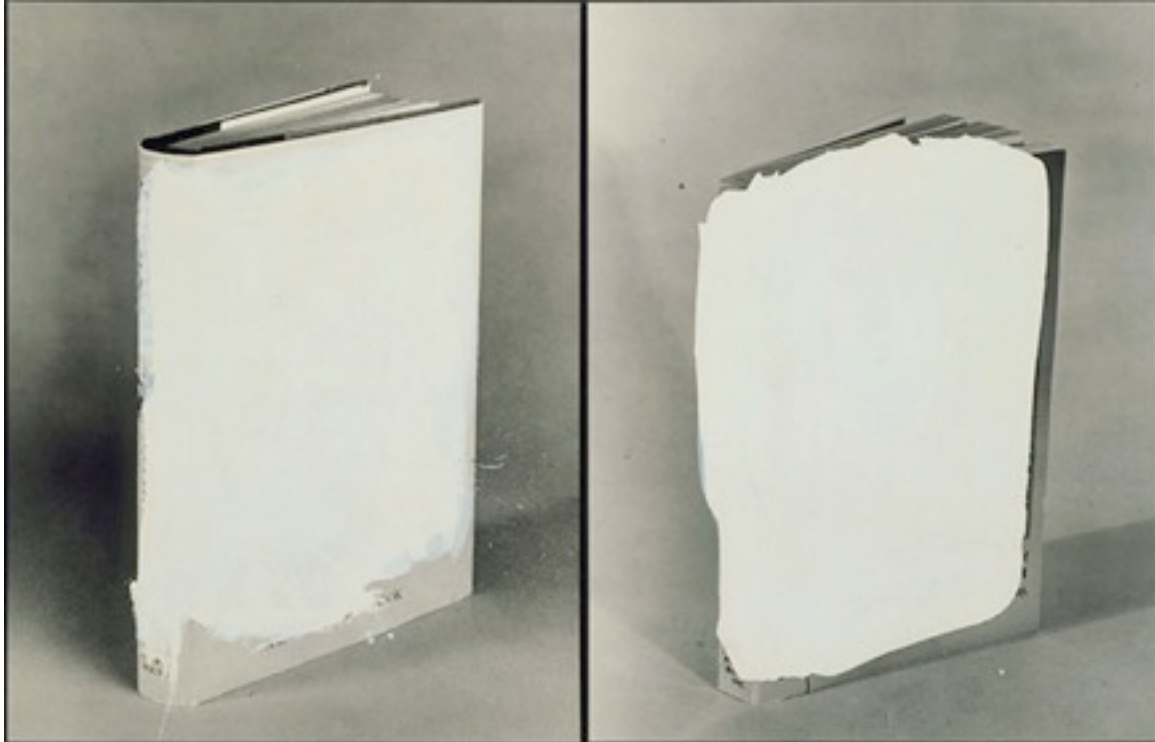


CODEX @ CCA Wattis

Posted on 06 March 2014.



John Baldessari, Two Voided Books, 1990, black and white photo, 62 x 96 1/2"

*“Down with our swaggering languages, with their rigid, enslaving syntax and grammar!
Let’s have no alphabet, no words. — Henri Michaux*

This modestly scaled, highly variegated exhibition presents a salon of 48 works (drawings, photographs, prints and videos) that examine ideas about the book. Not a particular book, but the book itself. Collectively, they present a meditation on the passage of the hardcopy book into history. Significantly, no actual books are on view. The show, curated by Brussels-based artist, curator and book collector Pierre Leguillon, in collaboration with other artists and students from CCA, recreates a similar exhibition that appeared in Geneva in 2011. It’s a savvy sampling and juxtaposition of works spanning the 20th and 21st centuries, from established and emerging European and American artists.

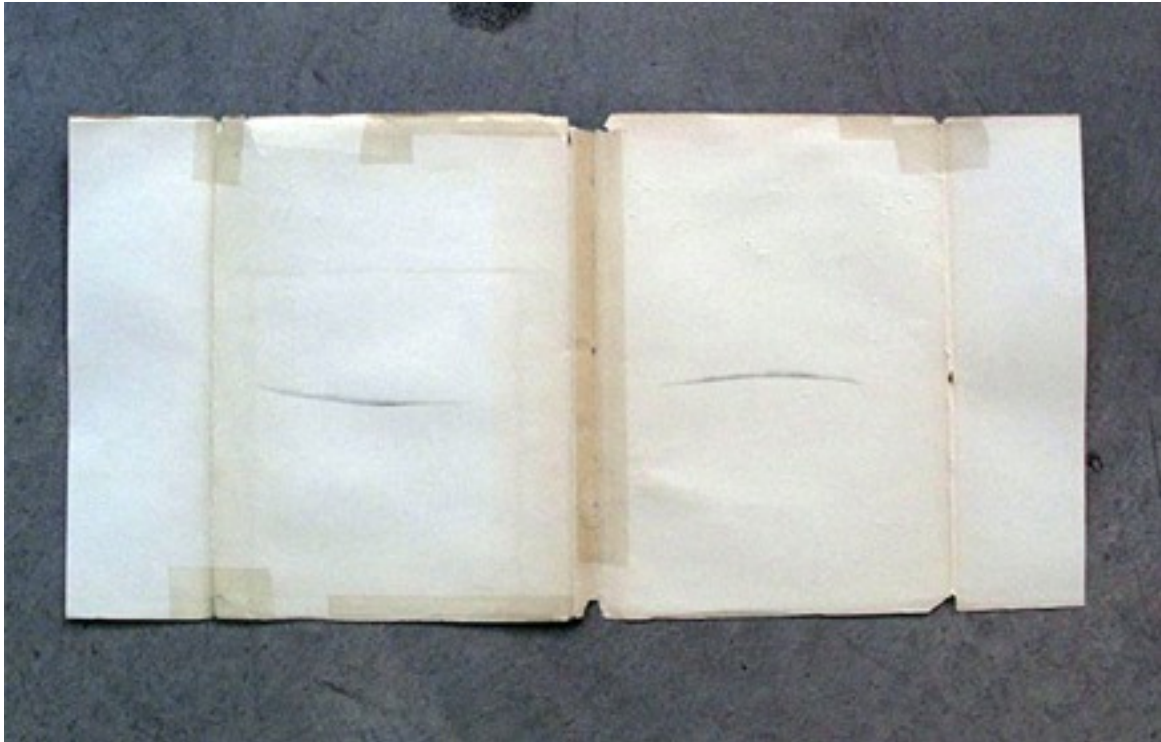


Appearing within the context of our now digital, screening and scrolling, mouse- or button-controlled reading experience, CODEX reveals the book as a sign that enables us to leverage the experience of books for different purposes. These signs or images free us from litanies of words, launching us into looking rather than reading. And so we stagger: from wit to dreams to lyrical gesture to the perverse appeal of elusive meaning. Representing the book free of its original form and context, CODEX examines the current state of the book with finely crafted sequencing and an extremely smart scrapbook sensibility.

The work is adroitly installed without identification labels. That information appears on the gallery's front window, forcing viewers to look outside, to the street, to discern a work's

Dennis Oppenheim, Reading Position for a Second Degree Burn, 1970, color photo + text 29 x 22 x 1 1/2"

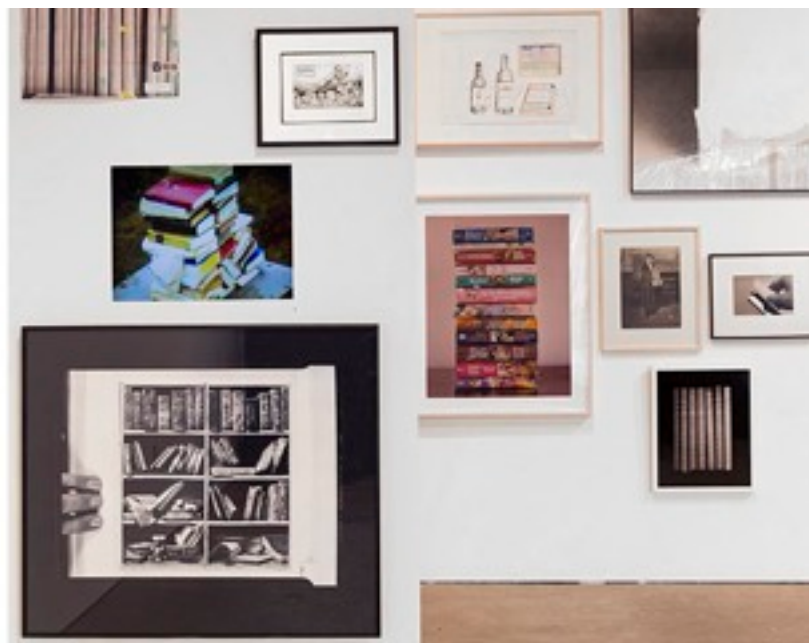
authorship. As such, we take each work at face value, absent the valuations that accrue from knowing who made it. To be sure, instantly recognizable names and faces stand out: a ham-fisted Guston ink drawing of a book as *tabula rasa*; Ed Ruscha's eponymous photo-essay *Twenty-six Gasoline, Stations*; an untitled 1978 Cindy Sherman film still; an R. Crumb drawing, *The Quiet Study*, of a levitated man reading a book; a Dennis Oppenheim self-portrait, in which the artist, shirtless, uses a book to direct the sun's rays onto his torso. Works by Raymond Pettibon, Barry McGee, Louise Lawler, Alec Soth and Saul Steinberg are also on view. But it's the less identifiable work that most enriches the show's premise. These include an anonymous 1920 photograph of man holding a stack of books. He's standing in a room with a sloping ceiling, and appears abnormally tall, the room a sort of stage set with a bricked-off window and empty bookcases. He seems posed and alert, his suit, cap, and shoes somewhat worn in contrast to the stiff, impeccable stack of books he is holding. On close inspection we see that the stack contains 14 volumes of Charles Dickens. What that means is impossible to say. The photo has the inexplicable quality of a dream.



Connie Purtil, *The Ground (Albert)*, 2011, pencil on found paper, 86.7 x 55.5"

Moyra Davey's *Shakespeares* is a photograph of a shelved edition of Shakespeare's plays which has been computer printed, then folded, closed with green tape, stamped and mailed to Leguillon to be unfolded and opened out on the wall. It's a terse, witty, performative revelation of a latent image and its relation to the subject. Paris and Vienna-based artist Marina Faust offers one of the show's most haunting and poetic works, an extreme close-up photo of a thumb and forefinger holding a book open at the spine, provocatively fingering the elusive text. Light seems to emanate from a place deep within the book, and to seek its source one risks becoming Alice hurtling down the rabbit hole: imagination's suction tube.

French performance artist Jean-Luc Verna presents a large, raw image of an outstretched hand holding an open book face down titled *Anatomie artistique de l'homme*. A photo-transfer on vintage paper, boosted with pencil, it radiates a theatrical and powerful expression of



refusal. Bracketing the main exhibition wall at the far right and left are TV monitors showing a continuous circuit of videos from four artists. Roman Signer's mesmerizing 1984 video loop, *Bucher*, uncoils images of books emerging as if from an underground spring and carried down a swift moving viaduct to be quickly grabbed and piled on a table standing in mid-stream. It reads, alternately, as a performance of desperate futility or a last-minute salvation rite. Spliced to this sequence is Baptiste Maitre's staccato-paced 14-minute, video of book scraps, *Shaped Cinema (2010)*. Flipped and filmed, they shatter the meaning of a 1970 MOMA catalog on Frank Stella's shaped paintings. The computer-generated "books" populating Yann Sérandour's *Ma bibliothèque virtuelle* — slim, graphic and leached-of-detail — read as a continuous skyline of generic, interchangeable objects. Alexandrine Boyer's wind-blown representation of a book, rendered with an antiquated typeface and the crackly visual quality of early cinema, is clearly an epitaph. It contains only the words of its title: *The End (2000-11)*. Indeed.



Finally, the take-away, for me, is Boston-based artist and book designer Conny Purtill's 2011 piece, *The Ground (Albert)*. It's the knockout that blows you over with a feather. Or, in this case, a degraded, humble book jacket. Purtill presents it back side out to reveal what is normally concealed. As an art object, the piece is a minimal, Ryman-esque subtlety, a conceptual Duchampian exercise in isolation and seeing. The piece presents itself as a drawing, a white-on-faded-white composition of mended tears and foxed stains. As our eyes adjust to its quiet whisper, we see the tiny interventions that hold an edge and the accidental pencil scrapes that activate space. It evokes the voyeuristic pleasure one gets from seeing the hidden. It's as if Purtill has flipped up the "skirts" of the book to give us a view of its secret stains.

Books may face dematerialization. But if there's one thing *CODEX* demonstrates conclusively and repeatedly, it's that the urge to create and consume them — in whatever form — remains strong.

—JULIA COUZENS

About the Author:

[Julia Couzens](#) is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the US. These include the Achenbach

Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

Photo Credits:

John Baldessari: Courtesy of the artist and the collection of Ninah and Michael Lynne.

Dennis Oppenheim: Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Solomon Gallery.

Installation Detail: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and HEAD, Geneva.