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# From Book To Bookish: Repurposing the Book in the Digital Era

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### Abstract

Attacked. Defended. Worshipped. Ridiculed. Recycled. Books today are subject to all of these treatments. Books are used as home décor, mousepads, bill folders, and sculptures. Books are also pulped and anonymously converted into other, non-book related products. It is no coincidence that such transformations and transmutations abound, nor that these bookish forms are variously being shared, promoted or decried. The current digital era both encourages and enables this.

But why is the book object still celebrated? How do these celebrations of the book manifest? How much of the ongoing cultural interest in the book is driven by its materiality? Focusing on just one way in which these celebrations manifest, this article displaces questions of text and authorship and instead offers a refreshed, object-orientated account of books today as lively, material ‘things’ and interrogates our taken-for-granted relationships with them.

As evidenced in physical and virtual spaces, there is ongoing interest in the book object, bookish objects, book spaces and fascination with the hold that these objects and spaces have on people. Drawing together visual evidence (that resides on my publicly-accessible Pinterest boards), I demonstrate the broader levels of cultural obsession that surround the book object, an obsession that is becoming ever clearer in today’s digital era.

This rich examination of the book object draws upon a range of theoretical approaches which can be gathered together under the umbrella of new materialism. Featured theoretical frameworks include: vital materialism and enchantment (Bennett 2010; 2001), thing theory (Brown 2003), sacredness and ritualization (Alasuutari 2006; Bell 1992) ecocriticism and the ethics of waste (Dryzek 2013; Fox 2000; Hawkins 2006; Scanlan 2005); embodied experience as a site of knowledge (Alaimo 2010; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Littau 2006); liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and Actor-Network-Theory (Akrich and Latour 1994; Latour 2005). With this article I present a framework through which to consider how important embodiment is to the concept of the book and the status of the book today.

### Keywords

Book, book art, new materialism, vibrant matter

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[M]etamorphoses of shape, colour, size and arrangement of form capture the imagination. If things we had previously considered to be but the passive context for our activity are themselves mobile, vital matter, then the World becomes much more interesting.<sup>1</sup>

The book is a particularly treasured object of great cultural significance. Nonetheless, the immense proliferation of books, combined with the emergence of digital counterparts like the Kindle has, for many people, contributed to a change in their behaviour towards books. This paper demonstrates that contemporary shifts in treatment of the book object are indicative not only of the book's Thing-power, but also of related trends in environmental ethics; just as cultural attitudes towards the environment are shifting, so too are attitudes towards things. They may even be part of the same trend in changing attitudes towards the nonhuman. Coole, Frost and Bennett, among other new materialists, explicitly state that changing attitudes towards matter and things is crucial to environmental conservation. For Coole and Frost, 'foregrounding material factors and reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are pre-requisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century'.<sup>2</sup> This project takes up this challenge by focusing on just one type of object, the paper book, and foregrounding its very particular material affordances and how those affordances continue to drive the book's ongoing cultural relevance. Making a detailed account of the book when reconfigured in this particular manner may deepen understanding of the book object. In turn, I argue that rearticulating the special relationship between books and bodies may provide a useful template for changing how we understand our relationship with other nonhuman actants.

The vibrancy of the book object is felt by many people. This is demonstrated by the passion with which people collect, hoard, gather, handle, share, sell, buy, talk to and devote their private space to all things bookish. This is also demonstrated by widespread changes in what are considered to be acceptable book-handling practices; repurposed books offer dramatic and prolific examples of this. Pinterest features many pictures and craft tutorials of how to use a book to create all manner of things, including: chandeliers, Christmas trees, bow ties, fairy costumes, wedding table

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, par 6

<sup>2</sup> Coole, Diana H., and Samantha Frost. 2010. *New materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham NC ; London: Duke University Press, 2

numbers, knife blocks, lampshades, photo holders, chairs and mystical sculptures.<sup>3</sup> Such examples offer starkly contemporary ways to celebrate book objects— in this article I investigate how the book object itself has contributed to this ever-growing body of repurposed books. Another scholar in the field, Jessica Pressman, describes her use of the term ‘bookishness’: ‘I use the term “bookishness” to describe an aesthetic practice and cultural phenomenon that figures the book as an artefact rather than as just a medium for information transmission and, in doing so, presents the book as a fetish for our digital age.’<sup>4</sup> I, too, riff upon the terms bookish and bookishness. Bookish seems a particularly apt descriptor, as the term ‘book’ continues to be stretched and troubled by its context in a digital era. The cultural, material and symbolic logics that have long entangled the book continue to be negotiated and now extend, with varying results, to ‘the bookish’. To reiterate, in this particular study, I will examine books within the context of a digital era but not those ‘digital technologies and reading practices’,<sup>5</sup> themselves.

This article concerns itself quite specifically with the metamorphoses of the paper book object throughout the past decade. It considers the various ways in which a change to the book’s shape, colour and arrangement can capture the imagination. Quite deliberately, it turns its focus to the role of the book itself in these moments of metamorphosis and thus conceives books as active, vital things. Reconceptualising books as agentic changes the way that our interactions with books are understood, explored and articulated. The starkly different words and actions of those who repurpose books and those who support their repurposing, versus those who express distress and disdain for repurposed books, demonstrate that it is not enough to conceive of the book object as vital—its very materiality must also be included in these considerations. While I am not the first to examine closely the relationship between materiality and the book, some of the most conscientious analyses of these intersections focus on the literary consequences of such materiality.<sup>6</sup>

For Jane Bennett, the importance of acknowledging and studying ‘the force of things’ springs from potential changes to the way political events are understood: ‘How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we face not litter, rubbish, trash, or the recycling, but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of all of these and more can be found on my Pinterest board, ‘Repurposed books’, viewable at <https://au.pinterest.com/lapetitenicola/repurposed-books-art-sculpture-furniture-etc/>.

<sup>4</sup> Pressman, Jessica. 2018. “Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*: Memorial, Fetish, Bookishness.” *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 3 no. 1, 2018, pp. 97-120. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0004), 97

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>6</sup> For example Pressman, Jessica. 2009. “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48 (4):465-482 and also 2014. *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media, Modernist Literature & Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

dangerous matter?'.<sup>7</sup> Bennett could be said to operate in a 'green discourse', as defined by sustainability academic John Dryzek. He writes that 'green discourse' is a broad field, inclusive of many 'factions'.<sup>8</sup> Notably, he includes new materialism, green economics, ecology, postmodernism and ecofeminism, all of which interact in some manner in this thesis. While on the face of it these may seem strange bedfellows, Dryzek, for example, writes that ecofeminists 'believe in a cultivation of radically different human sensibilities, involving a noninstrumental and nondominating, more empathetic and intuitive relationship to nature'.<sup>9</sup> I extend the definition of 'nature' somewhat further than Dryzek probably intends to include the built environment and manufactured objects with which we share our lives, specifically the book object. It is not difficult to attribute plants and creatures ('nature') some kind of agency. It is much more challenging, however, to consider manufactured objects in this manner. Scholarship and critique around waste, however, has increased the visibility of manufactured objects; rather than expiring on cue such objects continue to exist and perform. Books now play a role in shifting perceptions of preservation, waste, recycling, upcycling and the future-proofing of knowledge. Understanding 'thing theory',<sup>10</sup> 'Thing-power',<sup>11</sup> the 'resilience of matter'<sup>12</sup> and the pervasive powers of things heightens awareness of the small, taken-for-granted ways in which people and things continuously affect each other. New materialism and environmental ethics find their nexus at this point: both concern themselves with the problems inherent in anthropomorphic frames of understanding, and seek to highlight the ongoing and unceasing negotiations that occur between people, objects and the environment. As environmental ethicists Talbot and Magnoli write, '[Sustainable] communities will need to learn new ways of thinking, new values, a new system of ethics, a new understanding of their connection to Nature and a new capability to act individually and collectively in a sustainable manner'.<sup>13</sup>

Where the new materialist project most closely overlaps with the field of environmental ethics is in their mutual desire to encourage new ways of considering things not human (or to use Latour's term, 'nonhuman') and to highlight the strength of connection that runs *both ways* between nonhuman and human actants. Books are

<sup>7</sup> 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press., viii

<sup>8</sup> Dryzek, John S. 2013. *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 185

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 190

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Bill. 2001. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1):1–22.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Coole, Diana H., and Samantha Frost. 2010. *New materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham NC ; London: Duke University Press, 7

<sup>13</sup> Talbot, Roger and Gian Carlo Magnoli. 2000. "Social Inclusion and the Sustainable City." In *Ethics and the Built Environment*, edited by Warwick Fox, 91–101. London: Routledge, 95

not merely props, but rather active subjects that organize, generate, participate and provoke. The raft of repurposed books across Pinterest, of which I collect samples on my own Pinterest boards dedicated to the subject, demonstrates how this connection can manifest.

## The Repurposed Book

I deploy the term ‘repurposed book’ to refer to a book that is being put to a fresh function where its past life as a book remains relevant—indeed, it enriches the object that the book becomes. Such books are removed from their standard role as bearer of text, information and stories, and corralled into new roles and shapes. This might be origami-ed pages made into ornaments, leaves cut into hanging garlands, covers hollowed to create boxes or pages glued and then shaped into sculptures. Sometimes, a repurposed book can appear crudely executed. But at other times, the impeccable quality of the workmanship beguiles even ‘romantic’ book lovers into admiring the repurposed book. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of someone like paper artist Su Blackwell, who frequently uses books as her sculptural medium (see for example her sculpture *The Last Unicorn* 2012).

Repurposing books can sometimes be interpreted as inappropriate use of an object that deserves greater respect. For these objectors, who are vocal in great numbers across online newspapers, forums, blogs and comments, books are not like egg cartons, ripe for crafting into other natty projects. The sacred quality of books is neither inherent nor arbitrary, but is built upon a perception that has three key components: one, the sacredness of words;<sup>14</sup> two, the strong relationship between books, words and the religious institutions that almost exclusively produced books for three hundred years;<sup>15</sup> and three, that modern book-handling rituals continue to strengthen and reinforce the perception of books as sacred. This third point is frequently experienced in the inverse, that is the demonizing of acts that contravene accepted book-handling rituals, like the dog-earing of pages described as ‘barbaric’<sup>16</sup> or criminal. I propose that, in part, repurposed books provoke polarising, visceral responses because the act of repurposing books is perceived to be the profanement of a sacred object. Using a vital

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New accents. London; New York: Methuen and Lyons, Martyn. 2011. *Books: A Living History*. Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 7 and 58.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Piper, Andrew. 2012. *Book was there reading in electronic times*. In. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2, 5; Pettegree, Andrew. 2010. *The book in the Renaissance*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 6; Thomas, Marcel. 2006. “Manuscripts.” In *The Book History Reader*, edited by Alistair McCleery and David Finkelstein. 147–156. Oxon: Routledge, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Fadiman, Anne. 1998. *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. London: Penguin, 21

materialist account, I add to this the possibility that the sacred object (in this case the book) plays a part in cultivating or eliciting this collective sentiment. Sacred objects, like the book, are often perceived as objects that should exist outside of standard spheres of consumption. In many instances such hard-line attitudes are today complicated by the fact that books have become, for the most part, a rampantly commercial product, produced at industrial scale.

Books are powerful, active objects and with affective qualities that extend beyond their content. In making this suggestion I follow in the footsteps of Karin Littau, who seeks to ‘make perceptible [...] that books have bodies [...] that they enter into physiological relations with other bodies’.<sup>17</sup> Long after specific stories or information are forgotten, books can continue to elicit emotional and physical effects such as gasps of surprise, coos of cuteness, rounds of curious thumbing and reverential stroking. It is the books themselves, as things, that evoke those reactions. The repurposed book examples that I profile, demanded—through many of their physical qualities like the delightful tactility of paper and leather and the visual seduction of colours, size and shape—to be handled and read by their owners and others in their presence. By recognising the agency of objects, new materialist theories like Bennett’s decentre the human subject. Bennett, in telling her ‘onto-story’ of vibrant objects, once described an assortment of objects that ‘shimmied back and forth between debris and thing’.<sup>18</sup> Many repurposed books perform this same act—shaking, shimmying and shimmering—as they flicker back and forth between their new role as a repurposed book and their old role as a book.

There are many facets to contemporary debates around book repurposing. Repurposed books reveal tensions over the book’s commercial and sacred status, the literary merits of books, the increased use of books as materials in the do-it-yourself craft movement, ecologically friendly practices and books, whether the book is indeed dying, and the current standing of the book. These debates play out not only in the spheres of public opinion, but also with increasing engagement from the academe.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Littau, Karin. 2006. *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 154

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 4

<sup>19</sup> See for example: Brillenburg, Kiene; Driscoll, Kari; Pressman, Jessica. (Eds.) 2018, *Book Presence in a Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic  
 Multigraph Collective, Author, and ProQuest. *Interacting with Print: Elements of Reading in the Era of Print Saturation*. 2018.  
 Piper, Andrew. 2012. *Book was there reading in electronic times*. In. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

A further consideration is that while the book object may be inanimate, it is not inert. Its ongoing existence and continued celebrations of its form are demonstrations of this. Vital materialism pushes this concept further, offering the staying-power of the book as evidence that the book participates in its environment. Understanding the book not as a passive object but as an enchanting object, tenaciously clinging to shelves, tables, shops, homes and libraries, helps explain its strong and ongoing presence in the digital era.

Another way of articulating the enchanted materialism of books is the idea of ‘disobedient objects’. Curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) coined this phrase as an umbrella term for their highly varied display of revolutionary objects—not just political posters and gasmasks—but seemingly innocuous objects like saucepans or water bottles that have helped bring about social or political change. Repurposed books may not immediately be considered political, revolutionary objects. But they have the ability to be disruptive, upsetting and controversial. I take up the ‘evocative proposition’<sup>20</sup> invited by the exhibition title. A disobedient book is one that evokes new and different perspectives. Repurposed books often present an alternative and confronting way of engaging with this ubiquitous but symbolically-charged object. Some practices are longer standing and more common than others, making those books less viscerally confronting. The works discussed in *Interacting With Print*, for example, describes books interleaved with additional content like further illustrations and cuttings.<sup>21</sup> More contemporary practices, however, can often give today’s book lover a sharp jolt. Seeing a clutch of books tied together with twine as an impromptu knife block can be just as provocative as seeing a book with its covers torn off, spine broken, pages folded, suspended in the air above one’s head as a lightshade. What such objects do, with their continued presence and impact, is disobey, flouting the role first assigned to them.

Disobedient objects are at one point described as: ‘foreground[ing] promiscuous resourcefulness, ingenuity and timely intervention’.<sup>22</sup> That phrase, ‘promiscuous resourcefulness’, aptly describes so many of the ways in which books are repurposed. It captures not only the range of roles taken on by the repurposed book, but also hints at a shift in societal norms around the book. Books are not only sacred objects, but also things that are willing to work, to perform. The trope of the dying

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<sup>20</sup> Flood, Catherine, Gavin Grindon, and Victoria and Albert Museum. 2014. *Disobedient objects*. London: V&A Publishing, 11

<sup>21</sup> Multigraph Collective, Author, and ProQuest. *Interacting with Print: Elements of Reading in the Era of Print Saturation*. 2018. 288–304

<sup>22</sup> Flood, Catherine, Gavin Grindon, and Victoria and Albert Museum. 2014. *Disobedient objects*. London: V&A Publishing, 12



book is no longer compelling; it belittles the importance of books' embodiment, dismisses the strength of books' bonds, denies the books' agency and underestimates the resilience of books. As Pressman writes, 'books are doing just fine in our digital age.'<sup>23</sup>

Repurposed books retain an element of their 'bookish' status, most particularly their status as symbols of piety, wealth, knowledge and heritage preservation. Repurposed books add to this bookish status attributes like technological innovation and conservatism, artistic and engineering ingenuity, nous about consumerism, recycling, and ethical and sustainable living. The repurposed book is both a symbolic and a material embodiment of these concepts. The repurposed books discussed here demonstrate the size and variation of assemblages in which books 'organize our affection'. The ability of objects to organise affection while simultaneously retaining their meanings is described by Bennett as the inexhaustible quality of things.<sup>24</sup> Walking past a collection of seemingly innocuous rubbish, Bennett observed: 'In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics'.<sup>25</sup> The debris to which Bennett referred affected Bennett: it arrested her attention, directed her thoughts, slowed her pace and thus inspired her work. These objects did this not, however, through any deliberate human intervention or curation. The effect this debris had on Bennett was as things; the impact is theirs. They behaved in a way that exceeded whatever would have been intended for them when they were designed, left their factory or blew from the tree. Books, too, do this. As Robert Foster writes in his explanation of the relationship between globalization, commodities and value, 'researchers acknowledge how materiality is an irreducible condition [...] a condition that sometimes challenges or exceeds the attribution of meaning to things by human agents'.<sup>26</sup> The books profiled here are not all just pretending to do something, nor are they merely representative of books. They are things that are being, engaging *and* representing. These repurposed books can be read as text (perhaps) and regarded as signs of cultural barbarism or of digital device supremacy. But the sensual, material reality of the work the books perform should not be neglected.

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<sup>23</sup> Pressman, Jessica. 2018. "Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*: Memorial, Fetish, Bookishness." *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 3 no. 1, 2018, pp. 97-120. Project MUSE, [doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0004), 99

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 5

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Foster, Robert J. 2006. "Tracking Globalization: Commodities and Value in Motion." In *Handbook of Material Culture*, edited by Christopher Tilley, Webb Keene, Susanna Küchler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, 285-302. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 285

The book's sensual and affective nature is one of the qualities that books, particularly repurposed books, share with art. And, just as not 'understanding' art is not a barrier to being affected by it,<sup>27</sup> not 'understanding' the book is not a barrier to registering its affective qualities. An artwork or a book will continue to be 'just there, doing what it does, behaving as it behaves'.<sup>28</sup> As Derrida writes in *Paper Machines*, paper—the matter of books—is not exhausted by its semiotics either.<sup>29</sup> Paper not only represents but embodies; paper is both flimsy and concrete. Therefore what it represents, what it embodies, and how it engages, will continue to morph, and not always in ways that are decided or predicted by human actants. The same could be said of those bundles of paper pages, the book. This material potential is precisely what is being repurposed—the design affordances of the book both as a whole and as individual material elements.

### **Evidence**

This ineffable vitality of the book object is reflected in the range of images across Pinterest. Of the 50 billion pins posted to Pinterest, many are images of repurposed books that are performing any number of un-book-like tasks. This prompted my use of Pinterest as both catalogue and archive tool in tracing these bookish objects. Among my Pinterest archive of repurposed books, for example, are a pair of boots, a miniature beehive, a scented sachet and some buttons. These objects were all once books; prior to becoming these new bookish things and exerting Thing-Power in their current form, however, they exerted their Thing-Power as a 'normal' book in a number of ways. They were patient, practising the patience that objects possess, a patience that frequently sees them outlast their original owner.<sup>30</sup> Artists' book historian Johanna Drucker describes this quality as books' 'persistence'.<sup>31</sup> They were enticing and seductive, exuding a confidence that frequently sees them presented as status symbols. They were flexible, exhibiting malleability that frequently sees them used as materials suitable for transforming into fresh objects. This ability to transform into fresh objects is part of what makes books so appealing to those who wish to grant books a

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<sup>27</sup> Jaeger, C. Stephen. 2012. *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, Haney Foundation series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 35

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 2005. *Paper Machine, Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 41–65

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2012. "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton." *New Literary History* Vol 43 (2):225–233. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0020>.

<sup>31</sup> Drucker, Johanna. 2004. *The Century of Artists' Books*. 2nd ed. New York: Granary Books, 359

life beyond being a mere vehicle for text, going stale on a shelf or decaying in a rubbish heap.

### **Case Study One: The Repurposed Books of Su Blackwell**

The first crafted repurposed book I will analyse is by artist Su Blackwell. *Pandora Opening Box* is in the style of a 3D diorama and is a representative example of Blackwell's work.<sup>32</sup> The book is displayed lying back on its covers and spine, with the pages splayed upwards and open, creating a flat horizontal plane. Perpendicular to this plane is a forest of delicate paper trees that have been cut from the pages and folded to pop up. With its black background setting, lone girl and delicate light emitted by the box, the scene presents as a sophisticated, eerie fairy tale. The transformation of the book highlights the book's amenable nature. Through the artist's skill, the book's fine pages have been transformed; the pages have been stuck together with glue, the weight of the outer pages providing a relatively flat plane to work upon. The sheer number of pages would have allowed Blackwell to make a mistake and start again. The crisp whiteness of the paper reflects the light from the box and the book's small size makes it an easily transportable artwork. The book has rewarded Blackwell's patience and skill.

Enjoyment of Blackwell's work is further enhanced by how closely aligned the purpose of her works are with the purpose of the books. Frequently, Blackwell turns fairy tales into fairy tale tableaux (*Treasure Island* 2013), or folk stories into folk story dioramas (*The Stalk Wife* 2014), or botanical texts into floral wonders *Wild Flowers* (X) 2014. Blackwell's repurposed books approach the viewer in a gentle manner. The books are not abruptly requested to perform an unusual task; instead they continue to do what books do, which is take their viewers on a journey and tell them a story.<sup>33</sup> The work of media academic Lisa Gitelman supports this idea that form and content sustain a symbiotic relationship: 'Just as it makes no sense to appreciate an artwork without attending to its medium [...], it makes no sense to think about 'content'

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<sup>32</sup> Blackwell's work is available to view on her website [www.sublackwell.co.uk](http://www.sublackwell.co.uk)

<sup>33</sup> Blackwell's choice of Pandora and her box of troubles as the subject matter in this repurposed book is certainly open to further interpretation, given that 'the two most influential forces in shaping the modern Western consciousness—the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions—agree in regarding women as the catalyst of humanity's cataclysmic decline' (Harris and Platzner 2012, 111). The Pandora myth and its biblical equivalent, the story of Eve and her apple, tell two of the greatest cautionary tales of women and their acquisition of knowledge (Harris and Platzner 2012, 112). Furthermore, both of these modern Western traditions promote anthropocentric supremacy, a position that continues to justify exploitation of nonhuman subjects, including animals and the environment (Harari 2016, 90–99).

without attending to the medium that both communicates that content and represents or helps to set the limits of what that content can consist of.<sup>34</sup> The manner in which Blackwell combines her choice of medium and content is harmonious—the very genre of stories that Blackwell transforms and tells are eminently suited to their visual transformation.<sup>35</sup> That is to say, sharing fairy tales, folklore and knowledge of flora and fauna is a longstanding cross-cultural tradition that predates textual literacy. Thus not only do the artworks continue to do what those books originally did, the artworks in turn perform the sort of non-literate task of spoken folklore. Gitelman reiterates the importance of aligning material and object presence: ‘media are very influential, and their material properties do literally and figuratively *matter*, determining some of the local conditions of communication amid the broader circulations that at once express and constitute social relations’.<sup>36</sup>

Latour’s actant chains help unpack Gitelman’s point: neither ‘media’, ‘local conditions’, ‘broader circulations’ nor ‘social relations’ should be understood as solid, discrete, easily separable entities. Each of those elements should be understood instead as assemblages composed of many chains of human and nonhuman actants.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, at the edges of these assembles dangle actants that will, inevitably, be affected by other actants dangling from the fringes of other complex assemblages. The concept of assemblages makes paper pertinent. Mass produced paper books have many particular qualities; it is easy to pass a paper book from one hand to the hand of another, paper books are often cheap enough that if a book were lent and not returned another might be purchased in its place, paper books can be read in a wide range of light situations, from low-level to full sun, paper books have gaps between individual pages that can serve as placeholders for ephemera like ticket stubs, postcards and dry-cleaning docketts and paper books remind the owner of their existence by being present on a shelf, bench or bedside. Such examples illustrate the unique ways in which the materiality of the book determines how it is circulated and how it affects other relationships, like the relationship between subsequent readers. Paper books participate in social relations in ways that are often subtle but insistent and ways in which many ebooks are technologically disabled from doing. (This is not to say ebooks cannot participate in social relations, rather that such ways are often different and deserve their own extended examinations.)

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<sup>34</sup> 2006, 7

<sup>35</sup> Blackwell reads the books before repurposing them and the story she chooses to represent ‘is intimately tied to the tale’ (Heyenga 2013, 60).

<sup>36</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 10

<sup>37</sup> Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Even when Blackwell repurposes books into unusual, non-bookish roles, the display of her work in a range of international galleries contributes to the legitimisation of paper and books as an artistic medium. The legitimisation of paper allows for the ‘object presence’ and the ‘material presence’<sup>38</sup> to remain aligned. As Brown describes, object presence is what the object appears to be, and material presence is what that object is constructed of. In Blackwell’s case, the object presence is a sculpture and the material presence is paper. Keeping these presences aligned means the viewer is not forced to perform, nor subconsciously undergo, the mental ‘oscillation’<sup>39</sup> that occurs when material presence and object presence differ from what is typically expected. (I explore the dislocating effect of differing material and object presence in other projects.)

The popularity of Blackwell’s repurposed book sculptures is due to her talent with the medium and, crucially, her deft understanding of the power of books and their chief matter, paper. Blackwell strikes a delicate balance between respecting the original book object and the stories within it and simultaneously reinvigorating the book and meeting modernity’s demands for new and exciting things. The next case study, meanwhile, explores how even in the case of repurposed books, the relationship between books and commerce remains fraught.

## Case Study Two: Repurposed Books as Visual Merchandising

Visual merchandising defines ‘a store’s personality in today’s marketplace’ and must ‘attract and hold the passer by until interest is aroused’.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, good display ‘builds prestige’, ‘supports popular trends’ and ‘harmonizes business interests with aesthetics’.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, books have a long history as visual merchandising devices in stores, particularly department stores, which began selling books to increase store ‘prestige’ and promote their reputation as ‘palaces of glamour and gentility’.<sup>42</sup> There was some public outrage that books were being pressed into work that was beneath their dignity and ‘appeared to betray literary values’.<sup>43</sup> This uncertainty about what work it is appropriate to ‘ask’ of a book continues today; as Stephen Brown points out,

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, Bill. 2001. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1):1–22, 14

<sup>39</sup> Brown, Bill. 2010. “Objects, Other, and Us (the Refabrication of Things).” *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2):183–217, 207

<sup>40</sup> Mills, Kenneth, Judith Paul, and Kay Moormann. 1995. *Applied Visual Merchandising*. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1 and 3

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>42</sup> Miller, Laura J. 2006. *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 36, 37

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

‘The [book business] seems caught in a congenital cleft stick (culture versus commerce, the anti-marketing ethos of literary types, et al.)’.<sup>44</sup> The delight or distaste experienced upon seeing books used in visual merchandising in commercial retail or hospitality spaces is part of this contemporary dialogue about the status of the book, and whether it is suitable for such a prosaic and explicitly commercial purpose.

Books in commercial environments have changed much since department stores first began deploying books to sell other goods. Books can now be found in shop displays folded, chopped, stepped on, nailed open, papering over and carved out. They can also be found for sale as handbags or cut into bunting triangles. Arguably those who use books as visual merchandising feel what Gitelman describes: that ‘old media remain meaningful. [But ...] old media also seem unacceptably real. Neither silent film nor black-and-white television seems right anymore, except as a throwback’.<sup>45</sup> Using repurposed books in visual merchandising is a way of expressing that the store understands them as a ‘throwback’, as a nod to the familiar, but rapidly retreating, past. The ‘throwback’ would be most explicitly felt in a shop like Minette’s Vintage, which specialised in old ephemera and vintage fashion and new-but-old-looking fashion. Or in the Australian upmarket jewellery and accessories store Mimco, where the books are an attempt to mimic the atmosphere of a traditional haberdashery or apothecary and bring some of the mythical glamour of the 1920s to their jewellery, handbags and shoes.

Books as part of visual merchandising can indeed play a role in defining a store’s personality and attracting those who walk by to pause, stop and perhaps walk inside. They do this by performing as part of an assemblage, as outlined by Bennett: ‘Assemblages are ad hoc groupings or diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations’.<sup>46</sup> As in the early department stores, the presence of books creates a relationship, a ‘confederation’, between the books, the shop and the shoppers and thus communicates a story about that shop’s image.

Repurposed books as visual merchandising or cafe props continue to position books, for most viewers, with practices of consumption. Dialogue around those repurposed books, then, becomes related to questions about consumption. Repurposed books are, however, frequently made by a person for use in their own life, for personal purposes, repositioning that maker as one that produces for non-

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, Stephen. 2006. *Consuming Books: The Marketing and Consumption of Literature*, Routledge interpretive marketing research. New York, NY: Routledge, xiii

<sup>45</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 4

<sup>46</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 23

commercial purposes. When an individual repurposes a book, it has the ability to shift the dialogue to one about personal practices of using, reusing and recycling.

### **Case Study Three: Large Book Sculptures**

What were once hundreds of books have been transformed into a shop counter, and a bed, and an igloo. Large-scale installations of repurposed books like these are some of the ways in which the 'courtly' book romantic is invited to see books in a new way.<sup>47</sup> The sheer scale of the congregation of books used in these projects should suggest to the viewer that the books did not come to the project one-by-one. It is more likely they came to the project in groups—possibly even by the box or foot through a service like Wonder Book. Rachel Fershleiser, a long-time worker in the book industry, writes 'Books are made from wood pulp. If they don't sell, to wood pulp they return'.<sup>48</sup> That is not to say everyone who has ever worked on or around books feels exactly the same way. But it is a long-standing reality that many who object to book repurposing forget. Enormous installations like these help to demonstrate the scale of unwanted, unused and discarded books. Once again, it is a demonstration of Bennett's assertion that 'an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces'.<sup>49</sup> If the point of the repurposed book installation is to make a statement about the scale of human waste, a collaboration of this grand size is arguably more effective. The circumstances of these individual installations, combined with their location, affects their reception and user engagement.

### **The Commercial and Environmental Potential of Books**

One of the older arguments about the sacredness of books arises in discussion of books as commercial, saleable goods. There are objections raised about books being treated akin to toothpaste<sup>50</sup> or 'an everyday consumer object, like soap or potatoes'.<sup>51</sup> But resolving the book's status based upon it either being or not being an object of

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<sup>47</sup> Fadiman, Anne. 1998. *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. London: Penguin, 21

<sup>48</sup> Interviewed in Schinsky, Rebecca Jones. 2012. "Books are not Sacred Objects." *Book Riot*, August 20. <http://bookriot.com/2012/08/20/books-are-not-sacred-objects/>.

<sup>49</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 21

<sup>50</sup> Len Riggio of Barnes and Noble once described books as 'toothpaste', in Miller, Laura J. 2006. *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Lyons, Martyn. 2011. *Books: A Living History*. Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 8

consumption is an impossibility. Books are particularly entangled and highly contextualised things. Lyons describes how ‘modern readers in wealthy countries often treat books as consumer products, easily discarded and replaced in a frantic search for something new’.<sup>52</sup> This is in many cases true, but the nature of what the book is makes it impossible to treat all consumable products in the same manner—indeed it is impossible to order a kilo of books the way one can order a kilo of potatoes. Historically, however, books were once taxed by the kilo and postage of books is still charged by weight. But, in another contextual tangle, some countries, like France, lower postage payments for books based upon their presumed educational status.<sup>53</sup>

Gitelman is correct in surmising that ‘new modes of inscription are complicated within the meaning and practice of history, the subjects, items and instruments, and workings of public memory’.<sup>54</sup> Given the dramatic rise of repurposed books, and the rapidly widening ability to share images of these repurposed books through online tools like Pinterest, I suggest that repurposed books can be considered a ‘new mode of inscription’, participating in contemporary dialogues about commercialisation, environmental ethics, existential anxieties and the preservation and transfer of knowledge.

Repurposing the book can have the effect of divorcing it from its commercial context, flipping it from an object that is primarily about consumption, albeit consumption of written matter, to one of production, through the maker’s repurposing process. Drucker’s commentary about contemporary art made from unexpected, everyday objects supports this view: ‘Postmodern strategies of appropriation [...] divorced commodity objects from their commercial context in order to call attention to the interpenetration of media culture into nearly every aspect of contemporary experience’.<sup>55</sup> Repurposed books and their now ubiquitous placement in shops (as highlighted in case study two), restaurants, libraries and homes can also have the effect of highlighting the ‘the interpenetration of media culture’ in a number of ways. As the complexity of the repurposed book dialogue demonstrates,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>53</sup> The conditions are described in full on the La Poste website, <https://www.laposte.fr/entreprise/produits-et-services/livres-et-brochures>. Accessed February 2016. The French are, perhaps, more active defenders of the book’s exceptional status. In Napoleonic France, for example, booksellers had to pass strict morality tests to get approval to open a bookshop (Lyons 2011, 144). Protective measures around books and bookshops continue to be offered by the French government (Schiffrin 2010, 45–55; Sciolino 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 21

<sup>55</sup> Drucker, Johanna. 2005. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 161



media culture can reach into surprising places. Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder write of how 'books recirculate as gifts',<sup>56</sup> and that a consumer becomes a producer in the 'postmodern book market' by 'interacting' in the way of 'augmenting, annotating, animating and archiving'. Borgerson and Schroeder write predominantly with reference to engaging with the text, but they do in some instances specifically refer to the way these interactions take place on, around, and thanks to the book's material state.

Interest in the book's material state, combined with environmental concern for the 'overabundance of books' produced by the publishing industry, led repurposed book artist Jason Thompson to consider books as an artistic medium.<sup>57</sup> Understanding that many books go 'eventually, if we're honest, into the recycling bin and landfill', prompted Thompson to wonder 'is there a purpose for some of these unwanted books?' Suggesting that artists have particular skill in seeing beyond the book as a textual tool, Thompson says

Answering this question leads us to artists, designers, and artisans who appreciate books in a uniquely different way. [...] the artist's eye sees something more: raw materials to create unique objects far removed from the book form. To these artists, books are resources to rearrange, recycle, and reimagine into functional and decorative objects.<sup>58</sup>

Thompson is not alone in this artist-led appreciation of books as materials. There are a range of reasons why books are repurposed, including a desire for environmentally-friendly art materials (like artists Cecelia Levy, Jennifer Collier, Lisa Kokin and Julia Strand),<sup>59</sup> a desire to extend the life of the book (like artist Brian Dettmer),<sup>60</sup> to extend the reach of its stories further (like artists James Allen, Jennifer Khoshbin and Jeremy May),<sup>61</sup> to bring fresh attention to book as technology and everyday object (like artists Doug Beube, Yvette Hawkins, Pamela Paulsrud and Jacqueline Rush Lee)<sup>62</sup> and the desire to celebrate personal love of the book by integrating it into a broader range of

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<sup>56</sup> In Brown, Stephen. 2006. *Consuming Books: The Marketing and Consumption of Literature*, Routledge interpretive marketing research. New York, NY: Routledge, 57

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, Jason. 2010. *Playing with Books: The Art of Upcycling, Deconstructing, and Reimagining the Book*. Beverly, Mass.: Quarry, 8

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> On her website Levy states that 'Recycling and environmental aspects are important factors.' (<http://www.cecilialevy.com/about--statement-eng>, accessed 1/3/2016). Collier, Khokin and Strand (all quoted in Heyenga 2013 67; 99; 154).

<sup>60</sup> 'This sense [of obligation] wasn't merely for the sake of being environmental. It was for the sake of the object, and the potential for its resurrection, revitalization, and rebirth.' (Heyenga 2013, 6)

<sup>61</sup> Allen, Koshbin and May (all in Heyenga 2013, 25; 93; 117).

<sup>62</sup> Beube, Hawkins, Paulsrud and Rush Lee (all in Heyenga 2013, 55; 80; 122).

life activities than standard book reading practices (for example using a favourite book to perform a marriage proposal). When people repurpose books to meet these needs and desires, they sometimes also seek to call upon and make prominent the book's status, an assemblage constructed of what books symbolise, how they are embodied and the relationships had with them. Making the book's status prominent is a way of inviting viewers to personally engage with the assemblage on display. In the case of using repurposed books in shops and cafes, this may be done with the aim of further developing a relationship with the shop/café patrons through creation of a bookish space.

Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's concept of modern life as a 'liquid life' further enriches these contemplations of the bookish. A key tenet of the liquid life is consuming and promptly discarding. 'It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: that is, objects lose their usefulness, and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth in the course of being used'.<sup>63</sup> For many, repurposing books is a way to reconcile the values the book still retains, with its dull, outmoded state and to revitalise the book for contemporary, liquid lifestyles.

Repurposing books may also be one of the ways in which people attempt to resist 'the universal rule of disposability'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed the material suitability of books for repurposing may be one of the ways books are resisting this rule. This can happen for multiple reasons. One of these is to specifically shield the book from this rule and represent the book object as an item that continues to be worthy of veneration. Another reason may be to shield any object, book or not, from this rule, and to reposition any object that might be considered waste as an object of ongoing utility. Questions about bibliophilic love and use are typically approached from literary,<sup>65</sup> historical<sup>66</sup> or sociological perspectives.<sup>67</sup> Literary perspectives, however, typically ignore the materiality of the book, while sociological and historical perspectives overemphasise the 'human' part of human–nonhuman chains of interactions (Latour), the result of which is that the book is understood as a flat, Cartesian object. The problem with this, as Diana Coole explains, is that 'Cartesian matter is as intrinsically empty of

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<sup>63</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. 2005. *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity, 9

<sup>64</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. 2005. *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity, 3

<sup>65</sup> For example Price, Leah. 2012. *How to do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

<sup>66</sup> For example Chartier, Roger. 1994. *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Cambridge England: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers; Darnton, Robert. 2009. *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>67</sup> Fadiman, Anne. 1998. *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. London: Penguin

metaphysical purposes of ends as it is devoid of animistic or human spirit. This is what sets it free for modernity's secular and technoindustrial projects'.<sup>68</sup> The current cultural status of the book cannot be fully understood while researchers labour under traditional frameworks that are modernist and secular. Much of the ongoing interest in the book is driven by its materiality, but investigating this interest is difficult if books are reduced to passive 'Cartesian matter'. Books are not 'intrinsically empty', which is why tension over books as objects of commerce or waste continues to manifest.

It is not simply the act of discarding an object that creates these emotions. The book object specifically plays a part in affecting people. Books lay within a much more complex nexus than commercial versus non-commercial goods. Irrespective of their (special) commercial status, books are still an object like any other object. Russell Belk's 'Selling God's Book', details an explicit entanglement between the (holy) Bible and commercial concerns. Indeed, as he points out, 'for-profit sales have been part of the picture ever since Gutenberg'.<sup>69</sup> Books require resources to come into existence, they take up space in shops, homes and warehouses and they literally exist (in great numbers). As the environmental burden of consumption becomes clearer, the act of consumption has become ever more ethically charged. There are a rising number of online shopping tools and sites that offer to help the consumer to navigate the overwhelming number of products available, and to put forward ethically laudable products. The rise of shopping sites like buymeonce.com and ethical.com.au encourage consumers to think more critically about their purchases. This encompasses circumstances of their production (has it been ethically produced?), the environmental fall-out (how damaging was it to produce this product and are there consequences of its use?) and their purpose (is it really necessary?). Dryzek would describe taking such actions as part of a 'green lifestyle'.<sup>70</sup> Parallel to this is the ongoing rise of the DIY/ hacking/ reuse movement.

'Hacking' is a term that has seen its definition stretched beyond the field of computer coders and into the materially-realised world of things. Ikea Hackers, for example, is a website that specialises in sharing the multitude of ways that people modify the ubiquitous Swedish firm's flat-pack furniture so that it performs precisely the role the modifier would like it to, or extends the life of a broken or discarded piece

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<sup>68</sup> Coole, Diana H. 2010. "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, edited by Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, 92–115. Durham NC; London: Duke University Press, 95

<sup>69</sup> Belk, Russell. 2006. "Selling God's Book." In *Consuming Books: the Marketing and Consumption of Literature*, edited by Stephen Brown, 18–31. New York: Routledge, 21

<sup>70</sup> Dryzek, John S. 2013. *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 193

of Ikea furniture.<sup>71</sup> Another product that exemplifies the rise of the home DIYer/hacker/reuser is Sugru, a ‘moldable glue’ that can fix or modify almost anything. In 2012, *The Economist* described Sugru as ‘A new material to mend and make do [which] has a certain appeal in straitened times’.<sup>72</sup> The Irish inventor of Sugru, Ni Dhulchaointigh, says that Sugru ‘is genuinely about a new culture about making and fixing things’ and that applying imagination (and presumably some of the putty-like glue) to the stuff in our life ‘can help give products a new life’.<sup>73</sup> In many instances book repurposing has aims compatible with such sites and products. Sugru is a substance that encourages ‘promiscuous resourcefulness’,<sup>74</sup> something that is also demonstrated by the repurposed book. These shared aims come together explicitly when Sugru is used to help repurpose a book into a tablet holder, as shown in a Sugru online guide. But the combination of a repurposed book and Sugru, or a repurposed book and an Ikea hack, is not required in order to see the affinities the repurposed book shares with other products that are part of the move towards more ethical, environmentally friendly things. Added to this is the changed relationship people have with an object ‘when they have made it themselves, or provided the raw materials, or in other ways participated in its production’.<sup>76</sup> Modifying books into new objects likely changes the relationship the maker has with that object, and possibly influences how the maker then views other similar objects, like other repurposed books. Thompson explains his initial uneasiness at repurposing books, describing it as ‘cannibalising’ the book. ‘But after playing with enough unwanted and forgotten books,’ he says, ‘this feeling eventually passed’.<sup>77</sup> From this description, it is likely that his attitude towards the repurposed books of others also changed, from one of unease to admiration. Further, related to but on the fringe of such a movement, is the trend towards having less stuff.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the Head of Sustainability at Ikea, Steve Howard,

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<sup>71</sup> The website is [www.ikeahackers.net](http://www.ikeahackers.net).

<sup>72</sup> In many ways this is a throwback to the British Ministry of Information’s ‘Make do or mend’ campaign during World War II (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item106365.html>).

<sup>73</sup> Economist, The. 2012. “The Right Stuff.” *The Economist*, Last Modified 11 August 2012. <http://www.economist.com/node/21560267>.

<sup>74</sup> Flood and Grindon 2014, 12

<sup>75</sup> The combination of Sugru, Lego bricks and phone charger cables to create a neat bedside or desk phone-charging station, shared via social media channels, is an outstanding example of promiscuous resourcefulness. View examples at <https://sugru.com/go/lego> for examples.

<sup>76</sup> Tilley, Christopher Y. 2006. *Handbook of Material Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 68

<sup>77</sup> Thompson, Jason. 2010. *Playing with Books: The Art of Upcycling, Deconstructing, and Reimagining the Book*. Beverly, Mass.: Quarry, 8

<sup>78</sup> McBride, Carrie. 2016. “Flirting with Minimalism or Downsizing? These TED Talks May Just Talk You Into It.” *Apartment Therapy*, July 19. <http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/ted-talks-focused-on-minimalism-tiny-houses-downsizing-220917>.

thinks that ‘in the West, we have probably hit peak stuff’.<sup>79</sup> This is prompting even Ikea to adapt its business model. According to Howard: ‘We will be increasingly building a circular Ikea where you can repair and recycle products’.<sup>80</sup> Repurposed books demonstrate their repurposer’s desire to participate in this ‘circular’ model of things.

Warwick Fox writes that ‘the emerging anthropogenic [...] ecological crisis has been leading us to question the ways in which we dwell upon the earth’.<sup>81</sup> It is within this ethically-charged environment that we make decisions about our objects, our ‘stuff’, and our behaviour. To discard a book is to admit that it has been consumed. To donate that book to a friend or opportunity shop is to insert it into the ‘reuse’ economy. To keep a book is to indicate its ongoing usefulness. But to repurpose a book is to place the book into a murky discourse that tugs the book back and forth between sacred-object and ethical-environmental priorities, a discourse that is still deciding how to interpret a repurposed book.

I support Bennett’s ‘hunch’ that ‘the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption’<sup>82</sup> and that the figure of *animate* matter may in fact be one of the ways to encourage ‘more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption’.<sup>83</sup> The ‘opportunity shop’ is an ideal location in which to consider such a hunch. Just as discarding matter does not deaden its vibrancy, nor does donating it (that is, donating things alone will not solve the world’s ecological crisis). Repurposed books in an opportunity shop window could be making a statement about ‘mending and making-do’. After all, given their limited resources, opportunity shops must make the most of what is available to them. Furthermore, not all books donated have a potential ‘afterlife’, although opportunity shops do move a significant number of books, one way or another.<sup>84</sup>

One recent example from an Oxfam shop in Swansea, Wales, attracted viral attention on social media. The shop received so many copies of books in the E.L. James *Fifty Shades* trilogy that the manager built a large book fort out of the excess copies and begged not to have any more donated. The shop has many more *Fifty Shades* books

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<sup>79</sup> interviewed in Farrell 2016

<sup>80</sup> in Farrell 2016

<sup>81</sup> Fox, Warwick. 2000. “Ethics and the Built Environment.” In. London: Routledge, 1

<sup>82</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, ix

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> In the UK alone, Oxfam sells 15 million books annually. Brown, Stephen. 2006. *Consuming Books: The Marketing and Consumption of Literature*, Routledge interpretive marketing research. New York, NY: Routledge.

than can be sold, and the glue used to bind them apparently makes them unsuitable for recycling.<sup>85</sup> Giving shelf space to all of the *Fifty Shades* books donated to that Oxfam outlet, for example, would likely exhaust all of its available shelf and storage space. At the opportunity shop (another place that is sometimes perceived to operate outside standard spheres of consumption due to the integral role of donated goods) shelf space needs to be shared among a variety of objects, not least those that will sell well; books need to be treated as a commodity among competing commodities, even at the opportunity shop.

Shelf space is a valuable resource not only in shops by also in homes and libraries. As Basbanes reluctantly admits, ‘the culling of [library] books is an ongoing exercise that happens everywhere [...] for a multitude of reasons, some of them perfectly defensible’.<sup>86</sup> In the face of a large group of decommissioned children’s library books they may have been reluctant to discard, one public library in the US responded by repurposing those books into a cubby house that now sits in the children’s section of the library. It is possible that those who protest the recycling and repurposing of books suffer a kind of blindness with regard to the type of object the book is. Gitelman writes that ‘the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or ‘blindness’ to the media technologies themselves’.<sup>87</sup> The paper, codex book, given its evolving but largely uninterrupted 500 year-long history, is an indisputably successful technology<sup>88</sup> and hence also the most transparent. Its very success means that many are blind to its constraints, constraints that are becoming clearer as this mass produced reading object stands in contrast with its various digital counterparts. These include the comparatively large amount of space books take up, their propensity to deteriorate, the slow pace at which books are produced compared to the pace of research, the resources required to warehouse and distribute them, the strength required to hold them up and open, and the keenness of sight required to read standard typeface (the list goes on, however my point is not to make a ‘winning’ case for digital tools, as they are far from infallible either.) Many of these constraints stem from the matter of books: paper. Not surprising then is Lyons’s assertion that the

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<sup>85</sup> Loughrey, Clarisse. 2016. “Oxfam Charity Shop Given So Many Copies of Fifty Shades of Grey it Turned Them into a Fort.” *Independent*. March 24. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/oxfam-shop-begs-people-to-stop-donating-copies-of-fifty-shades-of-grey-a6947816.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Basbanes, Nicholas A. 2004. *A Splendor of Letters: The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World*. 1st Perennial edition. New York: Perennial, 182

<sup>87</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 6

<sup>88</sup> Lyons, Martyn. 2011. *Books: A Living History*. Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 7 and 55

biggest change to the book since its transition to codex form is the current transition to electronic means because it removes this key component—paper.<sup>89</sup>

Those who repurpose the book are often those most aware of what the book is and the book object's place, and they are willing to continue engaging in the 'negotiation of meaning' about the book's form, using it as a 'socially embedded site' for discussion.<sup>90</sup> Arguably books can continue to fulfil a range of roles assigned to them in their repurposed form. It is still possible to observe repurposed books and ponder, wonder, learn, bond, display, touch, share, engage with and be amused by those books. This argument is furthered by contemplating repurposed books as works of art and engaging with Drucker's explanation of 'poststudio' art: '[It] took its impetus from a rejection of modernism's privileging of visual opticality and its repression of traditional pleasure in making, artisanal skill, or basic disciplines'.<sup>91</sup> This examination of repurposed books offers the opportunity to consider whether repurposed books are reigniting debate not only over the 'pleasure in making', but also over visual versus textual supremacy.<sup>92</sup> Rejecting the possibility that books can perform in a non-textual manner and insistence upon the illegibility of the book as cancelling its usefulness may indicate a continued hegemony of the word. Garrett Stewart, for example, in describing repurposed books writes of them as 'nonbooks [...] not really there at all'<sup>93</sup>, 'demediated', 'blocked'<sup>94</sup>, 'estranging'<sup>95</sup>, 'negated books'<sup>96</sup>. Stewart's pessimism is, however, redeemed somewhat by his suggestion that repurposed books can 'turn a primary appeal of visual culture, graphic and plastic both, back on itself as an epiphenomenon of its ideational as well as material support'.<sup>97</sup> As argued here, Stewart believes that seeing the book recontextualised and perhaps stripped of its common functions encourages the viewer to see the object afresh.

Seeing the object afresh can, however, lead some observers to adopt instrumental, utilitarian perspectives. Stewart describes how 'the functional paginated form' is often removed from repurposed books and they are replaced or

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>90</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 6 and 7

<sup>91</sup> Drucker, Johanna. 2005. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 161

<sup>92</sup> Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New accents. London; New York: Methuen.

<sup>93</sup> Stewart, Garrett. 2011. *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 9

reformed to ‘mere material form’ or ‘raw geometric thing’.<sup>98</sup> Sometimes this has the effect of implying that it is possible to reduce the book to its parts. Lyons writes that ‘The book has always been much more than a useful gadget’<sup>99</sup> but this view is not shared by a digital futurist like W.J.T. Mitchell who famously dismissed the codex book as ‘dead tree flakes encased in dead cow’<sup>100</sup> or contemporary columnist Lance Ulanoff who looks at a bookstore and sees ‘aisles and aisles of dead trees compressed into 200 or so pages’.<sup>101</sup> Paradoxically, Ulanoff describes his love of books while announcing their obsolescence. ‘Old books are magical,’ he says. ‘New books are ridiculous’. What Ulanoff’s article indicates is his understanding of some of the sensual delights of the material book (‘I, too, love the smell of an old book. I collect [...] dozens of dusty, yellowing, fragile classics’) yet he expresses enthusiasm at making paper books a thing of the past, a curiosity. Implied here is the criticism that with the availability of technological alternatives in the digital era, no logical, rational person should bother producing or preferring print. The repurposed book reminds the viewer of the integral nature of the page, the opening, the turn, the fold, the cover and of the finiteness of the book experience. Certainly there is sufficient anecdotal evidence, backed by significant paper-book sales, online forum commentary and Pinterest activity, to confirm that many derive significant personal enjoyment from the book’s physicality and the way that this makes them engage with the book as a storyteller and as an object. The materiality of the book can, however (even among book lovers) raise significant concerns over its greatest vulnerability—paper.

## The Matter of Paper

Paper has its own material, aesthetic and lively qualities, qualities it shares with a book by being part of the book. A utilitarian analysis of the book might fail to account for the mysteriously seductive properties of a book’s key material component. Paper historian Lothar Müller writes expansively of paper’s charismatic nature, describing it in vital terms as a ‘dynamically energized medium’ and ‘not merely inert matter or a passive object’.<sup>102</sup> At times, paper is what makes books so suitable for the types of transformations profiled in the case studies above here. In the examples of rolled up books as room décor or a pile of book pages repurposed into a pencil cup, the relatively uniform size and shape of the pages makes them aesthetically pleasing as a group and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>99</sup> Lyons, Martyn. 2011. *Books: A Living History*. Farnborough: Thames & Hudson., 7

<sup>100</sup> cited in Nunberg, Geoffrey. 1996. *The Future of the Book*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 78

<sup>101</sup> Ulanoff, Lance. 2016. “Where the #&%\*! Are All My Books? On My Kindle.” *Mashable*, February 15. <http://mashable.com/2016/02/14/print-books-vs-ebooks/#cx2VRVMzbqqa>.

<sup>102</sup> Müller, Lothar. 2014. *White Magic: The Age of Paper*. Cambridge: Polity, xi



simultaneously disturbing to others once these objects are understood to be repurposed books. Meanwhile the variation in the colour of the pages after their covers have been pulled off offers the eye interest even as the stomach lurches at recognising what the objects once were.<sup>103</sup>

Book repurposers are not the only ones who are concerned with and engaged by the book's key material component. In 2014, for example, no fewer than four books covering the histories of paper were published: *White Magic*,<sup>104</sup> *The Paper Trail*,<sup>105</sup> *On Paper*<sup>106</sup> and the paperback release of Ian Samson's *Paper, An Elegy*.<sup>107</sup> This indicates a strong public appetite to better understand this ancient material. Such thorough engagement with paper is demonstration of books' material power and its deep existence within the 'sensual realm'.<sup>108</sup> It is as though the makers of repurposed books are able to temporarily parse the 'world of concepts'<sup>109</sup> from the sensuality of the book and then, in reforming the book, these key aspects are reconstructed in a fresh manner. Perhaps it is this reformation or rearticulation that is so threatening and repulsive to some. I employ and extend Stuart Hall's term 'articulation'<sup>110</sup> here to describe rearticulation as a process of making, of reordering and reprioritizing the material, social and symbolic elements of the book. It emphasises production over transactional consumption. In this way, my project's focus upon these processes of creation and interaction eschews the accusations of scholars like Tim Ingold, who assert that studies focusing on the materiality of objects are unable to 'follow the multiple trails of growth and transformation that converge, for instance, [...on] the page of a manuscript'.<sup>111</sup> In part, I agree with Ingold's summation that 'by the time [materials] have congealed into objects they have already disappeared. Thenceforth is it the objects themselves that capture our attention, no longer the materials of which they are made'.<sup>112</sup> But I also believe that this claim is not absolute—materials too can

<sup>103</sup> These examples are viewable via my Pinterest board on repurposed books, [www.pinterest.com.au/lapetitenicola/repurposed-books/](http://www.pinterest.com.au/lapetitenicola/repurposed-books/)

<sup>104</sup> Lothar Müller

<sup>105</sup> Munro, Alexander. 2014 *The Paper Trail*, London, Allen Lane

<sup>106</sup> Basbanes, Nicholas. 2014 *On Paper*, New York, Knopf

<sup>107</sup> This interest continues. For example reporter and writer Mark Kurlansky published his history of paper in late 2016, while reporter and writer David Sax's *The Revenge of Analog* (2016) pays significant attention to paper as the medium of diaries, magazines and books.

<sup>108</sup> Boivin, Nicole. 2008. *Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 9

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Culture, Media, and Identities*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage in association with the Open University.

<sup>111</sup> Ingold, Tim. 2007. "Materials Against Materiality." *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1):1–16. doi: 10.1017/S1380203807002127, 9

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

'capture our attention'. In recycling and repurposing the book it is often not the book as social tool but the book as materials that captures attention and is then experimented with.

## Repurposed Books Under Attack

Dialogue disparaging repurposed books is becoming less prominent in online media. Pinterest examples of repurposed books continue to abound and they are no longer accompanied by comments with the level of vitriol as in years past. There certainly remain comments that indicate a level of ambivalence about repurposed books, but their viewers often appear 'won over' or enchanted by the ingenuity or skill demonstrated.<sup>113</sup> Book historian Mindell Dubansky is an exception to this ambivalence. Creator of the term 'blook' ('book-look' objects) and collector of historical examples of reimagined books, Dubansky expressed horror at repurposed books, saying 'I hate this wholesale destruction of books that's going on, this altered-book craze. I've seen so many beautiful books that have been damaged on Etsy'.<sup>114</sup> Dubansky's use of the term 'craze' intimates her opinion that repurposed books are a fad, a practice taken up by those who have momentarily lost their mind and heedlessly 'damage' books to participate in this trend. The distaste Dubansky alleges upon viewing repurposed books reveals her concerns about the potential fading of the book's sacred status and possibly anxieties as a book historian regarding the preservation of knowledge. The act of repurposing these books, after all, could be construed as a radical demonstration of bookish love gone awry. In turn, her puritanical attitude towards book treatment is a rejection of the desire to refresh books for a contemporary cultural context.

It is not merely the repurposed book that reveals concerns about the current status of the book, but quite specifically the domestic and commercial placement of the repurposed book. The gallery setting helps to shield the effects of 'biblioclastic sculpture'.<sup>115</sup> As Duchamp's 'Fountain' demonstrated, it was not toilets that were disrupted by the conversion of a urinal into art, but the function of galleries and the definition of art that were challenged. That is to say, putting an object into a gallery says more about art than about the object itself. Similarly, as repurposed books spread

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<sup>113</sup> For example, 'Though we don't like the idea of ripping up ANY book, we can't deny this is beautiful!' (<https://au.pinterest.com/pin/22236591887334575/>), or "Okay, maybe a little uncomfortable with the ruining of books, but still.... pretty freakin' cool!" (<https://au.pinterest.com/pin/22236591887334566/>).

<sup>114</sup> in Schuessler, Jennifer. 2016. "A Secret in Every Tome." *The New York Times*, January 28. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/books/a-secret-in-every-tome-no-text-required.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/books/a-secret-in-every-tome-no-text-required.html?_r=0).

<sup>115</sup> Stewart, Garrett. 2011. *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 11

further from gallery settings, their ubiquity and their reach into domestic and commercial environments is casting a brighter light on changes to the book's status, and the range of reasons why repurposed books are variously hailed or reviled.

When presented as a repurposed book, the book object is showcased in an unusual manner. Bourdieu articulates the necessity of such novelty in maintaining one's cultural status:

Because the distinctive power of cultural possessions or practices [...] tends to decline with the growth in the absolute number of people able to appropriate them, the profits of distinction would wither away if the field of production of cultural goods, itself governed by the dialectic of pretension and distinction, did not endlessly supply new goods or new ways of using the same goods.<sup>116</sup>

Books have long been representative of many things including wealth, knowledge, prestige, piety, privilege, literacy and cultural acumen. But the book's ability to communicate these things has declined with the historical increase in book production and ownership. Repurposing books, whether through curated groupings, creative display, large installations or intricate pieces of sculpture, is certainly a new way 'of using the same goods'. What remains to be seen is how long until current repurposing methods 'wither' in distinction through their ubiquity. The perceived withering of distinction is likely one of the factors colouring the reception of many repurposed books. If, as discussed in relation to Blackwell's work, there appears to be alignment between the role of books and the performance of the repurposed book, then there is no loss of distinction. This in turn relates to ideas around the book's status, and how closely the status of the two objects align. For example, repurposed book as fine artwork and book; repurposed book as folklore device and book; and repurposed book as storytelling device and book. These pairs could be felt to align. This is in contrast, for example, to repurposed books as a dress or planter box and a book. The statuses for such objects begin to misalign, thereby prompting concerns for the book's daily role and iconic status.

The language used in online comments in response to repurposed book examples suggest that bodily reactions are both a barometer of sentiment and a determining factor in whether viewers engage positively or negatively with the repurposed book. Such reactions, especially when negative, can be the target of

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<sup>116</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 230

ridicule. Such was the case for journalist Rebecca Schinsky.<sup>117</sup> Schinsky's article was written largely in response to the 75 responses to the proposal book (profiled earlier in this chapter). Her article 'Books are not Sacred Objects' argued exasperatedly that those concerned about repurposed books are 'torch bearing villagers', 'misguided' and 'counterproductive'. There is a Cartesian-inspired snobbery behind Schinsky's criticism: that if only everyone knew how books were really made and their true life expectancy, then they would be rational (just like her) and they would cease 'devaluing' literature by making literature only about the 'the ink, the pulp, and the glue that deliver them to you'. This is not dissimilar to Ulanoff's prejudice against (new) books. Among other things, Ulanoff's prejudice ignores the many limitations of digital, screen-based devices. He is already blind to 'the instrument and all its supporting protocols'.<sup>118</sup> Such protocols include ready access to a screen-based reading device, knowledge of how to download and/or purchase online books, a manner of paying for books online, knowledge of software and accessories that enable notetaking, access to the internet to refresh the supply of books and power to recharge the device. Combined with this, there may continue to be a range of cultural situations in which a book is deemed more appropriate. The number of negative gut reactions to repurposed books appears to be shrinking (or at least becoming more temperate). Yet what Schinsky and Ulanoff's commentary demonstrates is that the opinions of those who would disregard the affective qualities of the book and make fun of those who insist on articulating and engaging with the affect of the book have not changed. Indeed such contemptuous attitudes are what prompt book historian Lyons to refer to book lovers as embattled: 'Embattled book lovers often insist that books do not need batteries, they do not get infected by viruses and when you close a book you never need to "save" because you will never lose your data'.<sup>119</sup> What Lyons writes is undoubtedly true. What many of the memes on Pinterest suggest, however, is that there is another driving force behind enthusiasm for the book object, and it is an enthusiasm grounded in affect.

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<sup>117</sup> Schinsky, Rebecca Jones. 2012. "Books are not Sacred Objects." *Book Riot*, August 20. <http://bookriot.com/2012/08/20/books-are-not-sacred-objects/>.

<sup>118</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 5

<sup>119</sup> Lyons, Martyn. 2011. *Books: A Living History*. Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 7

## Conclusion

Littau astutely notes that feelings and gut responses to art and literature used to be considered key elements of the artistic process—part of art’s very function.<sup>120</sup> Because of this longstanding relationship between art and affect (‘for over two thousand years’), Littau argues the dismissal of ‘bodily responses to literature’ as ‘unsophisticated’ is unjustified.<sup>121</sup> To trivialise those who express strong feelings is therefore to misunderstand art’s purpose and furthermore is to be blinkered against matter’s vitality. Affect experienced by a viewer as they face a repurposed book should not be summarily dismissed with disdain. Gut reactions spring from *seeing* (or touching) the *book*. What these makers sense is Bennett’s assertion that ‘vital materiality can never really be thrown “away”, for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity’.<sup>122</sup> That is to say, discarding a book does not necessarily deprive that book of vitality, but merely a human audience. In discussing art made from everyday objects, Drucker writes that ‘The materials and surfaces are absorbing, fascinatingly so, while the forms of the work exploit the potential of material to produce both meaning and effect in works that are delimited, sculptural pieces whose referential field vibrates within a matrix of associations’.<sup>123</sup> Some such bookish ‘associations’ are positive, some are negative. And many of these bookish feelings resonate from the body, inspired by such repurposed books.

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<sup>120</sup> Littau, Karin. 2006. *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 5

<sup>123</sup> Drucker, Johanna. 2005. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 160

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