hesitant — and simply didn't want to be mean to books. Through repeated exposure of intervening in an increasingly mean way, my relationship with books as a reader, designer and bibliophile developed to appreciate the marks a book gains from an embodied readers interactions. Books quickly revealed themselves as active participants in the interventions, shaping and directing not only individual encounters but conducting the full idea and scope of the work.

By engaging with books in this extreme manner I've come to understand what they mean to me and others, socially and culturally, beyond just the physical object. This research created space for me to truly get to know books and although I can not simply sum up what books mean, I can say what they mean to me; which is everything. They are no longer simply something that I just enjoy reading, designing and being surrounded by but they are a framework through which I think and communicate myself. As an emerging book designer it was vital for me to understand books in this way.

Acknowledgments

It feels fitting that doing my Master's has been a serendipitous thing — a series of stars aligning and decisions made partly beyond my control — which only leads me to believe that this is exactly how I was meant to spend this year. To say that I'm pleased with how it has worked out would be an understatement.

This work would not have been possible without the people who surround me. Thank you to everyone who has lent an ear over a coffee or a passing conversation in the hallway. Whether it's been getting excited exchanging ideas or offering words of encouragement, it has never gone unnoticed.

To my near and dear, family and friends, especially my Mum, thank you is wholly insufficient, for without you this work would not be the same. Keeping me sane and supporting me even when I didn't support myself and encouraging me to achieve things that I didn't think that I would be capable of.

Thank you to Graham and Maria Collinson, without your generosity I would not have had the opportunity or the confidence to pursue my Master's degree. I'm grateful to be joining an outstanding group of alumni under the Alexandra Collinson scholarship.

To Anna Brown and Jo Bailey, the endless conversations about books. You both saw this work before I could, believing and pushing me to step confidently beyond the box. I hope that I have the opportunity to be guided and work alongside you both again in the near future.

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To Thomas Cumming and Krista Barnaby, always my rocks, never an anchor. The spontaneous conversations, support from before I even began, words can not describe how much I truly appreciate and continually look up to you both. To continue admiring and being fascinated by books together.

Introduction

A beginning not an ending: Exploring the future of books

As a bibliophile, and an emerging book designer, I've frequently encountered speculation around the obsolescence of books, a narrative which framed much of my early research. This project began as an exploration of the future of the book, situated within the ongoing conversation around the death of books and the decline of physical media in an increasingly digital world.

Discussions within publishing and editorial contexts frequently positioned the codex¹ as a form under threat, framed by predication that digital technologies would inevitably supersede physical media. Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre note in *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor* that contemporary discourse around the printed book is often informed by a sense that its continued existence is uncertain (Schaefer & Starre, 2019). Entering this conversation, my explorations were similarly oriented towards speculative futures. However, as the project developed through a process of making — or unmaking — dissemination, display and discussion, the question gradually shifted away from what the book might become towards what it already is and what we understand it to mean.

When pondering how I wanted to situate my Master's research, I'd recently read an article in a design journal *Surrounded by Screens: Why do we Still Read Actual Books* by publisher Birgit Schmitz. In her book, she asks a different question: 'why do we still read printed books at all?' (Schmitz, 2023, p. 230). She notes that the internet has been available to all for the last three decades, and we moved into this millennium — deeper into the electronic age — the fear of the impending implosion of the Gutenberg galaxy has been increasingly voiced (Schmitz, 2023). Despite these conversations, for me, the act of holding a book — turning its pages, that musky scent wafting up my nose, physically inhabiting the reading experience — stood in contrast to digital formats, which felt fundamentally different, inferior even. The suggestion that the physical book would 'die' was preposterous. Books were never going to die, how could they?

¹ A block of pages bound on one side between two covers. Codex refers to a books format, it is the most common type of book and what most would associate the physical object of a book as.

The story of the research question: Part one

I began this work not with a research question, but rather a tension to explore; a starting point, giving myself permission to begin. As academics and musicians, Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean note in *Practice-led Research, Recher-led practice in the Creative Arts* creative inquiry often begins with action. Practitioners ‘tend to dive in, to commence practising to see what emerges’ (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 6). Through a series of interventions with books, the research question naturally emerged. As my understanding of books — and of myself — increased, so did my sense of what I was aiming to achieve.

New Zealand contemporary artist Rohan Weallens said about his practice, ‘You can’t know. You have to be in the dark. You have to not understand what you are doing.’ (as cited in Walker, Rhodes & Themelios (Eds.) 2019, p. 409). This strongly resonated with me and mirrors how I have come to understand my practice.



The idea of the book: The thing I picture when someone says *book*

I used to think a book required no further definition. A book was just a book—no question about it. But as my work has fallen further down this rabbit hole, I realised a book was not as simple as it once appeared to be.

In 2024, I completed my Bachelor of Design with Honours in Visual Communication at Toi Rauwhārangī, College of Creative Arts, Massey University. During my final year I began considering in earnest the materiality of books and their content–format relationship.

Back then, I defined books as containers of information. I knew a book as a novel, as this was how I most commonly interacted with one: a small paperback, pages bound on one side between two covers — a common codex. I knew what a book is. But did I? It is this continued unravelling of the seemingly simple definition that inspires and drives my practice.

Right: *A small part of my collection,*
Lamp Light Book photo series
Kayla Lythgoe and Michael Madden-Smith
(2025).



Giovanni's Room: Part one — It's just a book

So I read a thing, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. It quickly became a favourite; a book that I wanted to devour in one sitting, yet equally one that I never wanted to end. My edition of *Giovanni's Room* has come to represent myself and my relationship with books through my research.

It is in this beginning stage that I inform you that this is merely a book. However, it is also in concluding this project have I understood the importance of it, even though it has existed proeminently alongside me throughout. It is a book I will return to throughout this process, not only as a text but as a marker of my relationship with books.

Left: *Giovanni's Room*, *Lamp Light Book photo series*
Kayla Lythgoe and Michael Madden-Smith
(2025).

Existing practice: *Don't judge a book by its cover*

One of the volumes I created in my Honours project was called *38 things to do to keep a book in perfect condition*, which examined my own behaviours with books. This project explored the deep desire I held to protect and keep books as perfect as when they were first bought.

38 things presents the reader with a conundrum: to rip the cover, therefore destroying the book but being able to read its contents, or to preserve the book in perfect condition. I knew how I would be keeping the book.

This volume became the invisible thread from my Honours to my Master's work. Although I have only recognised this connection recently, looking back, I can see how this exploration has manifested over time. My concerns with books were already present in my practice, even though I had not yet fully realised them or found the language to articulate them.



Above: *38 things to do in order to keep a book in perfect condition*, Volume 05 from *Don't judge a book by its cover*
Kayla Lythgoe
Photograph: Michael Madden-Smith (2024).



Above: *Surround by books, Lamp Light Book photo series*
Kayla Lythgoe and Michael Madden-Smith
(2025).

Books and I

My relationship with books

Books have come to surround all parts of my life: personal, academic and work. They structure my day.

I read first thing in the morning with my breakfast; consuming more pages than food. In the summertime or sunken into an armchair in winter, I read. Still in my pyjamas, drowning in blankets, a book splayed open and a cup of tea warming my hands — I commence the ritual.

I read while waiting for the bus, on the bus, getting off the bus, walking down the street if the book is that captivating. Just a few pages or else I'll walk into something — although this is a skill I have begun to master. I read as I wait for a friend who's running late to catch up over coffee. A few pages before my meeting. While eating my lunch to dissociate from my workday.

Home again, but this time on the couch — my afternoon spot — bathing in the sun. In bed trying not to fall asleep, but I often wake up with a book resting beside me, which comes straight with me into the kitchen as I prepare my breakfast.

A part of why books entice me is their tactility, how they feel to hold and use. I've never understood people who prefer e-readers to physical books. Books transport you and transform you through their words, and for me, the ability to turn the pages, the feel of the paper between your fingertips, is a vital part of that transformational experience. A friend who shares my love for the tactile book once said to me, "*You know, not everybody cares about stuff the way we do.*" I was blindsided. To me, that is what makes a book a book!

Ironically though, I don't like my books to look like they have been read — this is how pristine I like my books to stay. No cracked spine, dog-eared pages, writing in the margins, creases in the covers. It almost feels like a voodoo doll: leaving a mark on a book is also a scar on myself. So I have a set of rules for engaging with books. Though unspoken, I use them to judge other people; they do not get a second chance to borrow a book from me if they break the unwritten contract and my 'perfect book' is returned sullied.

During my undergraduate studies, a new facet of the book experience was revealed to me: designing and making. It feels silly to say now but I hadn't realised books were designed. I have always read, and been captivated by stories, but it wasn't until I learned how to — and that I could — design a book that I began to truly appreciate and notice them as an object.

Since then my fascination has only grown and intensified.

When I meet someone new or attempt to explain to friends or family what I do and what my Master's study is, I end up having those familiar conversations that book designers all seem to know. "You design books, like book covers?" "Oh, not quite, well yes but not just the cover. The book, like the whole thing." A book doesn't just spit out of a writer's or artist's computer in the form you encounter on a bookshop shelf. As much as I find these conversations frustrating, I'm not surprised. It means books are doing their job: being a successful invisible container of information — a crystal goblet.

A maxim attributed to Swiss typeface designer Adrian Frutiger goes something like 'If you remember the shape of your spoon at lunch, it has to be the wrong shape.' (Frutiger, 1990, as cited in McGuirk, 2012). I think about book design in a similar way: a perfectly balanced conduit that imperceptibly strengthens the relationship between the reader and the stories within without necessarily noticing it. I think this is one of the reasons that I fell in love with book design in the first place.

Do I consider the material more because I'm a designer? Does a regular reader only consider the materiality when the book is differentiated? A signed copy, a first edition, a book whose form is pushing the boundaries of a book? These were some of the questions fermenting in my mind as I began thinking and making.

Right: *My 'unspoken' book rules*
Kayla Lythgoe
(2026).

01. No dog earring pages
02. Don't write in the margins
03. Don't get the books wet
04. Protect the books from the rain at all cost
05. If its raining don't take the books with you
06. Don't aimlessly throw books in bags with lots of other things
07. Wrap the books in gapeira of clothing, when in a bag - to protect it
08. Don't lend books to people who don't abide by these rules
09. Don't store books in direct sunlight
10. Don't fold the cover around itself
11. Store books stacked upright on a shelf; supported at each end with a bookend
12. Don't carry large stacks of books downstairs
13. No eating near books
14. Do not bend the books

Doing then thinking, and some thinking then doing: methodologies

Research through making (or rather deconstruction)

At the beginning of this Masters of Design, it felt as though I was throwing things at walls and seeing what stuck. Through making, I was able to ponder, question, and define, and I came to understand this process as practice-led research. This methodology emerged through practice rather than being a predetermined framework.

'We come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling.' (Bolt, 2007, p. 30, as cited in Smith & Dean, 2009)

In Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts, Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean propose a model of creative research described as the 'iterative cyclic web' (Smith & Dean, 2009). This is a framework that understands research and practice as operating in continuous circulation rather than in linear progression. It positions creative activity as both a generator and outcome of knowledge, allowing for understanding to be produced through movement between action, reflection, and theory.

While Smith and Dean describe a model that allows for multiple positions of entry (constructed of three points: practice-led research; research-led practice; and academic research) my process began to operate from an additional position. I was not generating new artefacts through my practice, but intervening in those that already existed. Rather than making, I was unmaking. I describe this position as practice-led unmaking. Here, knowledge doesn't emerge through producing, but through dismantling. The book is taken apart, physically and metaphorically, disrupting one's idea of a book. In doing so, I am not imposing form but observing what the book already is — materially, structurally and culturally. The act of deconstruction becomes the method.

Central to this research is the understanding that knowledge can be generated through acts of making. In *Designerly Ways of Knowing* designer and academic Nigel Cross argues that design constitutes a distinct form of knowledge production — through the act of making, where understanding emerges through iterative experimentation and material engagement rather than purely theoretical analysis (Cross, 1982). Cross provides a theoretical explanation for how knowledge is generated within the iterative cycles modeled by Smith and Dean.

This iterative process also requires an acceptance of uncertainty as a productive methodological condition. In *Research for people who think they would rather create* design academic Drik Vis discusses being a stranger to your work, highlighting that it is equally important to have direction but also to be open to the possibility in the process. ‘You should be every bit as clear about what you don’t know, as you are about what you do know. Embracing a quality of not-knowing can help make space for creative development’ (Vis, 2023, p. 85). Practice-led research encourages working from the unknown to the known, it is purposeful yet open-ended, clean-sightly yet exploratory (Smith & Dean, 2009).

This work has, by its very nature, been serendipitous and intuitive. Allowing myself to be in a state of play, where action was the starting point for understanding, and allowing for material response to guide the development of the work, was crucial. Rather than establishing pre-formed conclusions, the creative process functioned as a way of thinking through making, listening, and responding to what each intervention revealed. By remaining open to chance and possibilities the work naturally evolved. By placing making at the heart of the research it has ultimately enabled a deeper understanding of the book through direct engagement, which I would not have been able to achieve solely through academic research.



Above: A model of creative arts and research processes: the iterative cyclic web of practice-led research and research-led practice
Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009, p. 9).

Auto-ethnography

As with practice-led research, my use of auto-ethnography solidified itself as a method through repeated engagement, which deepened my understanding of my practice.

Prior to this research, I understood design primarily as a problem-solving discipline grounded in solution-driven outcomes. However, through this project, my understanding has expanded to include forms of inquiry that emerge from personal experience, reflection and material exploration. Rather than addressing a predefined problem, the work began from a set of tensions and curiosities surrounding my relationship with books.

In *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design* academic and post doctoral researcher Louise Schouwenberg and Michael Kaethler, discuss the emergence of auto-ethnography as a means of academic research in design, a shift from studying the ‘exotic other’, towards examining the researchers themselves and the world that they inhabit. ‘Shifting the orientation of research from distinct to personal, from objective to subjective’ (Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2021, p. 13).

Auto-ethnography foregrounds ‘the designer’s capacity to make sense of one’s world’ (Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2021, p. 13), As opposed to focusing on solutionism, it draws from speculative, critical, relational and social design. Schouwenberg and Kaethler state, ‘The design process doesn’t start with a problem or issue to address but rather a tension to explore’ (Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2021, p. 19). Situating myself at the heart of this research, I placed not only books in a vulnerable state but also myself. As Schouwenberg and Kaethler suggest, accepting and exploring the intimacy, vulnerability and unpredictability that accompany self-exploration allows us to attempt to make sense of our own world (Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2021). This research is driven by my own tensions and fascination with the book, and it is through this research that I aim to understand myself as much as I aim to understand books.

This approach allowed me to investigate not only what a book is, but how it is experienced, handled, protected, altered and emotionally charged. A book is not merely a material object; it is something one engages with through rituals, habits, attachments and resistances. By opening up my own relationship with books, I have been able to move beyond a surface-level definition of a book towards a more embodied understanding of the object. Ultimately,

this work aims to understand my personal relationship with books, recognising that the investigation is not solely about the book itself, but about understanding myself through that process of engagement. As Schouwenberg and Kaethler state ‘design activates the knowledge component by directly engaging and altering the very world it seeks to make sense of’ (2021, p. 14). By actively intervening with books through the process of making, understanding has emerged through action rather than observation alone.

The physical dismantling of the book becomes inseparable from the self-examination of my own relationship to it. The two methods operate cyclically; while each intervention reveals something about books, it also reveals something about myself.

**Getting to
know the object
that is the book.**

Introduction

“Interactive art doesn’t really exist unless somebody is using it. We would stand across the street from where the piece was installed and just watch people use it. We talked about people as the medium. In the same way that a sculptor understands clay or a painter understands paint, an interactive art designer needs to understand people.”
(Bonnemaison, 2019, p. 30)

As an emerging book designer, I must understand books. This understanding extends beyond the relationship between the content and the format of a book, and into the reader’s, the bibliophile’s, and the book’s world. Through a series of interventions, I have been getting to know the object that is the book — its materiality, durability, and the ways it is handled, used, protected, and sometimes resisted by the reader. Putting my own relationship, tensions, rules, and vulnerability at the forefront of this exploration.

Rather than merely seeking to damage books, these experiments use physical interaction as a means of understanding. They position the book not as a passive container of content, but as an active object shaped by, and shaping the reader’s behaviour.

Experiments vs interventions

I began by referring to these acts as ‘experiments’ — and have called them this for the majority of this process — but this word never completely sat right. To me, experiments imply having and testing hypotheses or demonstrating a known fact. I did not enter these processes with expectations, or hoping to find out a particular thing, rather I entered with a mindset of unknowing, open to the book and the possibilities of it. Schouwenberg and Kaethler describe this process as ‘Working within the unknown of where the process might lead’ (2021, p. 13).

I’ve settled on calling each of these works interventions, as I am intervening with the object and disrupting my idea of a book, as well as intervening with my own habits, tensions and behaviours with books. Entering a world of unknowing, not only of the book but of myself as a designer, reader and bibliophile.

Not everything worked

At the beginning of this process of getting to know the book, I hadn’t yet realised that that was what I was doing. I entered exploring the tactile nature and limits of books and how they sat in an increasingly digital world. Through the process of practice-led research and research-led practice the project shifted from asking what books might become to examining what they already are.

Although not everything that I explored was relevant in the end, each one informed the next, the failures being just as important as the successes. What initially appeared irrelevant or unsuccessful became the very mechanism through which the project clarified itself. Uncertainty and redirection are not failures but conditions of knowledge production. The interventions that did not endure were not failures but formative moments through which the project disclosed itself.

The proceeding spread is a list of the 20 interventions that I carried out over the course of this research. In the chapter following I will discuss the eleven bolded interventions which were the most impactful in allowing me to gain a deeper understanding of the book.

01.



Burning a book

I am not the first to commit criminal acts against books

06.



Tearing pages as read

Exploring digital modes of consumption within a physical book.

02.



Traces of reading

I am not the first to commit criminal acts against books

07.



Reading in the shower

Exploring the locations in which I read and the continuous tension of getting a book wet.

03.



Books don't mind the rain (but I mind my books not minding the rain)

One of my number one rules of using books is not letting them get wet in the rain but during this intervention I did just that. Confronting my own tensions and reading habits I explored my own and the book's vulnerabilities.

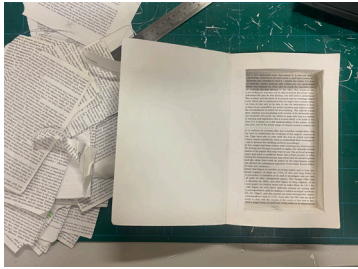
08.



Books are heavy

Why carry food and camping gear when you could fill your pack with books for a better workout.

04.



Books have holes

A physical demonstration of digital media and the printed world colliding. Cutting a hole in a book and putting a VHS tape inside.

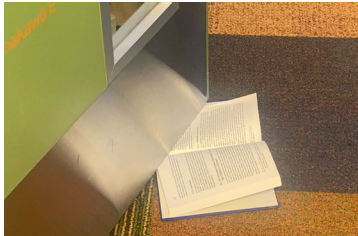
09.



Books are stools

Standing on a stack of books to reach high places.

05.



Books are door stops

The beginnings of a series exploring what books—as objects—can be used for; other than something to be read. I had been thinking about the future of the book and the strong shift towards a fully digital world. What would be done with all of the existing physical books if no one was any longer interested in reading them. Rather than throwing them away or burning them, how else could books be useful? As door stops.

10.



Books are mops

Spill something on the floor? Rip off a few pages out of a book to mop it up!



11.

Burning are absorbent

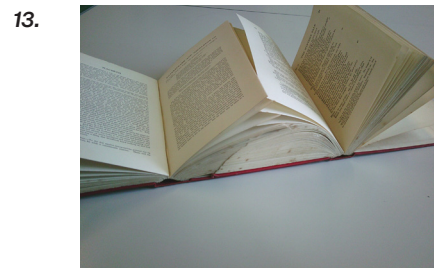
Instead of draining the sink or the bath tub, fill with books and leave for a few hours to let the paper fully absorb the water.



12.

Linearity

Drawing on *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson, I aimed to challenge the fixed order of the codex. By cutting a book into nine sections, shifting the form from directing how it should be read to giving the responsibility to the reader.



13.

Book sculpture 01 & 02

Inspired by artists Cyrus Tang and Odies Mlaszho, using books as sculptural objects, relinquishing their materiality as objects.



14.

Half the weight

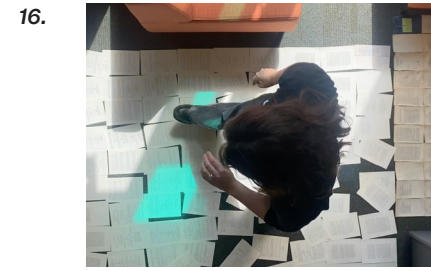
Exploring the taboos of reading culture, and an individual's reading habits.



15.

Books are pot

Altering the format of a book, shifting it into a fully bodily actively.



16.

Please walk on the book

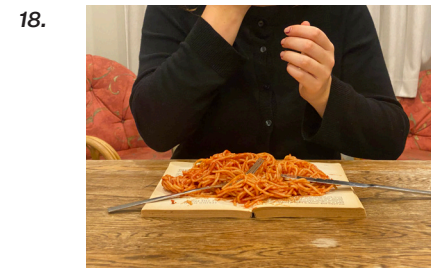
Altering the format of a book, shifting it into a fully bodily actively.



17.

The bones of the book

Altering the format of a book, shifting it into a fully bodily actively.



18.

A book is a plate

Would you eat spaghetti off a book?



19.

4896 pages

Altering the book to encourage deconstruction through use.



20.

I have blood on my hands

A physical conclusion, a confession; I have committed crimes against books.

57 steps on the road to committing crimes against books

Through the process of getting to know the book, I developed my own internal ranking of how 'mean' I believed each intervention was. However, I became increasingly aware that this hierarchy was shaped by my own personal moral compass, my shifting relationship with books, and what I personally gauge as 'mean'.

While this project primarily explores my own relationship with books, the visceral reactions I was seeing from a small group of people who I shared this work with prompted me to seek a wider range of responses, to further understand the book's scale of influence. As well, it was becoming clear that this practice-led research was not about the final outcomes or the transformed books, but the intimate process of the interventions themselves.

During my fourth and final Arohaehae presentation (one of four 'critique' moments in the process of a Master's of Design), I invited participants to rank how 'mean' I had been to books. The installation consisted of a 'meanness gauge', a scale of words and phrases that others had used to describe my treatment of books throughout the process, alongside two books containing images of the interventions. Participants were asked to select an image, rip it out — the pages were perforated at the spine — and place it on the scale in relation to how severely they felt I had treated the book.

This exercise drew on graphic designer Milton Glaser's *Twelve Steps on a Graphic Designers Road to Hell* (Glaser, 2004), which outlines a gradual ethical drift designers might experience through small, self-justified compromises.



Left page: *57 steps on the road to committing crimes against books*, Arohaehae 04 workshop interaction
Kayla Lythgoe, (2025)

Similarly, the interaction engaged participants to reflect on their own values and relationship with books, rather than simply judging my actions. They were asked to think: Would I do this to a book? The meanness gauge interaction adopts Glaser's notion of ethical drift in a material context, revealing how repeated small transgressions towards books can normalise increasingly severe acts of 'harm'. It articulates how I had experienced a growing numbness to acts I would previously have judged extreme.

Glaser's key argument in *Twelve Steps on a Graphic Designers Road to Hell* is that the deterioration of moral standards doesn't occur suddenly, but accumulates through incremental decisions. This closely mirrors my own process of getting to know the book. While some interventions began quite brutally, it was through repeated exposure and familiarity that I became increasingly willing and able to commit extreme acts with books. Without first letting a book get minorly wet in the rain with *Books don't mind the rain (but I mind my books not minding the rain)*, I would not have as easily been able to let a book get saturated in the shower during *Reading in the shower*. I was already far down the list on committing crimes against books.

The numbness to my actions, which I had begun to realise during *Please walk on the book*, was strongly reinforced during the workshop interaction. Many participants hesitated to rip the pages, whereas I hadn't thought twice about it. Some refused to participate altogether, unable to tear images from a book that documents acts of harm towards books, to rank how mean I had been to books. One participant instead taped the entire book beneath the scale, resisting the action of ripping while still engaging with the work.

The participants' ranking differed significantly from my own. There was a part of me that expected everything to end up on the far end, under phrases the 'pages are screaming', 'committing crimes against books', 'speechless', 'paralysed', and 'you say you love books?!' But *Burning a book*, which I considered one of the most severe interventions, was placed only partway along the scale. In contrast acts such as tearing a book in half or leaving a book in the rain were positioned at the extreme end, whereas I place leaving a book in the rain at the 'tame' end because it can still be used, albeit it becomes a little thicker and the pages become textured. Others placed *Reading in the shower* low on the scale, noting that they would do this themselves. Overall, participants expressed a mixture of awe and horror.

1. **Designing a package to look bigger on the shelf.**
2. **Designing an ad for a slow, boring film to make it seem like a lighthearted comedy.**
3. **Designing a crest for a new vineyard to suggest that it has been in business for a long time.**
4. **Designing a jacket for a book whose sexual content you find personally repellent.**
5. **Designing a medal using steel from the World Trade Center to be sold as a profit-making souvenir of September 11.**
6. **Designing an advertising campaign for a company with a history of known discrimination in minority hiring.**
7. **Designing a package aimed at children for a cereal whose contents you know are low in nutritional value and high in sugar.**
8. **Designing a line of T-shirts for a manufacturer that employs child labor.**
9. **Designing a promotion for a diet product that you know doesn't work.**
10. **Designing an ad for a political candidate whose policies you believe would be harmful to the general public.**
11. **Designing a brochure for an SUV that flips over frequently in emergency conditions and is known to have killed 150 people.**
12. **Designing an ad for a product whose frequent use could result in the user's death.**

Above: *Twelve Steps on a Graphic Designers Road to Hell*, Milton Glaser, (2004).

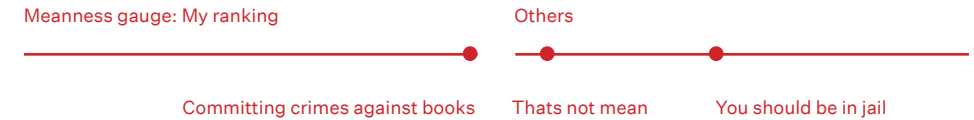
Encountering other people’s rankings — both in relation to my own and each other — made me aware of how far my own sense of accountability had shifted. I was a long way down the list on the road to hell! This engagement with ‘critical friends’ reintroduced an ethical friction that had largely disappeared during my solitary making process. I have included my own ‘meanness gauge’ (see left page) ranking for each of the interventions, alongside pulling others’ rankings from the workshop interaction to sit in contrast in the following chapter.

In *Theories of Reading*, literature researcher Karren Littau discusses how reading became perceived as potentially dangerous as it shifted from a public to a private form of entertainment. It removes the social scrutiny, unlike theatre, which is always public. Littau ponders, ‘...are the reasons for the novel’s potentially harmful effect to be found in ‘its introduction of the “fourth wall”’ (Littau, 2006, p. 64), where the materiality of the object becomes hidden by our immersion in its content. Similarly, many of my interventions occurred in isolation and were only shared afterwards with a limited audience. Which meant that my recognition of my own social training around the idea of the book was also hidden beyond my immediate reaction to the interventions. This lack of public witnessing permitted me to fall into the intimate and immersive world of material experimentation I was creating, which allowed for my growing numbness and justification of increasingly harmful acts towards books.

Littau refers to the way fiction also creates the feeling we are inside the world created within the pages of the book, characters seeming real and we are privately witnessing their thoughts and lives. I am forgetting that I’m holding an object and turning pages, sitting in my living room and not fighting battles with Greek gods. However, I am more interested in the ways in which this concept allows us to pay attention to the form of the book as one of the mechanisms by which we are encouraged to lose ourselves in the books we read.

As I’ve continued to be exposed to the creation of books, their fourth wall has increasingly broken, yet this awareness has not diminished the book’s power. They still hold the ability to transport me into their worlds and be captivated by the objects themselves.

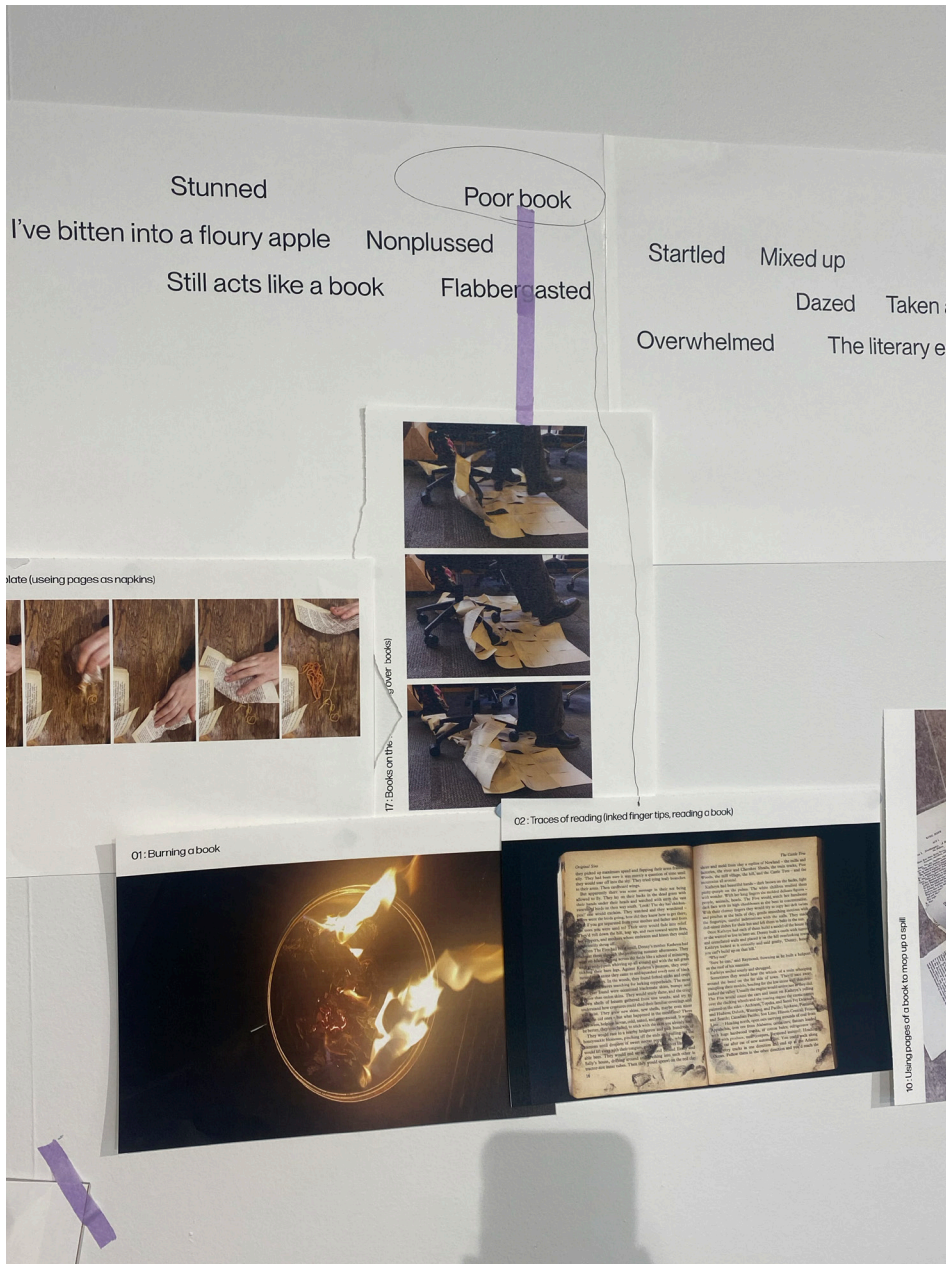
Throughout this work books and I have become intertwined in our own world, but the presence of others’ emotional reactions pulled me out of my private relationship with books and reinstated a sense of collective accountability of my treatment of books.



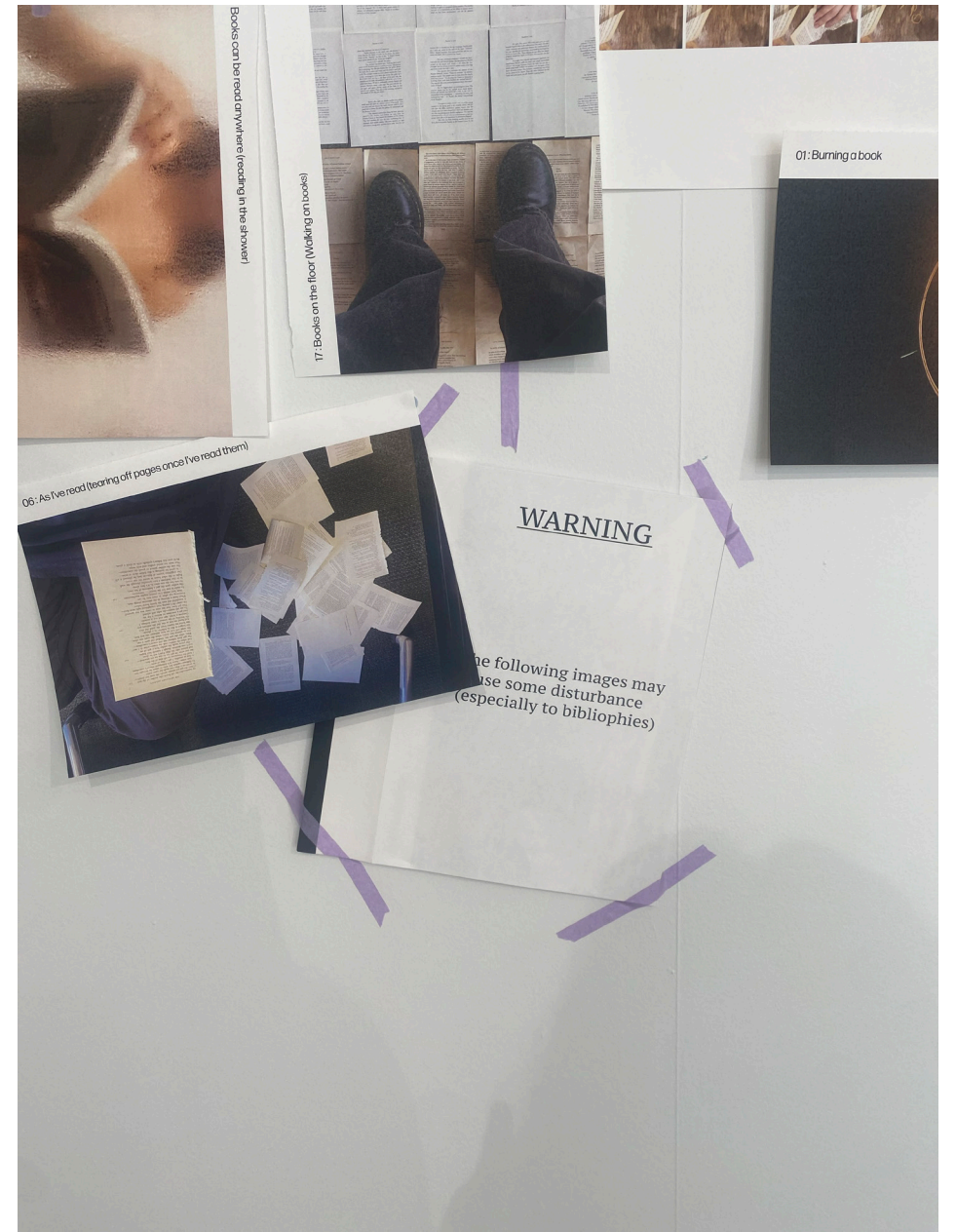
Above: My *Meanness gauge*
My own ranking in comparison to critical friends from the workshop interaction. Appearing with each intervention.

Surprised
I would do that
I do that
That's not that mean
Interesting
No milk in the fridge
That's a little bit mean
Stunned
Still acts like a book
Flabbergasted
Poor book
Amazed
Bewildered
I've bitten into a floury apple
Dazed
Stupefied
Nonplussed
Mixed up
Overwhelmed
Startled
The literary equivalent of graffiti
Dumbfounded
Confused
I can't look
Taken aback
Lost for words
Shocked
Very very mean
Bibliographic curity
Rattled
Astonished
Books don't deserve this
Is it still a book?
Speechless
Horrrifying
Criminal
I would never do that to a book!
You're going to hell
And you say that you love books?!Aghst
Paralysed
Numbed
Noplussed
Unreadable
Blood on your hands
The pages are screaming
You should be in jail
Committing crimes against books

Above: The text of my *Meanness gauge*



Above: *Meanness gauge* from *57 steps on a road to committing crimes against books* workshop, (2025).



Preface to the making: A note on the documentation

In artist Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), the work is not the photograph, it is the action of walking itself and the temporary line in the grass created from it, dissipating within hours of the work's creation.

The resulting photographs and video displayed are simply that: documentation. They are not the final work, just as the books that I have intervened with are not the work itself. While traces are left and books forever changed, this series of interventions are about the intimate moments of my engagement with the objects, and what the act itself reveals about not only the book, but also about myself and my relationship with them.



Above: *A Line Made by Walking*,
Richard Long, (1967).



Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Committing crimes against books

Thats not mean

You should be in jail

01. Burning a book

Before intervention:

**01. *Bond Plays: One*
by Eyre Methuen**

**02. *The Big Sleep*
by Raymond Chandler**

Tools:

**Bic lighter, kitchen pot,
and a barbecue**

After intervention:

01. Ashes in a jar

02. A burnt book

I didn't want to, it took weeks of contemplating, but I needed to do it to experience the act myself. I began with something that I knew was wrong, I had to push the limits of my personal beliefs about interacting with books.

I stood on my deck, hovering over the barbecue, a kitchen pot beneath the book for protection, fearful it might burst into flames the moment I held the flame beneath the pages. My hesitation turned to frustration as it proved difficult to keep the book alight. Slowly the pages dispersed into the surrounding air, a few ashes gathering in the pot.

Too late to turn back, I noticed a name inscribed on the inner cover. I had become so absorbed in the act that I had forgotten what it was: a book. But not just a book: someone's book. One that has been read, used, and loved enough for its owner to mark it as theirs.

I thought about how I would feel if this was my book and if someone was burning it, but then I thought about the fact that I'd bought this book at a second hand shop. I was giving it more life than it would ever have sitting on the shelves gathering dust, waiting to be read once again. I smelt like smoke, hands covered in ash. The book still managed to leave its mark and leave me red-handed.

Burning a book marked a threshold in this project. What I had begun doing was literally irreversible. It was my first step in being *mean* to books, although I was still far from piecing together that this was what I was doing.

At this stage, the work was influenced by my thinking around the future of the book. It felt as though in order to think about going forward I needed to go backwards — not just to the development of the format (Clay tablets, scrolls, codices etc), but to the wider cultural implications and uses of books. Books are the only printed matter that are supposed to last centuries, yet they can be destroyed with such ease. It felt wrong, extreme, dystopian. I couldn't help but wonder if we are shifting towards a Ray Bradbury world — maybe we already have. Bradbury's 1953 dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* presents a world where books have been outlawed and 'firemen' burn any that are found. It is a stance against censorship and a defence of literature in an increasingly mass media-based technologically driven society (Bauer, 2018).

I'm certainly not the first to burn a book. Such acts carry a long history, both as political gestures and propositions within art. British conceptual artist John Latham explored this territory through his *Skoob Towers Series*, stating that his actions were 'not in any degree a gesture of contempt for books or literature,' but rather an attempt to suggest that 'perhaps the cultural base has been burnt out' ('Skoob Tower Ceremonies', n.d.). Latham's works resonated with me because I also did not act with ill-natured intent, unlike the historical acts that burning books is associated with. Although books are sacred to me, it was essential that I experienced the act myself in order to begin to understand the object further.

Skoob Towers Ceremonies, John Latham, (1966).



* The first time that I did this intervention I didn't get the best documentation of it, so most of these images are from the second time I tried it, which I did towards the end of this research. Then, I held no hesitation or remorse, my relationship with books had shifted a lot since the beginning of this process.



* First time intervention with *Bond Plays: One*





* Second time intervention with *The Big Sleep*

00:02

00:26

00:29

00:31

00:18

00:26 00:32







Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

The literary equivalent of graffiti

I would do that

Overwhelmed

02. Traces of reading

Before intervention:

Original Sins
by Lisa Alther

Tools:

Print making ink and ink pad

After intervention:

A book covered
with black inky
finger prints

Although I know hypothetically that any time a book is read natural traces of wear are left, I'm not usually as aware of it as I am now, with my hands covered in ink. I attempted to read the book as I usually would. It felt wrong, I was wary with every movement. I was hyperconscious of where I was placing my hands, how I was turning the pages. I couldn't concentrate on the story, all I could think about was the inky fingerprints I was leaving.

Parts of the text become illegible as the ink seeps through the pages. My fingertips were slipping around, the ink resisting the glossy cover. My fingertips were stained from the ink for days afterwards. I felt like I was being held accountable for my actions, 'blood' on my hands. The book had physically left its impressions on me, as I had on it.

This emphasis on bodily trace resonates with artist Kelly Mark's *Object Carried For One Year* (1997). Mark carried a small aluminum bar in the back pocket of her jeans that registered an accumulation of marks, bumps and grazes from her daily routines. Sustained contact between body and object produced meaning through duration and physical evidence rather than representation.

Similarly, the clothing label Human Touch inks markers' hands during garment production so that human traces remains embedded within the finished object. In both cases, the resulting marks function as an index (Doane, 2007); a physical trace directly caused by contact rather than symbolic depiction. In my work, reading becomes a comparable act of inscription, allowing the book to retain a visible record of encounter — a direct imprint of lived action.

Object Carried For One Year, Kelly Mark, (1997).



Human Touch Clothing (est 2020).







Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Shocked

STOP!

03. Books don't mind the rain (but I mind my books minding the rain)

Pre intervention:

***A History of Silence
by Lloyd Jones***

Tools:

A rainy day

154 x 233 x 23 mm*

Post intervention:

154 x 233 x 42 mm

*All dimensions are listed in order by width by height
and by depth.

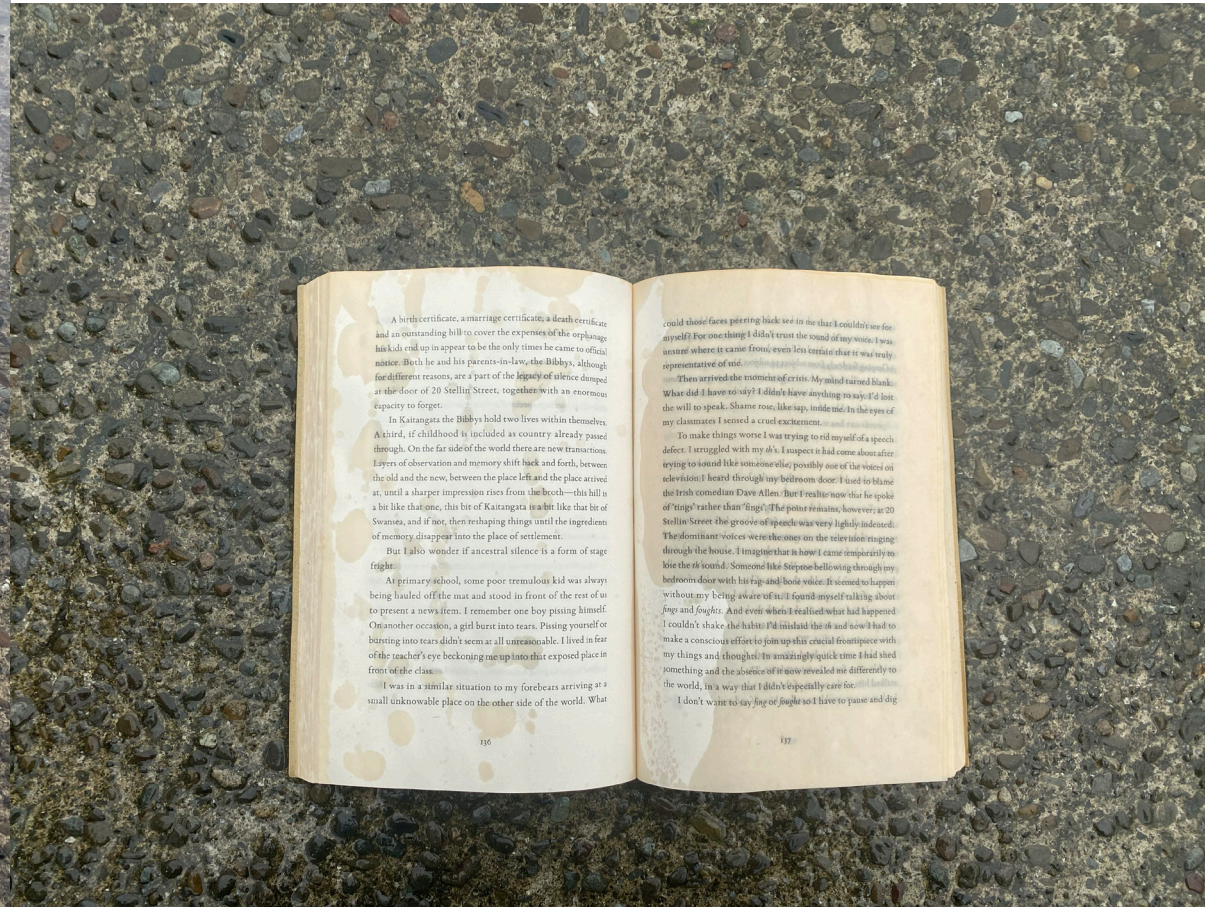
I carried the book downstairs, wrapped in my arms to offer it some protection from the rain. Standing undercover outside the building, I questioned how or if I was going to do this. Slowly, I edged out into the light misty rain and placed the book open, face up. Raindrops collected on the pages as I edged away, back to shelter. Watching from a distance felt easier, I couldn't see the damage being done, just the book sitting in a shallow puddle. When I returned parts of the pages had become transparent. The process was slow — it wasn't raining heavily — taking longer than I expected for the open pages to become fully wet.

I hate my books getting wet. Saturated or a single drop of rain, it's all the same. Water is a common enemy of the book. The pages become warped, thicker, and they change texture; the pages record the violation and archive the event. If I get caught in the rain with a book it gets shoved up my shirt for protection, or wrapped in a jumper and placed deep in my bag. If it's raining when I leave the house, I don't take a book at all — a crime in itself! This experiment challenged the deep-seated rules I have internalised, the ways I habitually protect my books, and the discomfort of acting against those instincts.

Much of the wear that I think about — marginalia, dog-eared pages — results from decisions made by the reader to interact with a book in a certain way. Whereas I usually avoid these types of decisions, in this experiment I passed control to the rain, testing my rules through deliberate violation. This experiment felt like a masochistic form of aversion therapy.

As with *Burning the book*, this book didn't simply receive the damage, it shifted from a passive object to an active participant. It acted, responded and co-determined the outcome of the experiment. I expected the harm to fail the book. But it did not. Its content remains intact, only a few pages slightly thicker with more of a grainy texture. Still able to function in the way I expect a book to. It forces me to ask, when does damage truly begin?

It is me who is uncomfortable with a book getting wet. The book itself doesn't seem to mind all that much. While water threatens a book's material integrity temporarily — pages warp and are more susceptible to getting ripped — it eventually dries, and arguably is more or less unchanged.





Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Lost for words

That's a little bit mean

Interesting

06. Tearing pages as read

Pre intervention:
Four Comedies
by Plautus

Tools:

Simply your hands and a bit
of force

Post intervention:
50 loose pages
and the front cover
and 199 page book
block still to be
finished reading

I sat on the couch — my afternoon reading spot — and, with each page I read, I tore it out, letting the pages accumulate around me. I felt no remorse; in fact, there was something faintly amusing about it. Normally, I can gauge my progress through a book by the weight shifting in my hands from right to left. Thank goodness for page numbers — if someone else wished to read this book they could reorder the pages.

This intervention sought to explore digital modes of consumption within a physical book. Doom scrolling into the abyss — a familiar act across social media platforms — but translating the swiping act to an upwards rip. Nowadays, I see more people scrolling on their phones than reading books in public. What would it mean to translate this endless consumption back into paper?

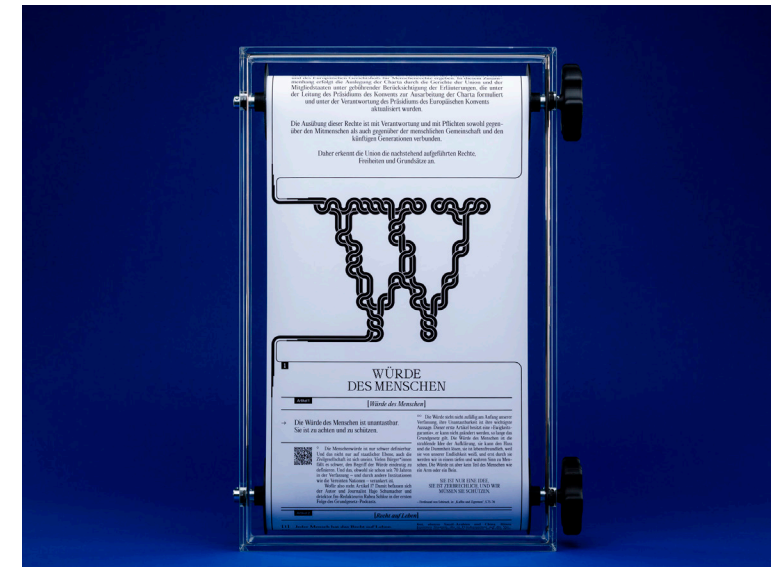
Some book artists have begun to explore related territory. Jonas Brüggemann's *Sc(hrif)trolle* (Brüggemann, 2022) presents a scrollable book which lacks traditional pages, meaning a reader can't jump ahead or navigate freely, binding the reader to the predetermined sequence of content. Similarly, Malena Winter's *0001–1282* (Winter, n.d.) questions the medium of the book by drawing on the vertical videos format common to social media. Both of these works mimic mechanics of endless scrolling within an analogue form.

While *Sc(hrif)trolle* is physically contained within its box, *0001–1282*, like my act of tearing pages as I read, renders consumption visible. The remains of my reading become evidence: a public trace of private engagement.

Tearing pages as read highlights that even when performed in sight of others, reading is a private and personal act. As sociologist Gray Alan Fine and interdisciplinary theatre and drama Ph.D student Shannon K. Fitzsimons discusses in *The Secret Lives of readers*, 'we feel a moral obligation to read in a way that maintains a measure of dignity' (Fine & Fitzsimons, 2010, p. 353). We are judged not only by what we read, but how we read. My interventions — particularly this intervention — are acts I would be hesitant to perform in public for fear of judgment. They sit far from socially accepted normal ways to interact with a book.

Fine and Fitzsimons also note, 'We chatter about what we read, but only rarely do we discuss how we read' (Fine & Fitzsimons, 2010, p. 353). In the context of this research, how one reads becomes as important — perhaps more important — than what one reads. Reading rituals and the habits an individual has with books reveal one's relations to the book as an object. By disrupting conventional reading behaviour, I aim to expose the unspoken rules and my own personal, private act of engaging with books.

Sc(hrif)trolle,
Jonas Brüggemann,
(2022).

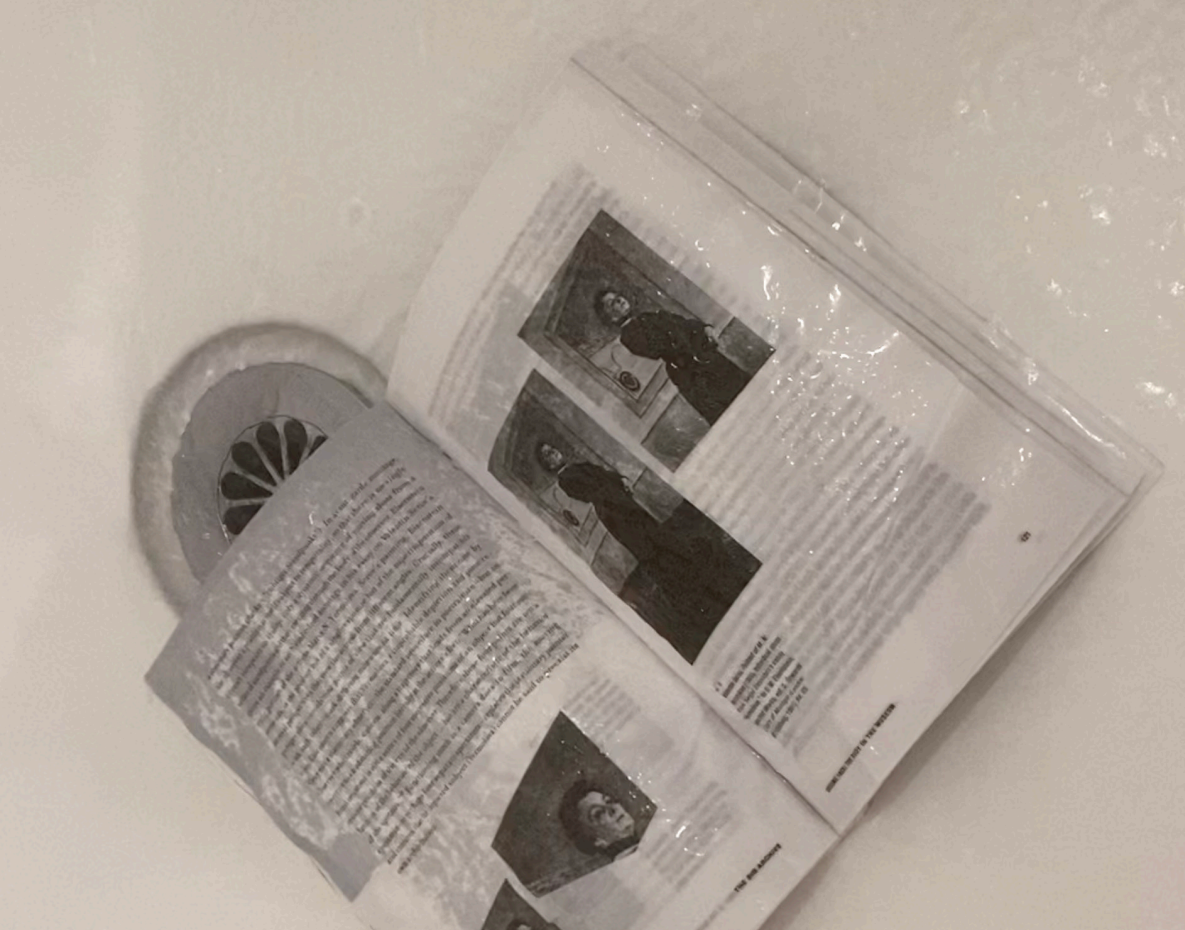


0001–1282,
Malena Winter,
(n.d.).









Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Still acts like a book

I would do that

Unreadable

07. Reading in the shower

Pre intervention:
The Big Archive
by Seven Spieker

Tools:

A shower

64 x 227 x 15 mm

Post intervention:

**A warped and
wrinkled book with
zero drape**

164 x 227 x 45 mm

I read any chance I can get. I have my ritual selected locations but reading in the shower is a new addition to my list. Books are often read in the bath, so why not in the shower?

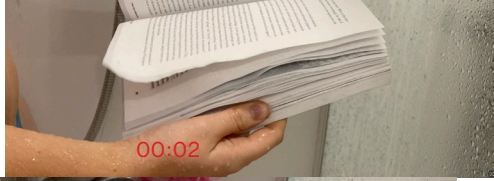
For me, a shower is a daily ritual. I usually shower in the evening around 9pm when I finish my evening work. I shower to cleanse myself physically and mentally. It is an activity to signal to my body that it's time to wind down, shut off my brain and begin getting ready for bed. The peace that the heat bestows on me lets my worries follow the water down the drain. Likewise, reading is a ritual which appears throughout my day — also something I use to pause and escape into my mind and the world created by the author.

Reading is 'isolating, private, and free' (Grobe, 2016, p. 568). Bringing a book into a space which is calming, restful and re-charging, together the book and I exist in a vulnerable state: a combined intimacy. I stood in the shower, slid down the wall, curled up with the book across my knees; my usual cocoon reading position. As I'd previously explored in *Books don't mind the rain (but I mind my books not minding the rain)*, having exposed my fear of a book getting wet, I had no hesitation entering the shower. By the time the pages were a little wet, the whole book was. It was the inevitable outcome that I wasn't concerned with.

Reading is more than what one chooses to read; it is also *how* one reads. The act of reading is not only formed through tactile interactions with the book, it also is constructed of the rituals around the act: making a cup of tea to begin reading with a hot mug in hand or getting a snack to accompany you. The location is a part of what 'constitutes a reading ritual ... We deliberately select spaces in which to cocoon ourselves as we slide into the reading mind' (Fine & Fitzsimons, 2010, p. 354). These choices — place, ambiance and preparation — position reading as a practice that extends far beyond the book as a material object.

It is also through these rituals that reading becomes my own intimate activity, and I'm able to sink into a book with such focus 'Alive to the book and dead to the world' as English scholar Christopher Grobe (2016) describes it in *On Book: The Performance of Reading*. My surroundings become invisible to me when I'm reading, the book holding such control over me that location becomes irrelevant. Whilst taking a book into the shower meant that I was able to continue reading, the experience was heightened as I'd become acutely aware of myself in relation to the object and the vulnerable position that we were both in. Although individually relaxing activities, when combined this was replaced with feelings of stress and frustration; the pages adhering together and easily ripping when attempting to turn to the next. The affordances of the codex allow for simple user interaction; a book can be interacted with anywhere, but that doesn't mean that they should be.

**I was as
vulnerable
as the book**



00:02

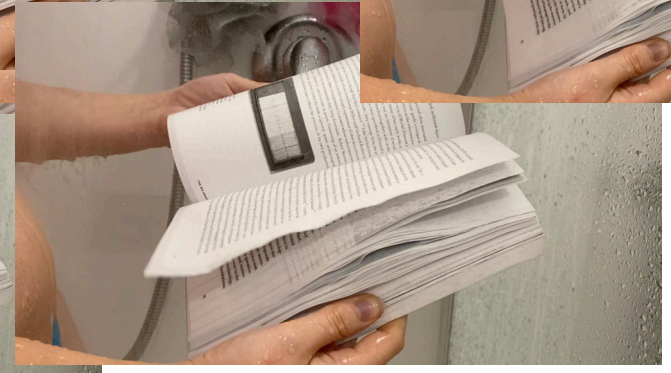
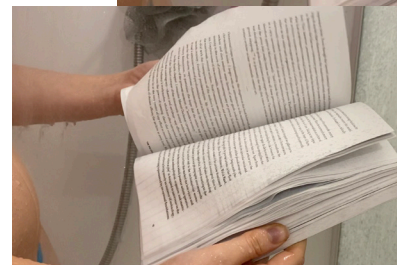
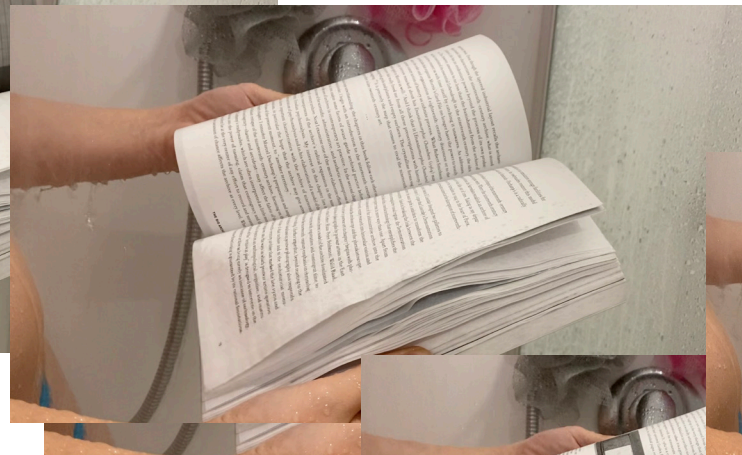
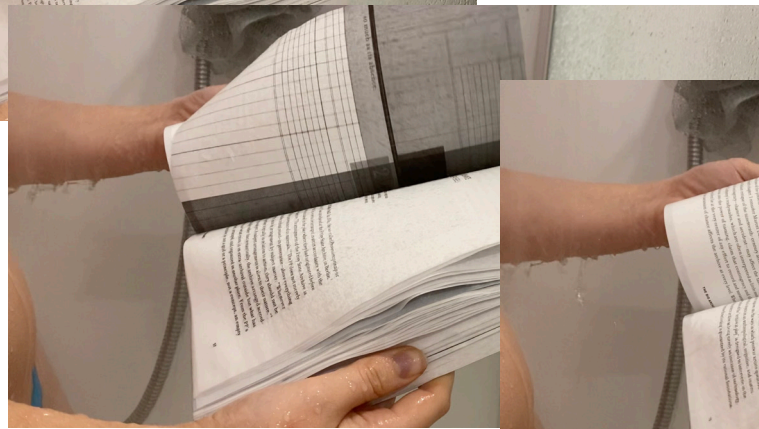
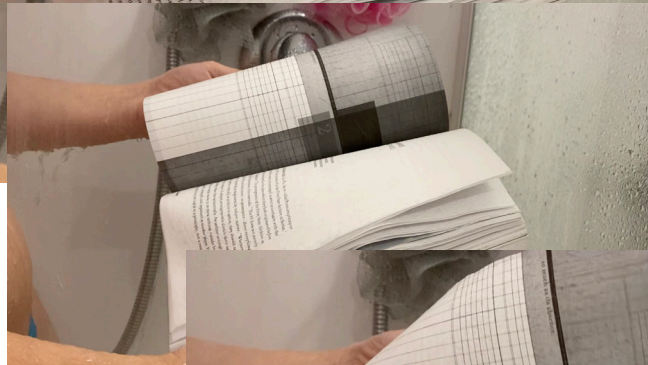
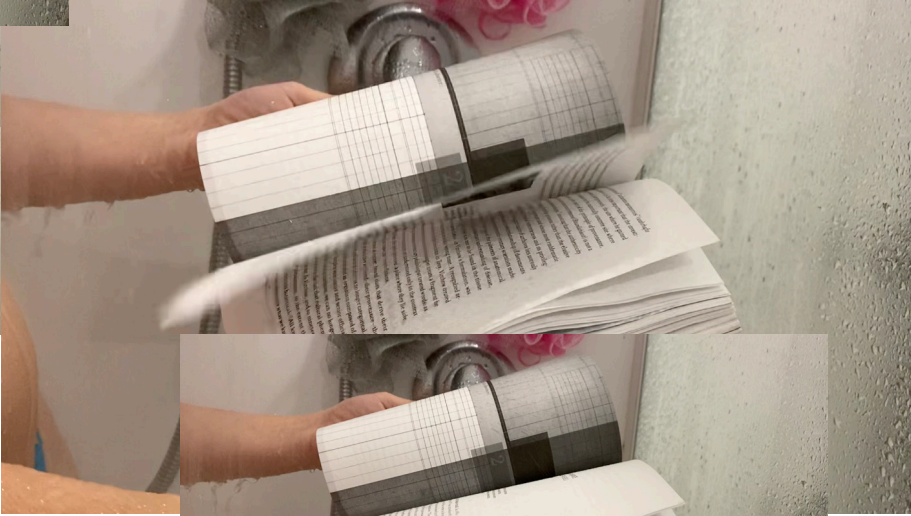
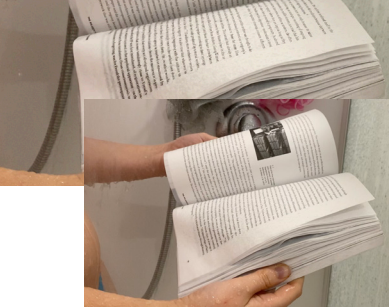
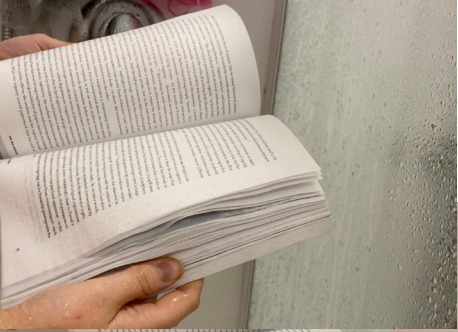
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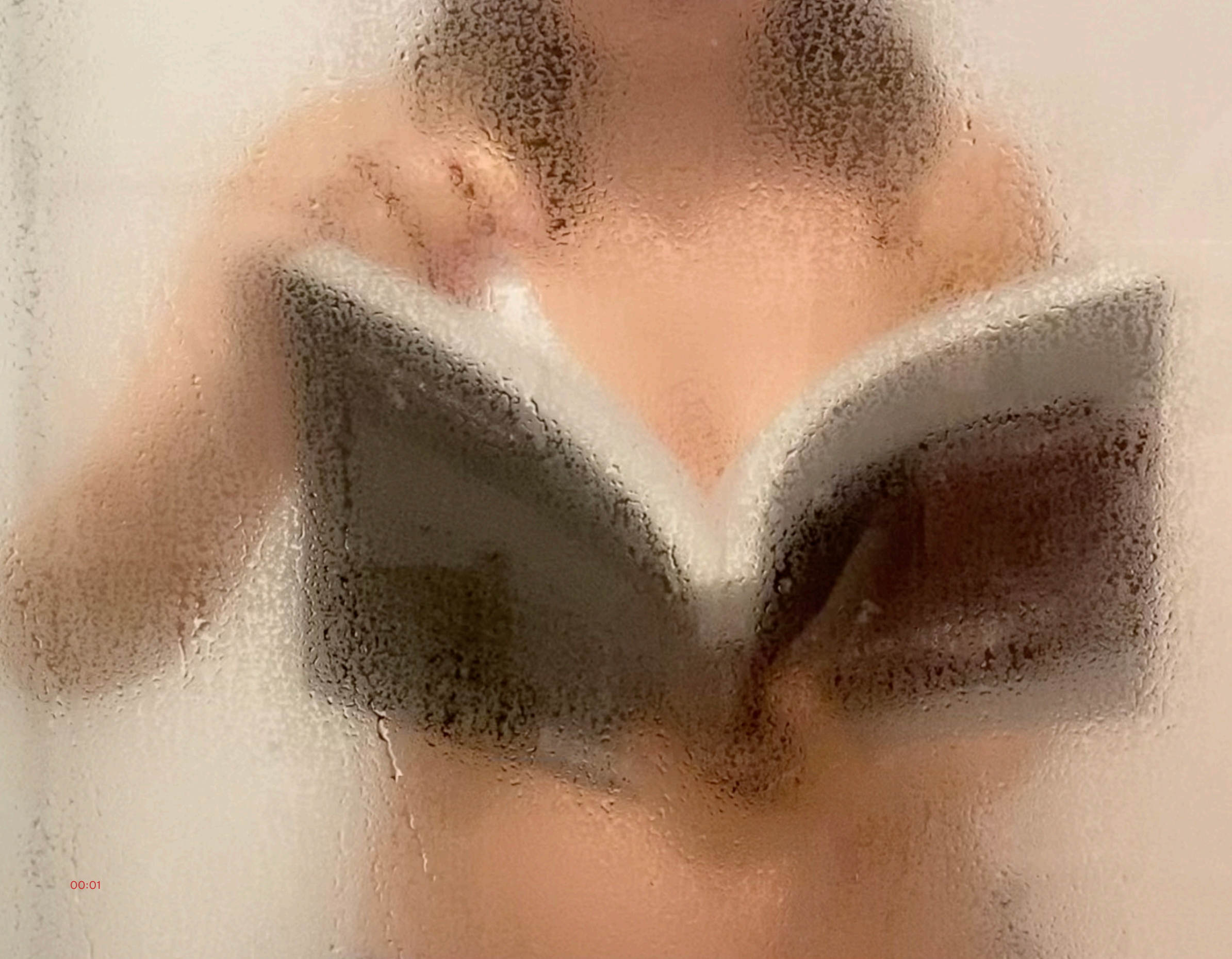
00:05

00:07

00:08

00:011







00:04



00:06



00:07

Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Stunned

Confused

Blood on your hands

14. Half the Weight

Pre intervention:
Kid-wrangling
by Kaz Cooke

Tools:

A reasonable amount of force
228 x 157 x 54 mm

Post intervention:
Two halves of a book
Half 01:
228 x 157 x 29 mm
Half 02:
228 x 157 x 25 mm

I was in conversation with a group of friends about reading, when one friend was saying that they don't like to read the final pages of books that they're particularly enjoying, as this manifests as a physical way of never letting it end. Another says that they knew someone who would tear a book in half so that they didn't have to carry around the whole thing once they'd read part of it. So I ripped a book in half.

Books present us with a sense of ownership, you're able to inscribe your name on the inner cover; the traces one leaves define it as yours. This intervention reminds us of the reader's role in the book, and as poet and educator Amaranth Borsuk states in *The Book*, it 'forces us to reckon with its materiality and, by extension, our own embodiment' (Borsuk, 2018, p. 147).

Unlike most of the previous interventions, this is practical and calm, adapting the form to suit my desired way of using a book. Nothing in the book has changed, the content remains the same. The book is, in many ways still intact, just in two pieces. Yet it feels so wrong. Am I a book murderer for tearing a book in half in order to make it more portable?

The physical format of the book feels fixed, yet I've adapted it to my own ways of reading. The discomfort reveals the strong association of the integrity of the form. Even when the text remains untouched, altering the physical structures feels like a violation.



00:08



00:09

From future to present

The full acceptance

During the middle of this process, there was a prolonged period which I wasn't entirely sure what this work was. It had shifted away from the future of the book towards an exploration of its present state. From this point on I understood this work for what it is now.

Although I was reluctant to admit it, the work was shifting away from an exploration of the future of the book. In truth I don't know if it was ever really about the future of the book. I felt unanchored; I didn't yet know what the work was without this framing, and the uncertainty held me in an uncomfortable place of vulnerability.

I questioned the unexpected: do I even like books? Books have become my entire world. I read every day — both for pleasure and research. They fill my home and tower over my desk. I design them, destroy them, alter them, and attempt to understand them. Yet, writing now, months removed from some of these interventions but even more deeply surrounded by books, I wonder whether the immersion had altered my judgment.

Philosopher Marshall McLuhan argues in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* that when humans extend themselves through media, they often become numb to the extension itself. The medium becomes so integrated into experience that one stops noticing it (McLuhan, 1964). Just as a reader can become so deeply immersed in a book that they forget that they are reading at all, it's almost as though I've become lost in reading one large book. The book's fourth wall was securely in place.

Despite this growing familiarity, my hesitations still remained. I found myself in disbelief at my own actions. I never set out with the intent to hurt books but my actions had begun to influence my reading habits. Reading now feels incomplete without a pencil in hand, and those accidental dents in the covers no longer bother me — at least, not as much.

Months before beginning my Master's, a close friend showed me her copy of *Call Me by Your Name* by André Aciman, which she had submerged in the lake in northern Italy — physically connecting the book to the place — where scenes from the film adaptation were set. I was horrified at her actions. The book had swollen to nearly twice its size; mould spotted its pages, which had warped and taken on a grainy texture. She now reminds me of my reaction with amusement, as I have since done far worse to books.

As I began to listen to the work itself more — to the books — I became increasingly open to the uncertainty that they might offer. They gradually revealed themselves not as passive materials, but as active participants within the interventions. Rather than serving as the subject through which ideas were tested, they began to shape the direction and meaning of the work.

There was never a question, for me, about whether books were dying. If anything the interventions were demonstrating the opposite, their resilience continually asserted their vitality.

The work shifted away from speculation about the future and towards an engagement with the book's current existence.

Giovanni's Room: part two — a new type of reader

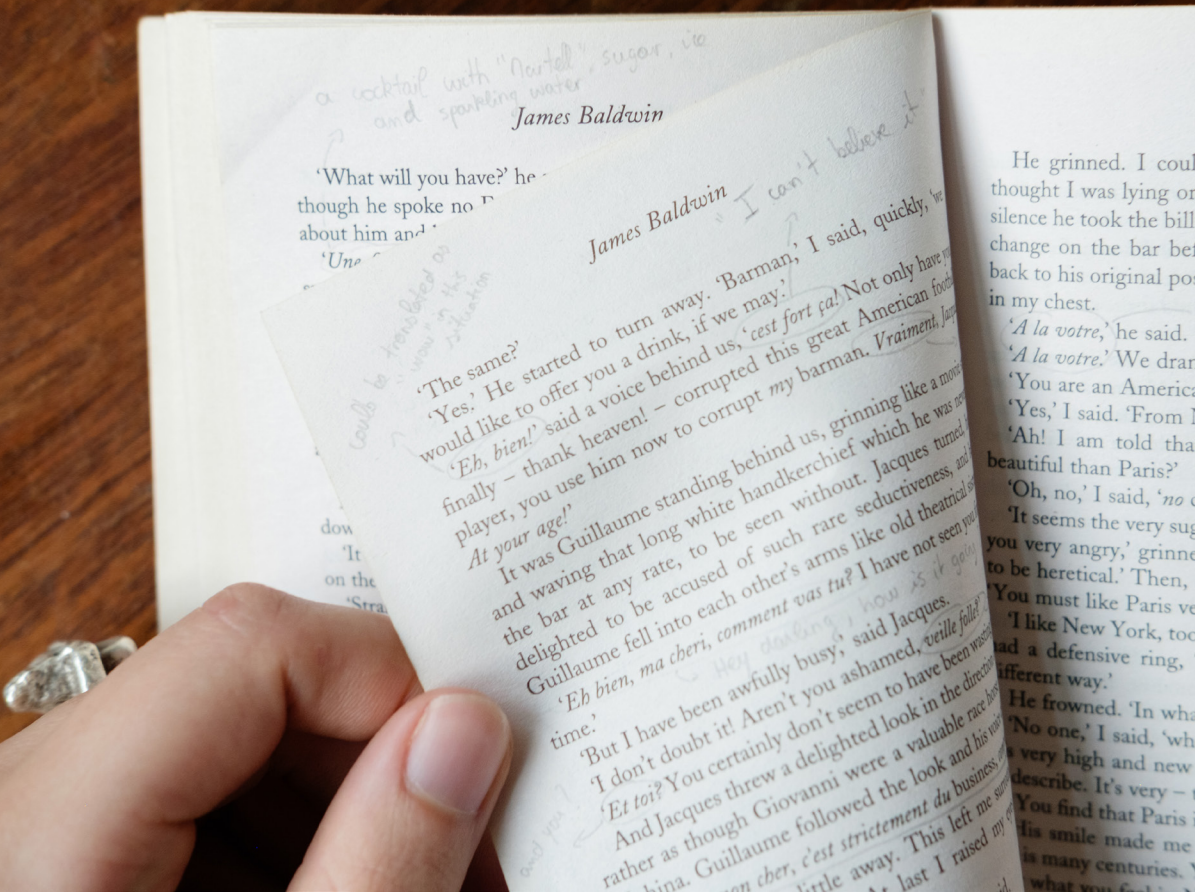
Throughout the text, passages of untranslated French remain. After lending my copy to my Grandad, he commented that while he enjoyed the novel, he wanted to know more of the story contained in French. In response, I lent it to a friend from France, who at my request wrote the translations in the margins, transforming the book from a mere copy of *Giovanni's Room* into an irreplaceable object; a shared experience.

As academics Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre note in *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*, contemporary printed books often function as social objects, obtaining value through circulation and shared use rather than remaining fixed or pristine (Schaefer & Starre, 2019). My copy of *Giovanni's Room* has now become singular. Separated from thousands of identical editions, it functions as a site of layered dialogue: between myself and Baldwin, and myself and my friend, mediated through his handwriting.

For a few months the book was at his side, following him around, and living in his bag waiting for moments to read and translate further. Not only does it contain hundreds of new words, pencil marks of the translations and further explanations, but the object has gained traces from its travels. Dents in the cover, the bottom half of the spine and surrounding pages expanded from what I can only assume was a spill of water. When I received the book back I was in awe, yet I could still feel my skin crawling.

And yet as much as my personal relationship with books has shifted — the interactions had made me care less about my own practice of reading. I can see the beauty in the traces of reading, however there is still a part of me that needs my books to stay perfect and look untouched.

Left: *Giovanni's Room*, Lamp Light Book photo series
Kayla Lythgoe and Michael Madden-Smith
(2025).



could be translated as 'you in the situation' ^{really}

'The same?'
 'Yes.' He started to turn away. 'Barman,' I said, quickly, 'we would like to offer you a drink, if we may.'
 'Eh, bien!' said a voice behind us, 'cest fort gal!' Not only have you finally - thank heaven! - corrupted this great American football player, you use him now to corrupt my barman. *Vraiment, Jacques! At your age!*

It was Guillaume standing behind us, grinning like a movie star, and waving that long white handkerchief which he was never, in the bar at any rate, to be seen without. Jacques turned, hugely delighted to be accused of such rare seductiveness, and he and Guillaume fell into each other's arms like old theatrical sisters.
 'Eh bien, ma chéri, comment vas tu? I have not seen you for a long time.'
 'But I have been awfully busy,' said Jacques.
 'I don't doubt it! Aren't you ashamed, *voilà folle!*'
 'Et toi? You certainly don't seem to have been tasting your time.'
 And Jacques threw a delighted look in the direction of Giovanni, rather as though Giovanni were a valuable race horse or a rare bit of china. Guillaume followed the look and his voice dropped.
 'Ah, ça, mon cher, c'est strictement du business, *comprendstu?*'
 They moved a little away. This left me surrounded, abruptly, with an awful silence. At last I raised my eyes and looked at Giovanni, who was watching me.
 'I think you offered me a drink,' he said.
 'Yes,' I said. 'I offered you a drink.'
 'I drink no alcohol while I work, but I will take a Coca-Cola.'
 He picked up my glass. 'And for you - it is the same?'
 'The same.' I realized I was quite happy to be talking with him and this realization made me shy. And I felt menaced since Jacques was no longer at my side. Then I realized that I would have to pay, for this round anyway; it was impossible to tug Jacques' sleeve for the money as though I were his ward. I coughed and put my ten thousand franc note on the bar.
 'You are rich,' said Giovanni, and set my drink before me.
 'But no. No. I simply have no change.'

He grinned. I could not tell whether he grinned because he thought I was lying or because he knew I was telling the truth. In silence he took the bill and rang it up and carefully counted out my change on the bar before me. Then he filled his glass and went back to his original position at the cash-register. I felt a tightening in my chest.
 'A la votre,' he said. Cheers! - PS: we say 'you had met' in Brittany
 'A la votre.' We drank.
 'You are an American?' he asked at last.
 'Yes,' I said. 'From New York.'
 'Ah! I am told that New York is very beautiful. Is it more beautiful than Paris?'
 'Oh, no,' I said, 'no city is more beautiful than Paris -'
 'It seems the very suggestion that one could be is enough to make you very angry,' grinned Giovanni. 'Forgive me. I was not trying to be heretical.' Then, more soberly and as though to appease me, 'You must like Paris very much.'
 'I like New York, too,' I said, uncomfortably aware that my voice had a defensive ring, 'but New York is very beautiful in a very different way.'
 He frowned. 'In what way?'
 'No one,' I said, 'who has never seen it can possibly imagine it. It's very high and new and electric - exciting.' I paused. 'It's hard to describe. It's very - twentieth century.'
 'You find that Paris is not of this century?' he asked with a smile. His smile made me feel a little foolish. 'Well,' I said, 'Paris is old, is many centuries. You feel, in Paris, all the time gone by. That isn't what you feel in New York -' He was smiling. I stopped.
 'What do you feel in New York?' he asked.
 'Perhaps you feel,' I told him, 'all the time to come. There's such power there, everything is in such movement. You can't help wondering - I can't help wondering - what it will all be like - many years from now.'
 'Many years from now? When we are dead and New York is old?'
 'Yes,' I said. 'When everyone is tired, when the world - for Americans - is not so new.'

and Jacques, pushing all of us before him as though we were his chickens, said with that grin: 'We can't stand here in the cold and argue. If we can't eat inside, we can drink. Alcohol kills all microbes.'
 And Guillaume brightened suddenly - he was really remarkable, as though he carried, hidden somewhere on his person, a needle filled with vitamins, which automatically, at the blackening hour, discharged itself into his veins. 'Il y a les jeunes dedans,' he said, and we went in.
 Indeed there were young people, half a dozen at the zinc counter before glasses of red and white wine, along with others, not young at all. A pockmarked boy and a very rough-looking girl were playing the pinball machine near the window. There were a few people sitting at the tables in the back, served by an astonishingly clean-looking waiter. In the gloom, the dirty walls, the sawdust-covered floor, his white jacket gleamed like snow. Behind these tables one caught a glimpse of the kitchen and the surly, obese cook. He lumbered about like one of those over-loaded trucks outside, wearing one of those high, white hats, and with a dead cigar stuck between his lips.
 Behind the counter sat one of those absolutely inimitable and indomitable ladies, produced only in the city of Paris, but produced there in great numbers, who would be as outraged and unsettling in any other city as a mermaid on a mountain-top. All over Paris they sit behind their counters like a mother bird in a nest and brood over the cash-register as though it were an egg. Nothing occurring under the circle of heaven where they sit escapes their eye, if they have ever been surprised by anything, it was only in a dream - a dream they long ago ceased having. They are neither ill-nor good-natured, though they have their days and styles, and they know, in the way, apparently, that other people know when they have to go to the bathroom, everything about everyone who enters their domain. Though some are white-haired and some not, some fat, some thin, some grandmothers and some but lately virgins, they all have exactly the same shrewd, vacant, all-registering eye; it is difficult to believe that they ever cried for milk, or looked at the

sun; it seems they must have come into the world hungry for banknotes, and squinting helplessly, unable to focus their eyes until they came to rest on a cash-register.
 This one's hair is black and grey and she has a face which comes from Brittany; and she, like almost everyone else standing at the bar, knows Giovanni and, after her fashion, likes him. She has a big, deep bosom and she clasps Giovanni to it; and a big, deep voice.
 'Ah, mon pote!' she cries. 'Tu es revenu! You have come back at last! *Salaud!* Now that you are rich and have found rich friends you never come to see us any more! *Canaille!*'
 And she beams at us, the 'rich' friends, with a friendliness deliciously, deliberately vague; she would have no trouble reconstructing every instant of our biographies from the moment we were born until this morning. She knows exactly who is rich - and how rich - and she knows it isn't me. For this reason, perhaps, there was a click of speculation infinitesimally double behind her eyes when she looked at me. In a moment, however, she knows that she will understand it all.
 'You know how it is,' says Giovanni, extricating himself and throwing back his hair, 'when you work, when you become serious, you have no time to play.'
 'Trens,' she says, with mockery. 'Sans blague!'
 'But I assure you,' says Giovanni, 'even when you are a young man like me, you get very tired' - she laughs - 'and you go to sleep early' - she laughs again - 'and alone,' says Giovanni, as though this proved everything, and she clicks her teeth in sympathy and laughs again.
 'And now,' she says, 'are you coming or going? Have you come for breakfast or have you come for a nightcap? *Nom de Dieu!* you do not look very serious, I believe you need a drink.'
 'Bien sûr,' says someone at the bar, 'after such hard work he needs a bottle of white wine - and perhaps a few dozen oysters.'
 Everybody laughs. Everybody, without seeming to, is looking at us and I am beginning to feel like part of a travelling circus. Everybody, also, seems very proud of Giovanni.

at once wounding and charming the ear, before and behind, and on either side of our taxi - our taxi driver, and Giovanni, too, roared back. The multitude of Paris seems to be dressed in blue everyday but Sunday, when, for the most part, they put on an unbelievably festive black. Here they were now, in blue, disputing, every inch, our passage, with their wagons, handtrucks, camions, their bursting baskets carried at an angle steeply self-confident, on the back. A red-faced woman, burdened with fruit, shouted - to Giovanni, the driver, to the world - a particularly vivid *cochonerie*, to which the driver and Giovanni, at once, at the top of their lungs, responded, though the fruit lady had already passed beyond our sight and perhaps no longer even remembered her precisely obscene conjectures. We crawled along, for no one had yet told the driver where to stop, and Giovanni and the driver, who had, it appeared, immediately upon entering Les Halles, been transformed into brothers, exchanged speculations, unflattering in the extreme, concerning the hygiene, language, private parts, and habits, of the citizens of Paris. (Jacques and Guillaume were exchanging speculations, unspeakably less good-natured, concerning every passing male.) The pavements were slick with leavings, mainly cast-off, rotten leaves, flowers, fruit and vegetables which had met with disaster natural and slow, or abrupt. And the walls and corners were combed with *grignons*, dull-burning, makeshift braziers, cafes, restaurants, and smoky yellow bistros - of these last, some so small that they were little more than diamond shaped, enclosed corners holding bottles and a zinc-covered counter. At all these points, men, young, old, middle-aged, powerful, powerful even in the various fashions in which they had met, or were meeting, their various ruin; and women, more than making up, in shrewdness and patience, in an ability to count and weigh - and shout - whatever they might lack in muscle; though they did not, really, seem to lack much. Nothing here reminded me of home, though Giovanni recognized, revelled in it all.
 'I know a place,' he told the driver, '*res bon marché*' - and told the driver where it was. It developed that it was one of the driver's favorite rendezvous.

'Where is this place?' asked Jacques, petulantly. I thought we were going to - and he named another place.
 'You are joking,' said Giovanni, with contempt. 'That place is very bad and very expensive, it is only for tourists. We are not tourists,' he added, to me, 'When I first came to Paris I worked in Les Halles - a long time, too, *Nom de Dieu, quelle boulot!* I pray always never to do that again.' And he regarded the streets through which we passed with a sadness which was not less real for being a little theatrical and self-mocking.
 Guillaume said, from his corner of the cab: 'Tell him who rescued you.'
 'Ah, yes,' said Giovanni, 'behold my saviour, my *patron!*' He was silent a moment. Then: 'You do not regret it, do you? I have not done you any harm? You are pleased with my work?'
 'Mais oui,' said Guillaume.
 Giovanni sighed. '*Bien sûr!*' He looked out of the window again, again whistling. We came to a corner remarkably clear. The taxi stopped.
 'Là,' said the driver.
 'Là,' Giovanni echoed.
 I reached for my wallet but Giovanni sharply caught my hand, conveying to me with an angry flick of his eyelash the intelligence that the least these dirty old men could do was *pay*. He opened the door and stepped out into the street. Guillaume had not reached for his wallet and Jacques paid for the cab.
 'Ugh,' said Guillaume, staring at the door of the cafe where we stood. 'I am sure this place is infested with vermin. Do you want to poison us?'
 'It's not the outside you're going to eat,' said Giovanni. 'You are in much more danger of being poisoned in those dreadful, chic places you always go to, where they always have the face clean, *mais, mon Dieu, les fesses!*' He grinned. '*Fais-moi confiance.* Why would I want to poison you? Then I would have no job and I have only just found out that I want to live.'
 He and Guillaume, Giovanni still smiling, exchanged a look which I would not have been able to read even if I had dared try;

'Beautiful logic,' I said. 'You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go there?'
 He laughed. 'Well, isn't it true? You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back.'
 'I seem,' I said, 'to have heard this song before.'
 'Ah, yes,' said Giovanni, 'and you will certainly hear it again. It is one of those songs that somebody, somewhere, will always be singing.'
 We rose and started walking. 'And what would happen,' I asked, idly, 'if I shut my ears?'
 He was silent for a long while. Then: 'You do, sometimes, remind me of the kind of man who is tempted to put himself in prison in order to avoid being hit by a cat.'
 'That,' I said, sharply, 'would seem to apply much more to you than to me.'
 'What do you mean?' he asked.
 'I'm talking about that room, that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?'
 'Buried myself? Forgive me, *mon cher Américain*, but Paris is not like New York, it is not full of palaces for boys like me. Do you think I should be living in Versailles instead?'
 'There must - there must,' I said, 'be other rooms.'
 'Ca ne manque, les chambres.' The world is full of rooms - big rooms, little rooms, round rooms, square ones, rooms high up, rooms low down - all kinds of rooms! What kind of room do you think Giovanni should be living in? How long do you think it took me to find the room I have? And since when, since when' - he stopped and beat with his forefinger on my chest - 'have you so hated the room? Since when? Since yesterday, since always? *Dis-moi!*'
 Facing him, I faltered. 'I don't hate it. I - I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.'
 His hands dropped to his sides. His eyes grew big. He laughed. 'Hurt my feelings! Am I now a stranger that you speak to me like that, with such an American politeness?'
 'All I mean, baby, is that I wish we could move.'

'We can move. Tomorrow! Let us go to a hotel. Is that what you want? *Le Crillon peut-être?*'
 I sighed, speechless, and started walking again.
 'I know,' he burst out, after a moment, 'I know! You want to leave Paris, you want to leave the room - ah! you are wicked. *Comme tu es méchant!*'
 'You misunderstand me,' I said. 'You misunderstand me.'
 He smiled grimly, to himself. '*L'aspère bien!*'
 Later, when we were back in the room, putting the loose bricks Giovanni had taken out of the wall into a sack, he asked me, 'This girl of yours - have you heard from her lately?'
 'Not lately,' I said. 'I did not look up.' 'But I expect her to turn up in Paris almost any day now.'
 He stood up, standing in the center of the room, under the light, looking at me. I stood up, too, half smiling, but also, in some strange, dim way, a little frightened.
 'Viens m'embrasser,' he said.
 I was vividly aware that he held a brick in his hand, I held a brick in mine. It really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to him, we would use these bricks to beat each other to death.
 Yet, I could not move at once. We stared at each other across a narrow space that was full of danger, that almost seemed to roar, like a flame.
 'Come,' he said.
 I dropped my brick and went to him. In a moment I heard his fall. And at moments like this I felt that we were merely enduring and committing the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder.

How can auto-ethnographic and practice-led design research be used to further understand my relationship with books, and establish their meaning within my design practice?

The story of the research question: part two

It feels strange in a piece of academic writing, to have the research question over half-way through the text. But, as I said in *The story of the research question: part one* (page 23) it developed organically, only resolving through my 'interventions' and through 'making and unmaking'.

I came to understand that I was exploring the book, my relationship with it as a reader, bibliophile and an emerging book designer and what that can reveal to further inform my practice. My research question took shape, becoming:

How can auto-ethnographic and practice-led design research be used to further understand my relationship with books, and establish their meaning within my design practice?



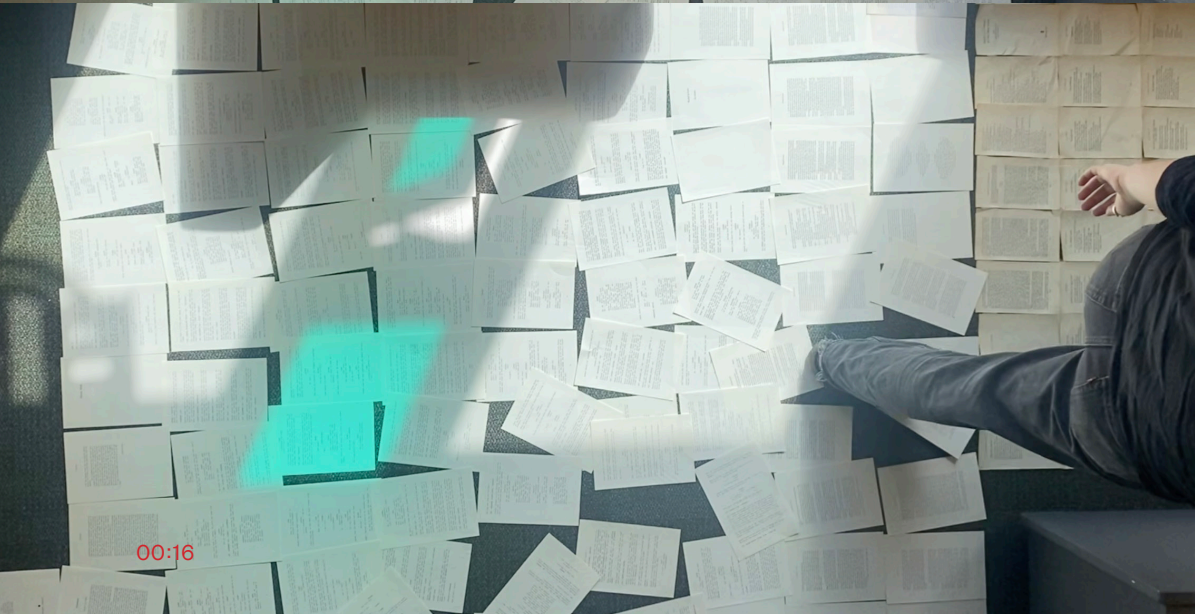
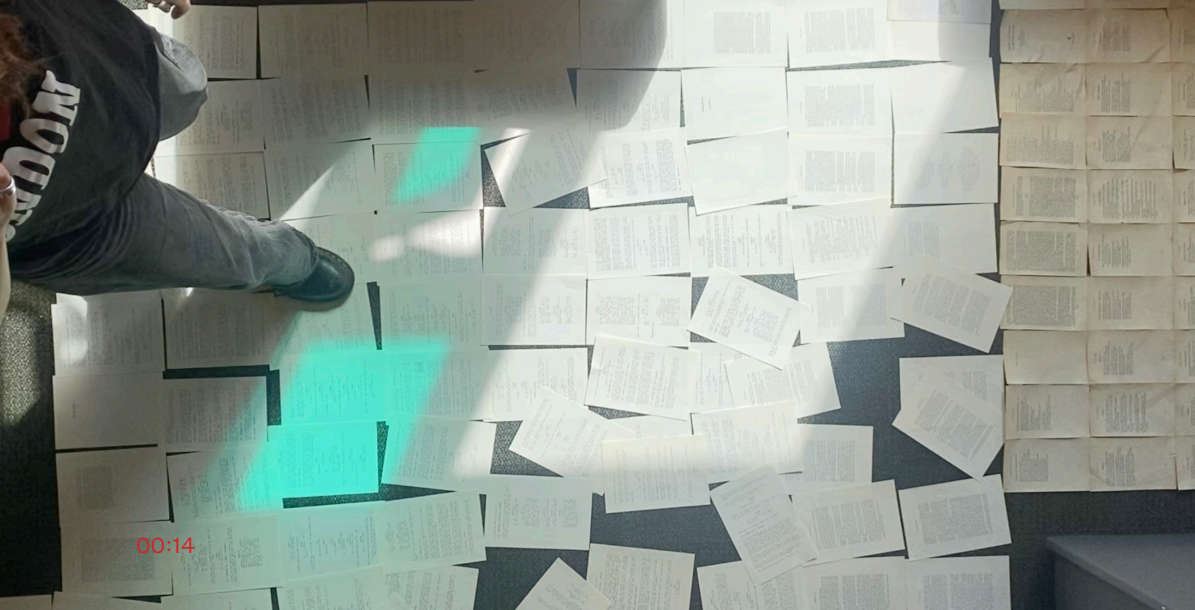
So, why not my books?

None of the books that I've used for the interventions have been my own — a point I've been frequently questioned about — but it is only in retrospect that I feel I might be able to commit such an act to one of my own books. The books not being mine made it easier for me to be 'mean' to them. Regardless of not having read and formed an intimate relationship with these books, I still had intense reactions to what I was doing to them.

Even now, if I did select one of my own, I wouldn't choose a book I value or have read and formed an attachment to, rather I would choose one I dislike, or simply a book that could be easily replaced.

The return of the annotated *Giovanni's Room*, alongside the interventions I had undertaken, helped reveal the role of the book as a social object, existing in a network of relations. It is both a shared vessel and an intimate object to be understood uniquely by each reader. It is only in drawing this work to a conclusion that I have recognised that this hesitation reveals an implicit hierarchy within the typologies of books. Despite appearing the same, books are not experienced as equal objects.

Left: *A handful of my books, Lamp Light Book photo series*
Kayla Lythgoe and Michael Madden-Smith
(2025).



Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Is this still a book?

There's no milk
in the fridge

I can't look

I would never do
that to a book!

Poor book

16. Please walk on the book

Pre intervention:

01. *Short and Sweet: 101 very short poems*

Edited by Simon Armitage

02. *Electric Mind*
by Diana Thater

Tools:

Guillotine, tape, people willing to walk on books (difficult to find)

01. 172 x 130 x 90 mm

02. 290 x 151 x 17 mm

Post intervention:
Two flat books,
covering 6.04 m²

Using a guillotine, I cut the spine from a book. Laying their pages on the ground and taping their edges together.

I wasn't fazed by my actions, yet I carried out the task with care.

I left the book in my shared studio space for several days as an open invitation. People avoided walking across it, instead stepping or jumping around; worried about muddy shoes. I had to say 'Please walk on the book, that's what it's there for'. I added another book to the floor, extending the surface until walking across them became unavoidable. I myself didn't think twice about strolling across. Yet, several people couldn't bring themselves to walk across the book and it was others' careful movements that only made my lack of hesitation more visible.

I hadn't realised how desensitised I had become to the way I was treating books. It was others' reluctance that revealed how deeply immersed I was in the process. While I had become increasingly willing to carry out these experiments, my relationship with books was also shifting—almost without my noticing.

I'd been thinking about books in relation to space following conversations about how this work might ultimately be encountered—perhaps in an exhibition? I wanted to explore different ways that a person can interact with a book in its different spaces. When I read a book, it is a quiet, undisturbed, personal act: flicking the pages from my right hand to my left, eyes running side to side down the lines, then striking back up to the top of the next page.

However, the altered format of *Please Walk on the Book*, transforms an easily portable object into something 'inconvenient'. It is difficult not only to read, but to manoeuvre. The act of reading shifts to a bodily act: rolling over it, standing on top of it, moving across it, flipping it around, rather than sitting in front of it with only my fingers in motion. The book demands this of the reader; being laid out on the ground. To lie across the pages, shifting my whole body each time I'm ready to consume a new section and flipping the entire sheet over in order to read the other side. As Karin Littau points out in *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania* reading is inevitably a bodily act. 'The relation a reader has to a book is also a relation between two bodies: one made of paper and ink, the other flesh and blood.' (Littau, 2006, p. 2)

Alison Knowles is an American visual artist, her work *The Big Book* (Knowles, 1968) invites people to physically get into the sculpture, as you have to do with any good book. In doing so Knowles reveals the theatrical component of reading. Rather than seeing it as a passive activity, reading is an action that the reader helps activate.

As Knowles states, 'What you bring to it is the biggest ingredient, far more important than what is there.' (as cited in, Borsuk, 2018, p. 155). This shifts the attention away from the object and towards the reader's

role in proceeding the meaning. Knowles' work makes visible something that is usually taken for granted, a book does nothing on its own. It is through a reader's bodily, emotional and interpretive engagement that a book is activated. Without this, a book remains silent. *The Big Book*, as with my own intervention *Please walk on the book*, demands the physical participation of the audience.

By placing the book on the floor reading is no longer confined to the hands and eye alone; the whole body must become involved. In both cases the reader is highlighted as an essential component of the work, positioning a reader's engagement as an integral part to what a book is and how it comes into being.

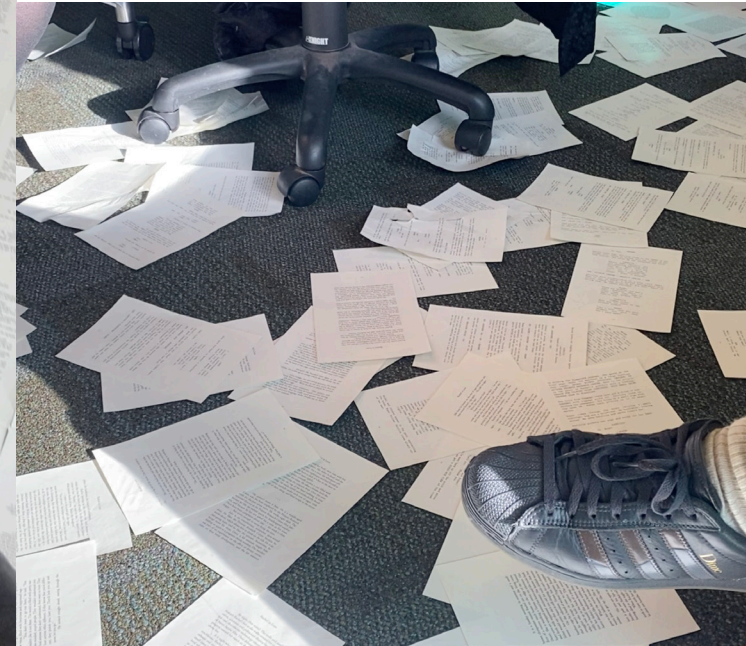
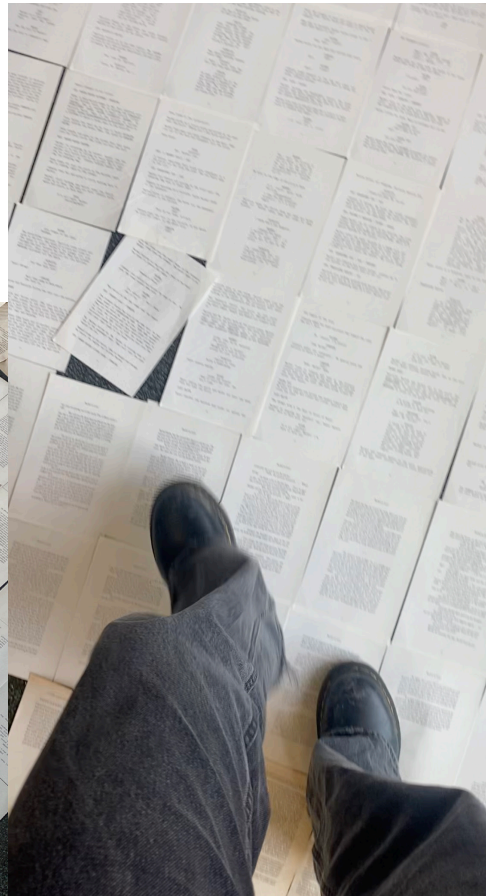
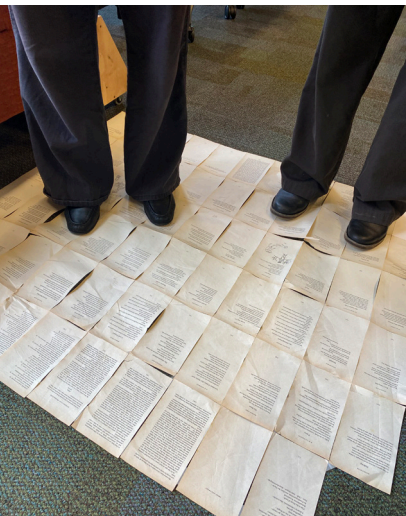
The Big Book,
Alison Knowles,
(1967).

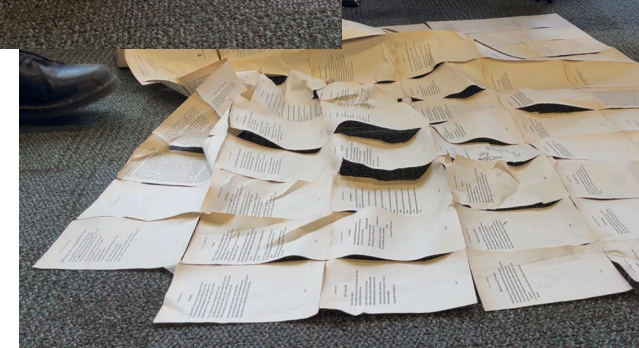
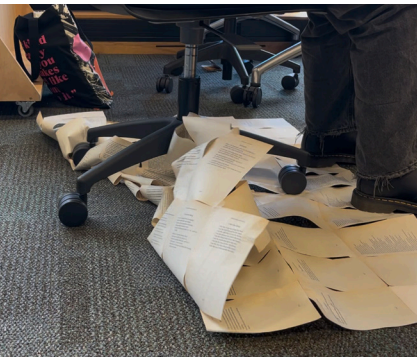
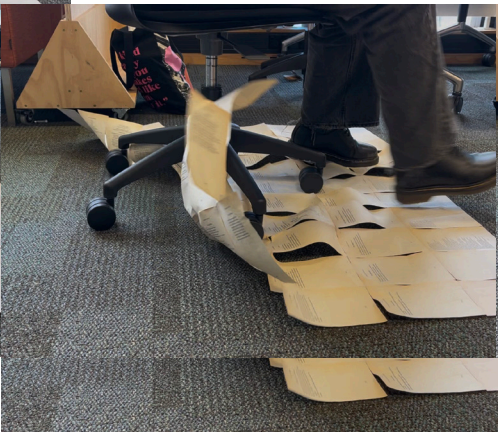
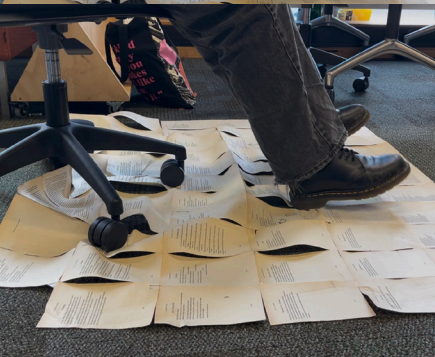




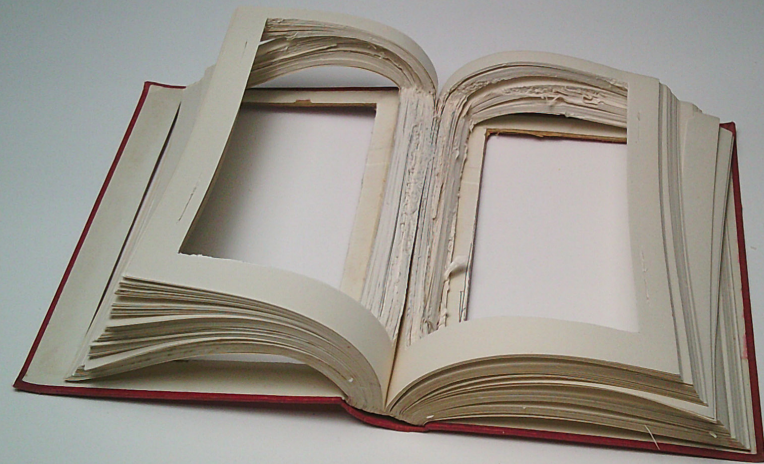
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17. The Bones of a Book

Pre intervention:

*The Windsor Shakespeare
Vol 18 Cymbeline, Coriolanus*
by William Shakespeare

Tools:

Craft knife, ruler, cutting
mat and a great deal of time
and patience

280 x 140 x 370

After intervention:

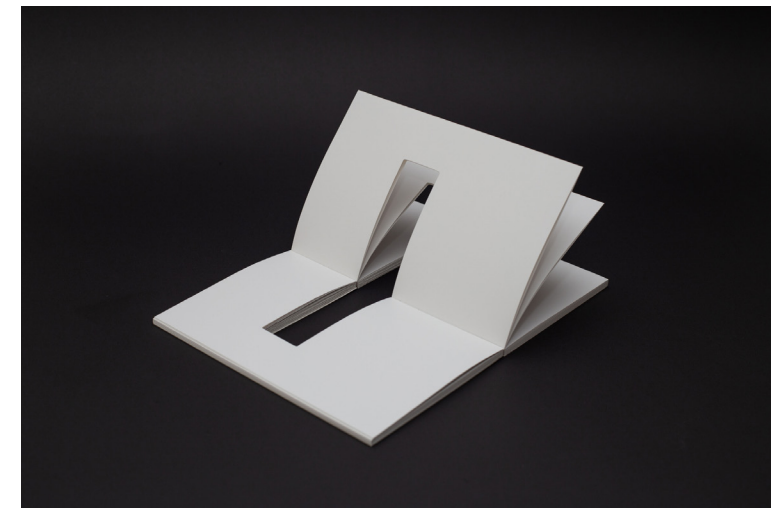
A book with the
content cut out
A 280 x 140 x 370
book with a 177 x
120 x 370 hole

‘The cover, spine, fore-edge, inner pages, endpapers—these are the “limbs and organs” of a book’ (Dongyan & Jia (Eds.) 2024, p. 34). If these are the limbs, does that make the content the soul? If the material object is the body and the bones, is it lifeless without a soul? My work focuses on the object of the book, rather than the information it contains. Yet, it is possible to divorce the content from the form?

Apart from the large hole in the centre, it doesn’t look too far removed from a normal book. You are still able to flip through the pages and sit it on a shelf, surrounded by other books. It doesn’t look any different. I initially planned to use a machine in hopes of cleanly cutting the content out of the book, but — perhaps naively due to embarrassment — it seemed easier to cut each page out by hand rather than explaining why I wanted to cut the content out of a book to someone. The irregularity of the uneven, messy slices of the pages alludes back to the manual labour involved in pre-industrial bookmaking: constructing every aspect — the handmade paper, the binding, and the movable metal type. The intervention itself was a labour of love.

Inspired by artist and graphic designer Umut Altintas’s *Void Book*, where whatever is seen within the margin of the ‘void’ becomes the content of the book, placing the responsibility of what is content onto its user. Although my work has never been about what is contained within a book, it is hard to not focus on the content of a book; as that is what is seemingly holding my attention and why I’m there in the first place. By doing this intervention with an already existing book, I’m taking away a part that was meant to be there, the reason for the book’s existence. (Unlike Altinta’s book which was created intentionally without content) In both cases the meaning is no longer contained within the pages, but in the absence of the content.

Void Book,
Altintas Umut,
(2008).

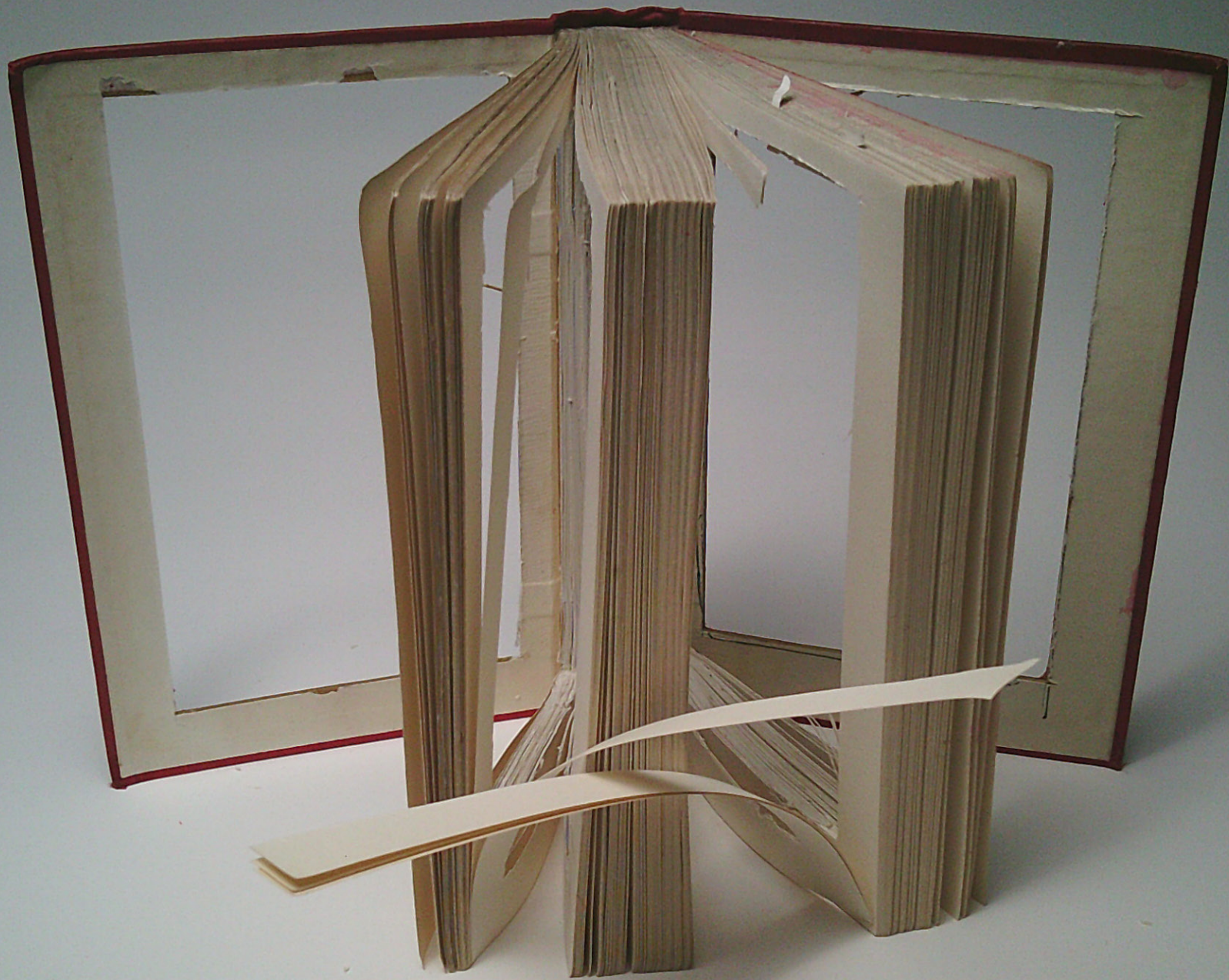




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Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

You're going to hell

And you say you love books?! Criminal

The pages are screaming

18. A book is a plate

Pre intervention:

Bluebeard's Egg

by Margaret Atwood

Tools:

Spaghetti, *Pams* tomato and basil pasta sauce, a pot of boiling water, (optional: knife and fork)

Post intervention:

A book with a few ripped pages, and a large spaghetti sauce stain

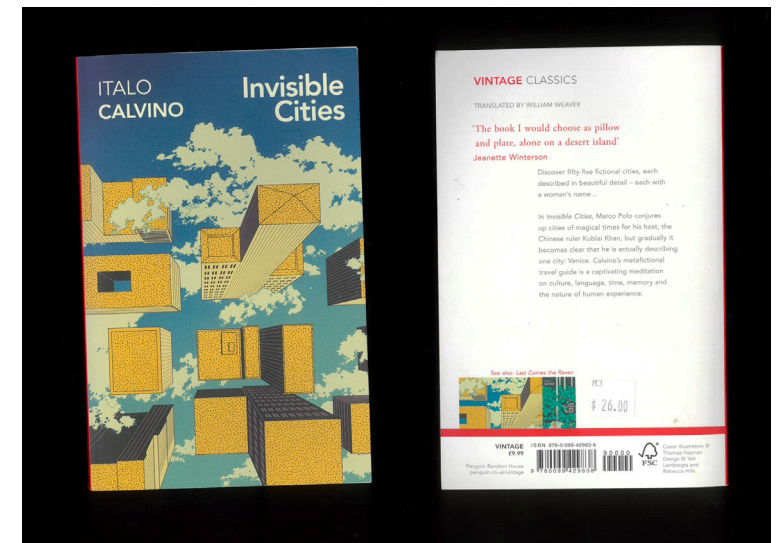
Yes I did eat some of the spaghetti and no it wasn't good. It tasted like 'book' — that second hand, old book smell. This intervention was not only the worst to carry out, but the hardest to come to terms with beforehand, and to sit with afterwards. It began simply by using a book as a place mat. Naturally it escalated: why use a plate? A book would make a perfectly functional plate!

I approached this experiment with more hesitation than the first ones; I am certain I wore a look of disgust throughout. My flatmate, who was helping me document the process, was more eager than I was, pouring more pasta on the 'book plate' and flicking it on the table. It was a crime scene. I was reluctant and uncomfortable; this was pushing my limits of what I could do to a book. There was something about the mess: the stain and the pasta sauce; delicious pasta sauce seeping through the pages. The pages becoming so soggy that they effortlessly tear away from the spine. It felt illegal — dishonourable to the book. Months later the dried sauce stained pages began to grow spots of mould. All I can think is I've ruined the book, what am I supposed to do with it now? It feels unusable, no longer a book. I think I might have to throw it out and that might be the meanest thing that I could possibly do — forever ending its life.

I thought that burning a book would bring me the most discomfort, but using a book as a plate felt more destructive, though not in the way I usually understand destruction. When I burned a book, it was quickly stripped of its 'bookishness' entirely. In contrast, using it as a plate forced it to remain recognisable as a book while performing a task it was never meant to do. My reaction to this revealed just how strongly my sense of what a book should actually do is.

On the jacket of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, author Jeaneatte Winterson gives a testimonial: 'I would choose (this) as pillow and plate, alone on a desert island.' This metaphor expresses her deep attachment to the content. *A book is a plate*, takes this metaphor literally. She is offering a signal of affection, the willingness to use the book as a tool in order to have it near. But this becomes deeply uncomfortable in practice. The book resists the reassignment, continuing to be demanded recognition as a book.

Invisible Cities,
Italo Calvino,
(1974/2023)





00:02

00:03

00:04

00:05

00:06



152

Being mean to books in order to find out the meaning of books

153

Getting to know the object that is the book



00:01

00:02

00:03

00:04

00:05

00:06

00:07

00:08





Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

Books don't deserve this

And you say you love books?! Criminal

The pages are screaming

19. 4896 Pages

Pre intervention:

*The Australasian Journal
of Popular Culture,
Volume 4 Numbers 2 & 3*
edited by Adam Geczy
and Vicki Karaminas

Tools:

Cutting mat, craft knife
and a ruler

Post intervention:
A book with 23
horizontal cuts

I should have chosen a book with a thinner cover. The thick card protects the pages too much, not allowing for them to easily get tangled. I spent hours attempting to cut straight lines into the book, creating an altered format to see my use through the growth of the object.

Inspired by *Another Reading — Contemporary Book Design from China* (2023) by graphic designer, professor and publisher Jianping He, the book has an altered exterior. The cover, cut into hundreds of strips which over time through interaction with the book expands and becomes tangled. I first encountered *Another Reading* at the 2023 Alliance Graphic International (AGI) conference in Auckland. He showed a copy of the book which had become chaotic, its original form transformed by the hands of many readers as the strips of the cover tangled with one another.

He explained that if the accumulation became too much, the entire section of strips could simply be cut off. This felt particularly wrong — not only damaging the book, but actively discarding a part of it. Yet, the design purposefully encourages damage through use, holding the potential to transform a mere copy into your own physical representation of a lived reading experience. While I was appalled by the book at the time, it is now at the top of my list to acquire.

Poet and Oulipo member, Raymond Queneau constructed a book of similar form, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems). The content is 10 different poems but the format allows for an infinite number of different possible combinations. This allows the reader to create a new poem each time they open the book.

Another Reading deliberately encouraged damage through use. Fast tracking the process, which in a different sense happens to books regardless if their covers are cut into hundreds of strips or not. Unlike *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* where the book is constructed for the strips to work with the content, I've simply cut up an existing book. Slicing through sentences, it has become a bodily task to even hold the whole same page open or read a new combination of text. Fragmentation becomes a means of slowing down reading and intensifying touch. Damage is reframed as a formal reconfiguration that alters how the book can be encountered, read and cared for.

Another Reading.
Contemporary Book Design from China,
He Jianping,
He Jianping, (2023).



Cent mille milliards de poèmes,
Queneau Raymond, (1961).







Meanness gauge: My ranking

Others

That's a little bit mean

How could you do that to a book?!

20. I have blood on my hands

Pre intervention:

***The Windsor Shakespeare
Vol 13 Titvs Andronicvs
Romeo & Juliet
by William Shakespeare***

Tools:

**Water and the hands of a
book criminal**

**Post intervention:
Colourless, warped
mouldy book**

I have committed crimes against books.

Torn, marked, stepped on, eaten off, treating them in ways that most would consider unacceptable. My hands are covered in ink, blood rather. And yet, without these acts, I would not have come to know books in the ways that I do now. These interactions were not careless. Though at times violent, they were attentive and considered. The interventions allowed me to think with the book — the object — rather than alongside it. Forcing me into closer contact, beyond my presumptions of how I previously thought that I should engage with books.

If someone had told me at the beginning of my project that this is where the work would end up I might have tried to avoid it altogether. Instead, my habits, attachments, and instincts around books have been placed at the centre of the project. This work required me to confront those tendencies directly. Not to resolve them, but explore them in order to get to know books differently.



00:05
00:49

00:27
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00:30
01:04
01:17

I have been *mean*
but what do books
mean?:
Findings

Introduction

This section is a reflection of what the interventions revealed not only about books but about myself as a designer and bibliophile.

For most of my life I have known books only as a reader — focused solely on the content — and only recently as a designer — focused on format. But there is a third condition through which the book operates: the reader's roles. Its vitality has increasingly revealed itself to me through getting to know the book. As an emerging book designer, it feels crucial for me to understand the role a reader plays with books. As Borsuk notes, 'Defining the book involves consideration for its use as much as its form' (Borsuk, 2018, p. 195), because until someone comes along and begins to read, a book sits inert. On a table, a bookshelf, or in a bookshop 'they wait for someone to come and deliver them from their materiality, from the immobility' (Poulet, 1969b, p. 53). In *Phenomenology of Reading* literacy critic Georges Poulet describes that he looks at a book the way he would an animal for sale, 'so obviously hoping for a buyer ... for animals do know that their fate depends on human intervention, thanks to which they will be delivered from the shame of being treated as objects. Isn't the same true of books?' (Poulet, 1969b, p. 53) The book lies and waits, until someone is curious enough to pick it up, read it, flick through the pages. Only to set it back down once more and again, they wait.

I have existed as a reader for most of my life but it has been through this work that I have begun to understand how my role impacts the book. A writer writes the content and a designer turns that content into the object. A reader brings that object to life. So it is here that I begin to ask, does a codex become a book through a reader's interaction, which without, is it merely another object sitting on a shelf? This work has asked me to 'reflect on the very immaterial "idea" of the book' (Borsuk, 2018, p. 146) in order to understand it.

'The book we hold in our hands is invisible to us' (Littau, 2006, p. 24). Books usually function as a 'crystal goblet', this work — by engaging with the idea of the book and pushing against the boundaries of unspoken rules that they carry — deliberately disrupts their invisibility in order to bring their materiality back into the conversation (Borsuk, 2018).

As Borsuk notes while discussing artist books, '...they highlight the "idea" by paradoxically drawing attention to the "object" we have come to take for granted. They disrupt the out treatment of the book as a transparent container for literacy ... and engage its material form in the work's meaning' (Borsuk, 2018, p. 113).

I certainly didn't ease into this research. Given my love of books a borderline obsession with the object and my unspoken rules that govern how I read and handle them, to be mean to books wasn't in my nature. It would be reasonable to expect reluctance — beginning

with small, simple and reversible acts. Instead, I began at the extreme. Burning a book is arguably the most violent act that can be performed on the object and it was this first haunting intervention that revealed to me what damage truly is.

Through the interventions my relationship began to shift. I began to care less, slowly I no longer saw wear as damage, but as a sign of endearment. It is only because I love books so profoundly that the ones I'm reading follow me everywhere and gain marks of my existence with the book; I'm enjoying the content so I underline it, I use it to take notes while I'm in conversation and don't have a notebook handy, but my book is right there on the table so I scribble a barely legible interview recommendation. In *The New Art of Making Books* Ulises Carrion attributes many qualities of the book, one being 'A book is also a sequence of moments' (Carrion, 1975, p. 1) not only as the context itself becomes a moment trapped in time but I add my own layer of moments to the books I read. I remember where and when I read every book, the notes I've left on the pages, the dents in the covers, and dog-ear corners that I leave folded to be able to return to my page with ease. When I read a book, it becomes a part of me, and I a part of it. The marks — both intentional and accidental — are proof of that.

Defining and re-defining ‘mean’

At the beginning of the research, I understood being mean to books as causing visible damage and permanently altering a book. Those actions, acting against those unspoken rules of book culture by allowing for visible traces of wear to be gained by the object. At the time this was how I acted as a reader, and encountering books with careless wear I found upsetting. I equated being mean with any action that compromised my perceived preciousness of a book — it should stay as perfect and pristine as when it first left the bookshop shelf.

There is no question that I have been mean to books, but after getting to know them, my definition of what it means to be mean has shifted. I have come to understand a different kind of intimacy with books; one in which the book becomes less of an object to protect and more of a body to be interacted with. Reading now feels incomplete without a pencil in hand.

The notion of treating a book *meanly or nicely* is not fixed, but exists on a spectrum, open to to a reader’s individual morals. A movement from fear of harm to acceptance of vulnerability — of both the reader and the book. Schaefer and Starre discuss the printed book as a materially persistent object whose meaning is shaped through handling, circulation and readerly attachment (2019).

My idea of a book after getting to know the book

I thought I knew books, but through the process of *Getting to know the object that is the book* my understanding widened and I realised that both the book and the idea of the book are not as simple as I once thought. As Ulises Carrión writes, ‘A book may be the accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book; these are the books of bookshops and libraries’ (Carrion, 1975 p. 1). Whatever books are and whatever they mean, they are always more than a singular object.

As I began to know books from a materiality perspective during my undergraduate studies, the question of *what is a book?* continually lingered. I have attempted to provide myself with definitions but as Borsuk comments, books are ‘...meant to be activated by a reader, and thus describing them in brief simply does not do them justice’ (Borsuk, 2018, p. 149). I entered into this work with a loose definition, but much like artist and author Keith A. Smith, I found that ‘My definition of a book grew until I realised, there can be none. To define anything limits it to your past resolutions with no room to expand’ (Smith, as cited in, Borsuk, 2018, p. 171).

I have come to understand that a book exists in two ways. Initially I was only focusing on the physical definition of a book — the object itself, and the content that it contains — a vessel for information. And while yes, this is exceptionally important — for without the object itself no book can exist — there is an additional dimension as Littau states ‘to conceive of a book as two kinds — one material the other ideational’ (Littau, 2006, p. 1). Because each individual holds a different idea of a book, defining it becomes an almost impossible task. Everybody carries their own idea of a book, shaped through personal encounters with the object; the habits, rituals and routines formed around reading.

It is from this position that this research began to ask a different question. Book artist and author, Johanna Drucker in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies* says ‘Thus in thinking of a book, whether literal or virtual, we should paraphrase Heinz von Foerster ... and ask “how” a book “does” its particular actions, rather than “what” a book “is”’ (Drucker, 2013, p. 221). I never set out to define a book, though it has inevitably surfaced throughout the work. Instead, I ask how a book acts, behaves and functions in order to understand my role as a reader in co-existence with books. With all of the above in mind, any attempt to find a single or stable answer to the question becomes impossible. Which is exactly the point of this research.

Normal ways of being mean to books

'Some acts we talk about endlessly, and some we do not speak of, even in a whisper.' (Fine & Fitzsimons, 2010, p. 353).

Books carry a set of unspoken rules — social obligations that shape how we are expected to interact with them. From a young age we are taught to treat books with respect. These expectations aren't formalised; I call them 'unspoken' because there is no universal written code for how a book should be handled. Even the policies of Wellington City Libraries, for instance, outline rules about behaviour within the library space, but don't outline how one should physically interact with the books themselves.

Yet, when these expectations are challenged, the social and cultural power of books becomes apparent. Conceptual artist John Latham and his 1966 work, *Still and Chew*, where he borrowed a library copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* and invited fellow artists to rip out a page and chew it to a pulp is a clear example of this. Latham then put the remains into vial, adding acid, sodium bicarbonate, yeast and left it to brew. Needless to say the library was less than amused upon the book's return (Laing, 2021, p.185).

Acts of deliberate *meanness* like Latham's and the intentional damage I caused books revealed the discomfort society holds and just how significant the roles and rules of books are embedded in our culture. Their materiality, their resilience, and the social power they carry is evident from the display of emotion cast by my audience.



Art and Culture, John Latham, (1966-69).

Giovanni's Room part three: I've changed?



Giovanni's Room has become considerably more than a book to me. It isn't only a story that I enjoy and recommend to friends; it is representative of my time spent completing this Master's degree. Through the process of getting to know this object, I have come to better understand myself. This book captures my evolution as a reader and sits in the beginning of what I hope to be a lifetime designing books.

If my house was burning down, my first copy of *Giovanni's Room* is one of the things I'd save — I'm besotted with this book. Alongside this attachment exists a desire for a second copy; to sit with my original one, not to be read or marked, only to exist in contrast. The pristine and the marked, the perfect and the unique. This desire reveals a tension I return to throughout my practice — one that I can't seem to shake — the pull between preservation and the lived reality of a marked one. This reflection emerges from my ongoing engagement with books not only as texts, but as material objects.

It is within this tension that I begin to question what truly makes a book a book; is it more of a book if it sits perfectly as though it never left the bookshop's shelves or one that is shaped through use, exchange, and care?

Schaeffer and Starre consider the book as an active mediator and not just as a passive intermediary, using the conceptual distinction theorised by Bruno Latour (2019). Books have often been understood as intermediaries; passive carriers of text that simply transport meaning between author and reader. However, when we engage with the book's material and performative aspects, it can instead act as a mediator, actively participating in the production of meaning rather than merely transmitting it.

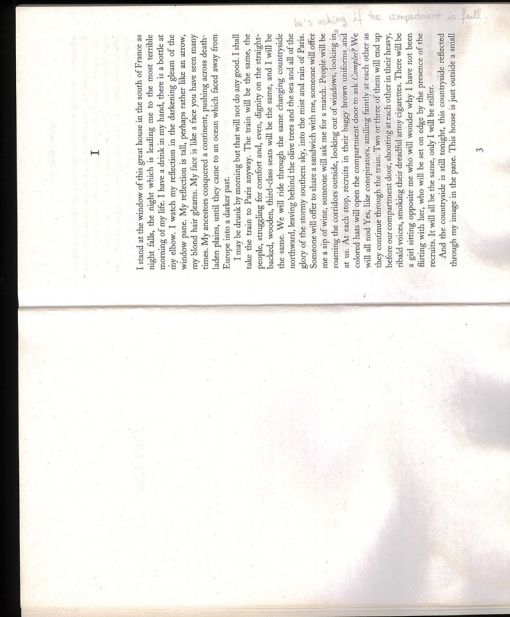
This became evident to me through interventions such as *Please walk on the book*. The book itself becomes an active participant, directing how a reader interacts and it plays a role in shaping the meaning of the work. In *Burning a book* and *Books don't mind the rain (but I mind my books not minding the rain)*, control

Left top: My second copy of *Giovanni's Room* (2026).

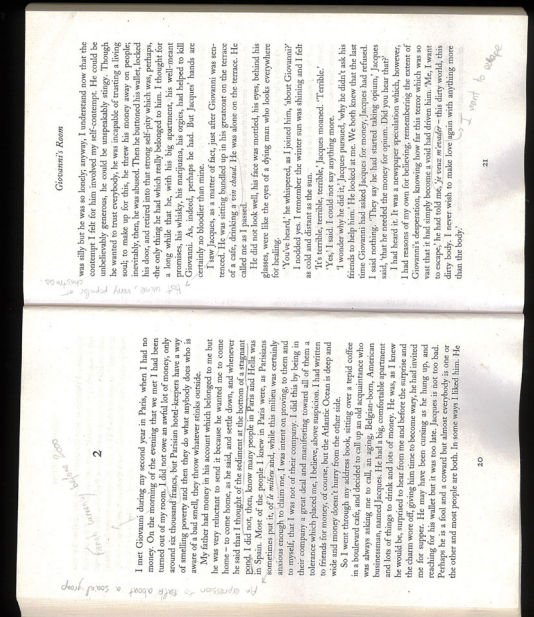
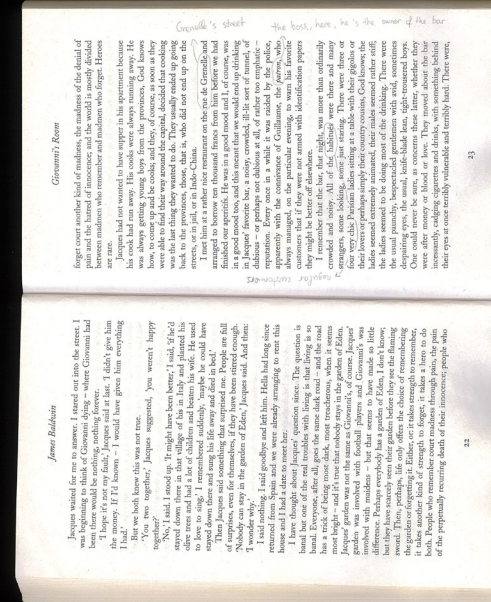
Left bottom: My original marginalia filled copy of *Giovanni's Room* (2025).

of the intervention shifts to the fire, the rain and the book itself, together shaping the outcome.

Everyday reading can also reveal the book as a mediator. My now marginalia-filled copy of *Giovanni's Room* has become a site where meaning has accumulated through interaction. The codex doesn't merely carry the author's words to the reader, but meditates between different voices and moments in time; the author, the annotators, myself and possible future readers.



Right: My original marginalia filled copy of *Giovanni's Room* (2025) p. 3, 20-23, 26-27



**Culmination
of the makings
(or deconstruction)**

The beginning of the end

What's more of a book, one that has been used and read or one that sits perfectly untouched? A book exists to be read, yet to read a book risks damaging it, so is it worth the chance? I now sit at both ends of the spectrum. I like my books to stay perfect but equally through *Getting to know the object that is the book* I now see the value of traces books gain from use.

As shown through *Giovanni's Room*, my relationship with books has changed, but there is still a deep-seated need that I hold to ensure my books stay pristine. A tension that sits not only at the core of my habits as a reader but one that continues to inform my design practice. Since I began designing books, I make two copies for myself. One to be read, to be touched and interacted with and a second, to sit perfectly untouched. This tension which was increasingly highlighted by *Giovanni's Room* inspired how the final books would sit; the culmination of my getting to know books.

For a book is not a book
until a reader's activation.
Just as I have left my marks
on books and you naturally
will through reading
any book, I invite you to
permanently make this
book your own and treat it
as you see fit.

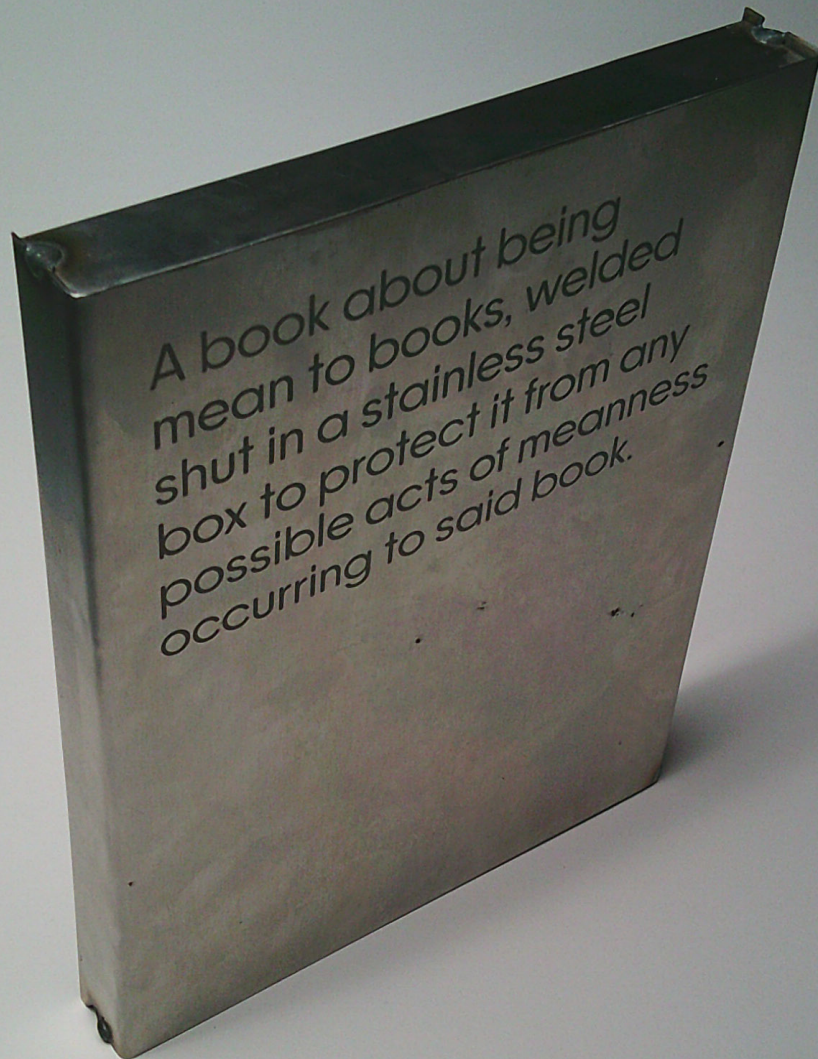
Using a knife, letter
opener, or simply your
hands, split open the folded
edges in order to access the
full book.

Notes on this book

Notes on Book Design by Amanda-Li Kollberg and Siri Lee Lindsdreg note how 'Before the manufacturing of books became fully industrialised, and the printed and bound books had their folded sheets cut open by a machine, and it was common that this last step was performed by the consumer' (Kollberg & Lindsdreg, 2023, p. 39).

Passing the power to the reader whether to split open the folded pages, to do it with precision or carelessly tear them apart or to leave the book as it arrived to them — an invitation to the reader to be an active participant in the production of the book.

Because ultimately as much as I treasure the books I make it is not up to me how they are read and interacted with. Someone could very well choose to use one of my books as a plate and I would be horrified, but I'm sure that the authors and designers of the books that I've used for my interventions never intended for such acts to happen to their books.



Book in a box?

I needed to protect my books from any possible acts of *meanness*. So I have to tell you a secret, I welded shut a copy of my exegesis inside of a stainless steel box for protection.

I explored several materials and methods for enclosing the book, but with little experience in this type of fabrication, I didn't initially consider the high heat that is produced by welding. This process would expose the book to significant risk: at the very least charring its edges, at worst setting it on fire; which I did when making my test box. An act intended to preserve the book may in fact be the most dangerous intervention of all. The only way to confirm the condition of the book is to cut the box open, an action that would again risk harming the book.

In being preserved from possible deconstruction, the book becomes conceptually altered rather than physically, as with the interventions. It shifts from my idea of a book becoming closer to an object, a sculpture, or a container, rather than a readable text. It feels ironic that I originally defined a book as a container of information and now I have literally made a book that is that!

Borsuk suggests that 'muted books' take on a totemic significance. When a book cannot be read, it shifts from an active object to a metaphor—an idea of a book rather than a book itself (Borsuk, 2018, p. 193). By silencing a book it draws attention to the idea one associates with it but being unable to see it.

The book is protected from damage but it is also restricted from use, unable to be touched, used, read or seen. Adhering to Schrodinger's cat-like position; simultaneously a book and not a book, burnt and not burnt. The paradox of Schrodinger's Cat is a thought experiment designed by theoretical physicist Ernst Schrodinger in 1935. A cat, geiger counter, a flask of poison, a hammer and a radioactive source are sealed inside a box. As there is no way to know the fate of the cat, until the box is opened the cat is both simultaneously alive and dead (Kramer, 2013). Is there actually a book inside? Would I be so cruel to trap a book that it can't even be seen, to lose its association with being a book. Is it burnt or charred, or did I manage to protect it and the book resides perfectly inside?

Book in a box? was inspired by the work of artist Micah Lexier, particularly *Stuffed Envelope* (2016), and his humorous use of text which appears throughout much of his work, such as *This Sign* (2011), created for *Scrap Metal Gallery*. Lexier's practice often used direct language to foreground simple conceptual gestures. The text on *Book in a box?* uses explicit language in order to highlight the irony of shutting a book inside a box — a book about being mean to books—while also nodding to the absurdity of being unable to interact with a book.



Top: *Stuffed Envelope*, MicahLexier, (2016).
Bottom: *This Sign*, MicahLexier, (2011).

A book about being
mean to books, welded
shut in a stainless steel
box to protect it from any
possible acts of meanness
occurring to said book.

Concluding thoughts

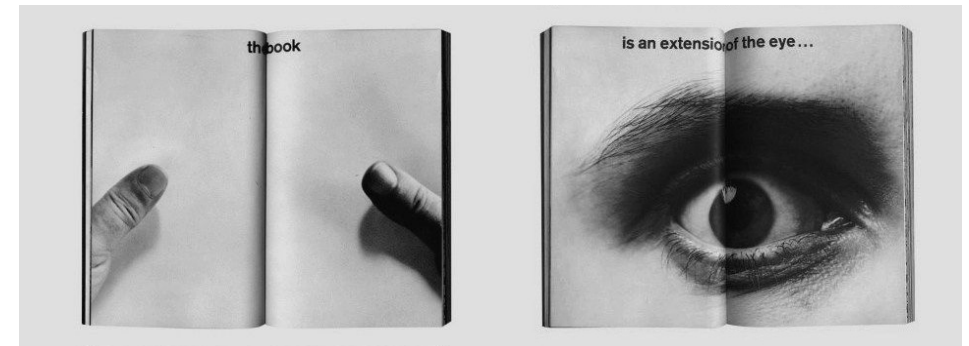
The meaning of books: beyond the object

There's no doubt that I have been mean to books but what do books mean? As much as I don't think that I could simply define a book, summing up the meaning of books is also no easy task.

A book exists beyond its status as just a physical object. Through this research books have revealed themselves as social objects, and both ideas and ideals of them which are deeply embedded into our culture. Books influence our language, and serve as an invitation into one's mind. As actor and film maker John Waters famously remarked "If you go home with somebody, and they don't have books, don't fuck 'em!" Socially, books have also come to represent intellect, curiosity. They can reveal personal values, interests and how one wishes to be understood by others.

From the beginning of this project, people have had visceral reactions to what I was doing to books. This was particularly evident during the workshop *57 Steps on a road to committing crimes against books* and through individual works such as *Please Walk on the Book* and *A Book is a Plate*. Like myself, the participants had no relationship with the books used for these interventions. Their reactions were fueled by their own ideas and the personal significance of the book both as a concept and an object, which indicates the cultural authority we give books. As Borsuk observes, 'The power in which we imbue them is undeniable' (Borsuk, 2018, p. 193).

The term 'book' has become so malleable that it encompasses more than just the codex form. E-books and audio books are considered just as much a book to some as the paper book is. Along with those developing formats, people's idea of books have grown so that it is more than the physical form of the book which informs them as to what a book is, what it does and how it's used.



Getting to know myself (and others) as well as books

When I began my Master's, books were something that I simply liked. They were what I left my undergraduate degree wanting to design — objects that I imagined forever spending my days with.

Throughout this process, I have come to understand what books represent in my life and what they represent for others. They are not just objects I read, design, and make; they have become a fundamental part of how I exist as a creative practitioner — as essential to me as air, food and water. Just as these are essential in daily life, books have become a crucial part of my existence.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan states that the 'the book is an extension of the eye' (McLuhan, 1967/2008), for me however, the book is also an extension of myself — just as they are for others, made visible by their reactions to my interventions. The books I create, the books I read, and the books I choose to co-exist with have become inseparable from who I am. They allow me to think beyond conventional boundaries, to move outside assumptions of what a book should be, and instead explore what they can become — and what I can become. The book is no longer simply a thing I work with, but the very framework through which I think.

Medium is the Massage, Marshall McLuhan,
(1966-69 pg 34 – 37).

Conclusion: The end of the beginning

Being mean to books in order to find out the meaning of books created the space for me to truly get to know books — as objects, ideas and the depth that they carry; socially and culturally. While I do not intend to continue to be mean to books, without engaging with them in this way I would not have arrived at the understanding I now carry forward. This is only the closing of a chapter and the beginning of the next in my life designing, reading and existing with books.

Although this work shifted away from exploring the future of the book, it has continued to prove itself as a resilient object. My project ultimately ended up proving how alive and deeply embedded the book is in our culture and, as a result, in my own practice. What I can say is what books mean to me, which is everything. I can only hope that one day a book that I have designed will become someone else's *Givoanni's Room*.

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