

EMBODYING BOOKNESS: READING AS MATERIAL ACT

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Johanna Drucker's aesthetic engagement with print—and with written marks and visual codes in general as visual embodiments of language and signs—bridges her artistic and theoretical work. During the last decade she has applied her deep poetic knowledge of the workings of print and codex forms to digital media, in a sustained attempt to explain the relations between their material instantiations and their computational codes (Drucker 2007, 2008 and 2009). This reflection about signifying processes as functions of material mediations, including a sense of the self as a sign-produced site of experience and perception, has been repeatedly explored in many of her artist's books. In the catalogue for an exhibition of her work held at Granary Books in New York City in June 1994, she offered this overview of her own work:

Books offered a private arena in which to express an ambitious and yet secret, intensely personal, investment of energy. My desire to make books combined a drive to write the world into being, to claim experience through its representation in language, with the desire to make closure and containment, to shut the word within the covers of a finished work held, saved, retained. Two themes run through the works: the first is the exploration of the conventions of narrative prose and the devices by which it orders, sequences, and manipulates events according to its own logic; the second is the use of experimental typography to expand the possibilities of prose beyond the linear format of traditional presentation. (Drucker 1994)

She conceives the ensemble of book materialities as this self-enclosing mirror where self and world come together in some sort of intelligible order of signs. Experiments in both typographic presentation and narrative prose are described as co-dependent elements in her books, and both are part of a more general material investigation of the book as an experiential container and organizer of lived experience.

In her artist's books, the relation between the visuality of language as embodied in typography (i.e., typeface, type size, type style, typesetting, page layout) and narrativity as an effect

of verbal montage is investigated within the full dynamics of the codex structure. Page surface, page opening, and page turning provide yet another material dimension in which the relations between typographic design and verbal narrative extend from the visual to the tactile and kinetic field, through which eye, hands, and body interact with the sign field maintained by the codex space. There are many examples in her work in which recursive echoes between these three levels draw the reader's attention to the performance of reading as a particular embodiment of a given codex-typography-narrative dynamic. By means of specific formal operations the book becomes a machine for creating awareness of codex codes through a self-referential rhetoric. Their bookness points to the specificity of their material form as books, i.e., the fact that as a signifying space they cannot be reproduced by or translated into other media—and marks the codex as a signifier that repeatedly attempts to position itself as a particular kind of experiential event.

Johanna Drucker's aesthetic engagement with the materiality of the typographic book will be briefly analyzed in two works: *From A to Z* (1977) and *The Word Made Flesh* (1989). Meta-reference to the material form and modes of production of letterpress books, one of the typographic and bibliographic tropes of those works, is also a feature in several of her works which are structured on the basis of specific formal relations between typeface, page layout, paper properties, and book binding.¹ Relations between verbal signs are strongly mediated by the way her works consistently display the dynamics of the printed book, as manifested in the tensions between single page, page opening, and page sequence. She has developed a very personal visual prose in which typographic and bibliographic coding becomes an important narrative signifier.

*From A to Z*² [Fig. 1], a coded narrative about the community of artists and printers with whom an autobiographical narrator is working, contains a procedural restriction that makes narrative productivity a function of the individual sorts and pieces of type available in the type cases:

The premise of this book was to take the type in 48 drawers of type, make a text that made sense, and use all of the elements in the fonts

once and only once. The type drawers were full and composition, though it often required moving from drawer to drawer, was fairly straightforward for introductory sections. Picking type faces to match character styles and then setting the original poems on the recto of the sheets was the next step, and editing was often required as type ran short. The setting of the back sides of each character page required three steps. First, all the sorts left in the case had to be set up and proofed, then they had to be arranged on paper, as in a scrabble game of punning sense. The setting into a final form came after, with pressure to use as many of the sorts as possible. (Drucker, ABO, Project statement, <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/atoz/edition1.xml>, accessed 12 Jan 2011).

Thus, the frequency of occurrence of any given letter in the text mirrors the quantity of sorts available for upper and lowercase type in each drawer. This reference to the mode of production points to the formal features of type (font, size, style), to its materiality as a metal piece that leaves an inscriptional mark on paper, and also to its economic nature, as a given amount of available production capital embodied in one of the tools required for printing.

As a procedural work, it turns the typographic alphanumeric characters, including punctuation signs and other special characters, into one of the content layers of the book. Its self-imposed constraint of using only a limited set of glyphs means that its narrative content has to be adjusted to its typography. Linguistic combinations will be partially determined by typographic possibilities, thus translating the medium back into narrative content and structure. The writing alphabet is reframed as typesetting alphabet: letters are not only an abstract inked mark on paper, but they are also the individual metal types used for making those marks. In *From A to Z*, the visual layout, i.e., the topographic organization of the page, the syntax of pages, and the montage of its narrative sequences inscribe the materiality of the mode of production within the text's narrativity. Its exploration of the combinatorial potential of the written alphabet as an extension of the syntactic nature of verbal language is experienced as a fully material encounter with typography as material artifact. Language is embodied as writing and writing is embodied as typography, thus heightening our perception of the material determinants of printed narrative as a particular mode of production of language as writing.

The generative power of the constraint can be seen, for instance, in the subversion of orthographic spelling, which is either replaced by characters that are partially similar in terms of visual or sound form, or simply omitted and inferred from set sequences (in anticipation of current 'sms' simplified conventions): 'sum'sOrts (...) was, us'd, up, and, sum, was, left, ov'r, and. of, a, hunn'rd, copi's. zis. on', iz, numb'r :::::.' [Fig. 2]. This principle of simplification eliminates orthographical redundancies and produces readable sequences

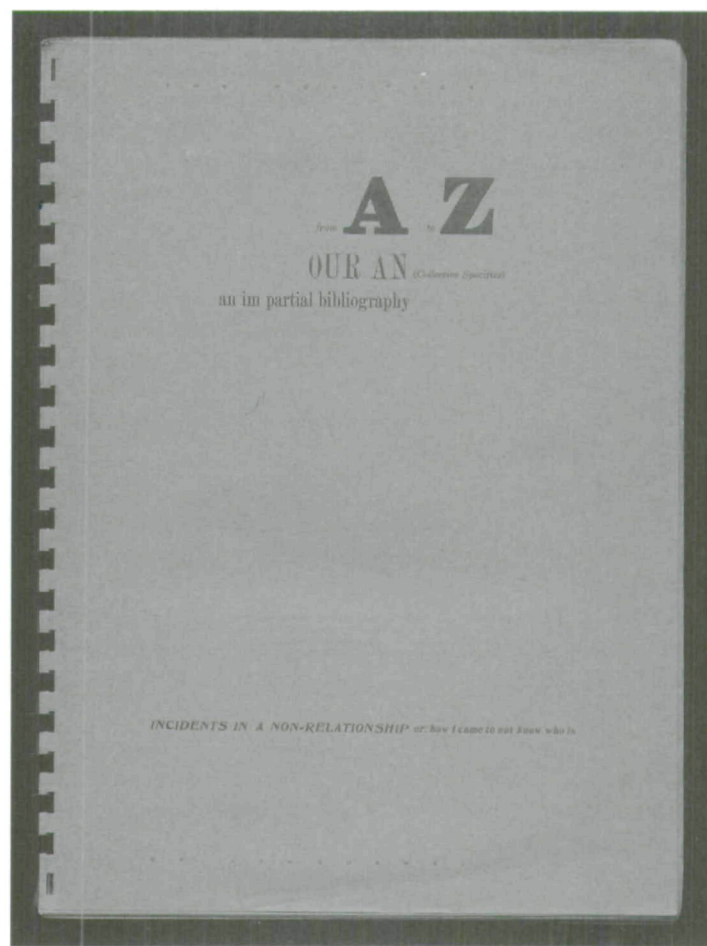


Fig. 1
Johanna Drucker, *From A to Z: OUR AN (Collective Specifics) an im partial bibliography, INCIDENTS IN A NON-RELATIONSHIP or: how I came to not know who is* (1977), title page. Original size: 7.375 × 12 inches.
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that recode writing conventions. The act of setting type and the quantification of its economic value as a given number of set pages is sometimes referred to in the verso of several folios: '\$9.=,25Pps.' (p. 10) '\$15\$.--.,29Pp.' (p.20). As a personal autobiographic project, *From A to Z* contains marks of its production at formal, biographical, and economic level. Texts are forced to acknowledge their limitations in telling themselves through self-reference to typographic availability and scarcity. Self-description and marginal annotations split the narrative into several layers of ironic commentary that constantly downplay the text's own authority [Figure 3].

The fact that the work contains running marginal notes adds a parodic dimension to its form as a book, mocking its own descriptive pretensions while signalling a particular kind of annotated book—the annotated bibliographic list [Fig. 4]. Because its narrative attempts to describe the relations between the individuals in the print workshop, and particularly an imaginary love “non-relationship” between A and Z, its reference to the means of production may be said to include the social and affective relations of production. Letters are metaphorical embodiments of the dramatis personae of the story: 'A: Miss East Coast uptight hot shit coed – just so smart and attractive and well educated and able to play it all right'; 'Z: Very Ivy League graying prematurely

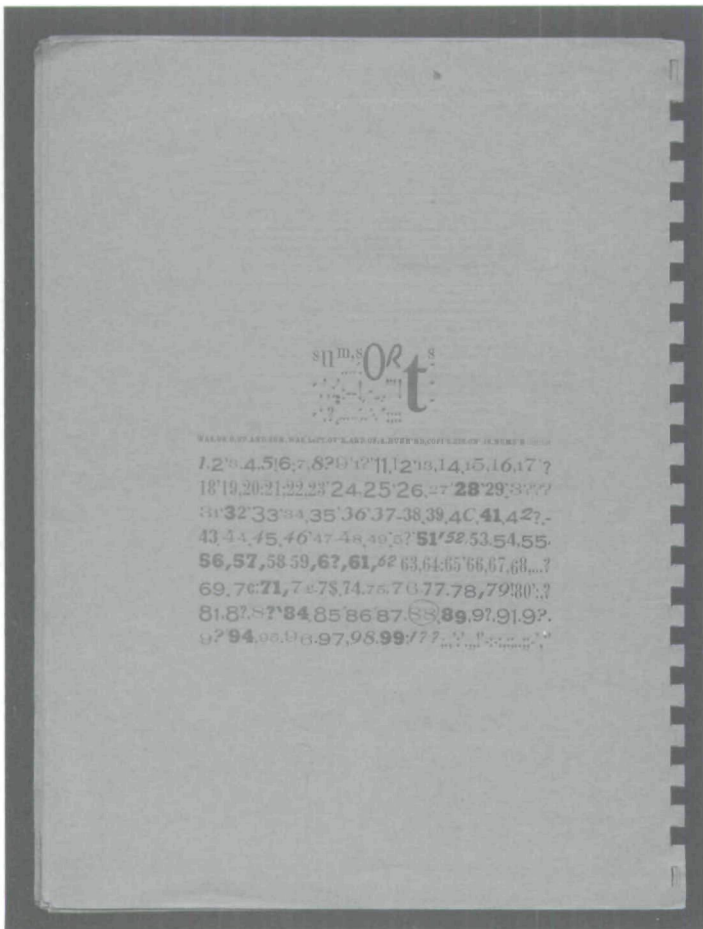


Fig. 2
 Johanna Drucker, *From A to Z* (1977), colophon, page 66
 Original size: 7.375 × 12 inches.
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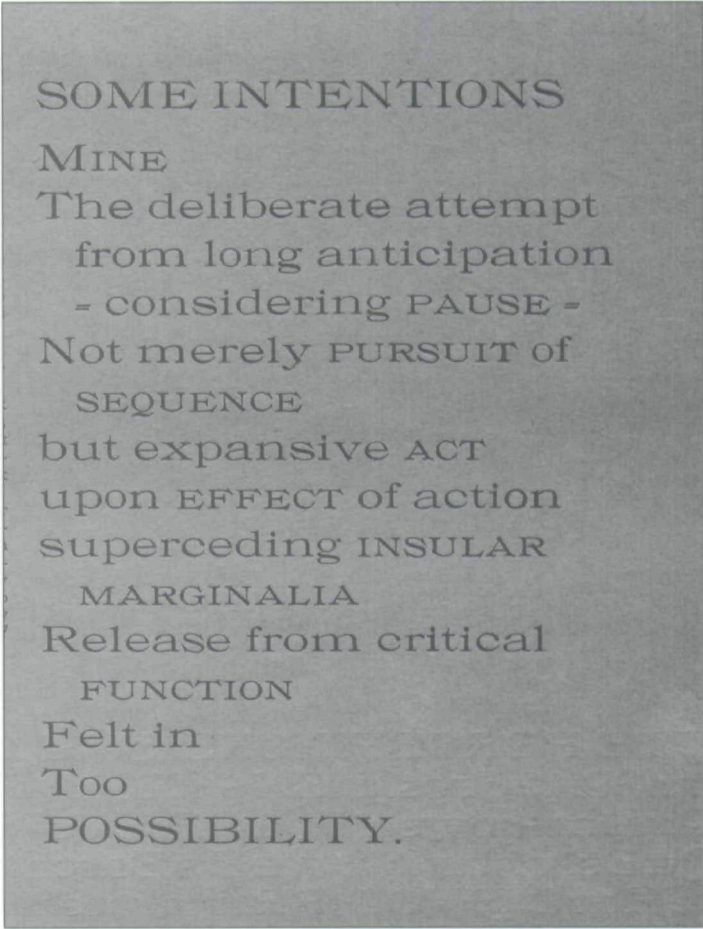


Fig. 3
 Johanna Drucker, *From A to Z* (1977), page 9, detail
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and into the distinction it lent him—good family, good education, & good prospects, nice inheritance—poor fellow” (“Key to Abbreviations Used in this Book,” *From A to Z*, p. 65). A careful reading of its coded allusions also highlights the power relations that structure the affective and productive positions within this print community. *From A to Z* narrates the print workshop as a catalogue of typographic types and as a catalogue of human types.

The tension between description and self-description never allows the reader to entirely leave the surface of the page. This visual anchorage is the source of recurrent formal echoes between medium and content, i.e., for constructing the reader’s awareness of the semantic value of visual difference. Typographic layout and book structure become crucial elements in the work’s meaning, as readers are forced to notice again and again the recodification of spelling and typesetting conventions that is taking place as they try to read. Changes in type and layout are the result of the constraint imposed on the number of fonts, styles and characters available at each stage of composition. Thus the deciphering of coded allusions to the various relationships between the characters in the story is mirrored in the deciphering of the phonetic and visual puns as each piece of available type stands for various letterforms. The drawers of type and the

letterpress itself are written into the narrative.

In *The Word Made Flesh* (1989) the layering of verbal and typographic meaning is equally complex [Fig. 5]. The text offers several typographic reading paths that superimpose on the page. Paths are created by a basic rectangular grid that governs the arrangement of type on the page.³ The use of two print colors (red and black) as well the expressive use of other font properties create two reading paths: a background same-size-capital red text, of which each letter is symmetrically set at the grid’s points of intersection; and a foreground varying-size black text that is set over the grid, thus interrupting and breaking the background pattern. Because the foreground text uses contrasting type sizes and styles, the result is the reader’s dynamic engagement in deciphering words and sentences while moving between the background and foreground plane. This play with the materiality of type forms (font, size, style, kerning, leading, baseline, height, etc.) enacts the meaning of the title in the experience of trying to make sense of words and sentences.

The Word Made Flesh further denaturalizes print by combining different fonts, sizes, and styles in the same words and sentences. Several words are made to share the same character, which runs across two or more lines, as happens with all the letters in the phrase “THE WORD MADE

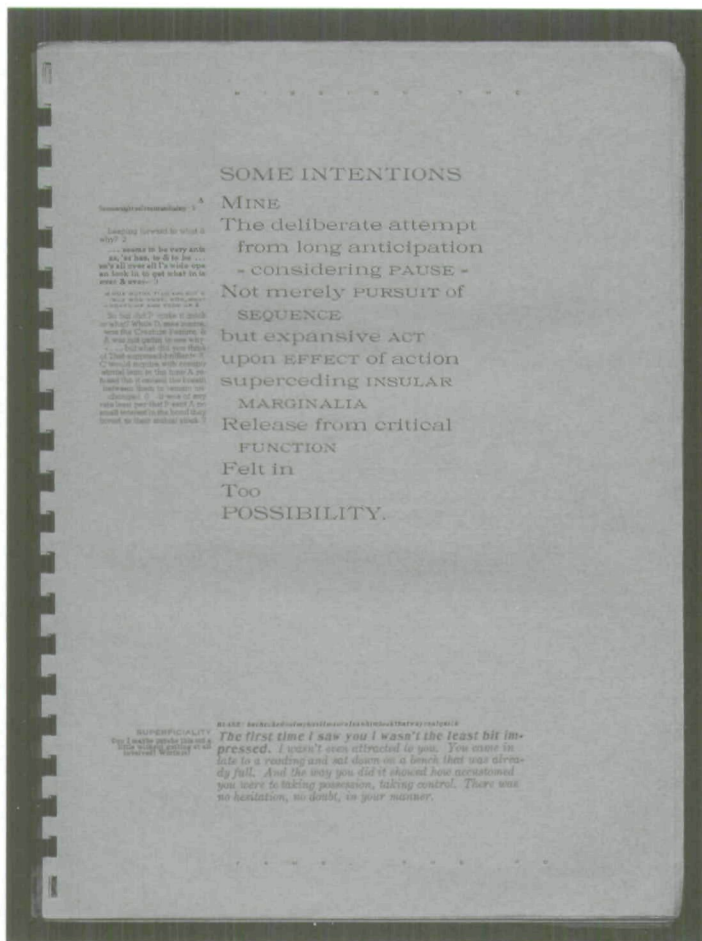


Fig. 4
Johanna Drucker, *From A to Z* (1977), Table of Contents, page 5
Original size: 7.375 × 12 inches.
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FLESH'.⁴ These sixteen characters (which are in fact twenty, because the 'T' occurs five times) define diagonal reading trajectories within the basic horizontal/vertical type-setting grid. Large-scale letters themselves become the material center of this typographic narrative, as they spread across the pages [Fig. 6]. The tension between letter sequence and letter constellation on each page increases the verbal tension between the lyrical and narrative/reflective threads in this work.⁵ At the same time the reader is forced to pause and consider the particular shape of the letter as if he/she were looking for the type to set the text. Reading becomes a typographic experience because it emulates part of its particular production history. The setting of type is made present in the reading of the text.

The temporality and spatiality inherent in the codex structure as a syntactic arrangement of folios and pages is experienced by readers while shifting back and forth between a self-enclosed constellated page and a continuing typographic narrative. Because the title-sentence is written across twenty recto pages ('TTTTTHEWORDMADEFLESH', pp. 7-45), the work suggests a homology between syntactic structures in language and syntactic structures in the codex.

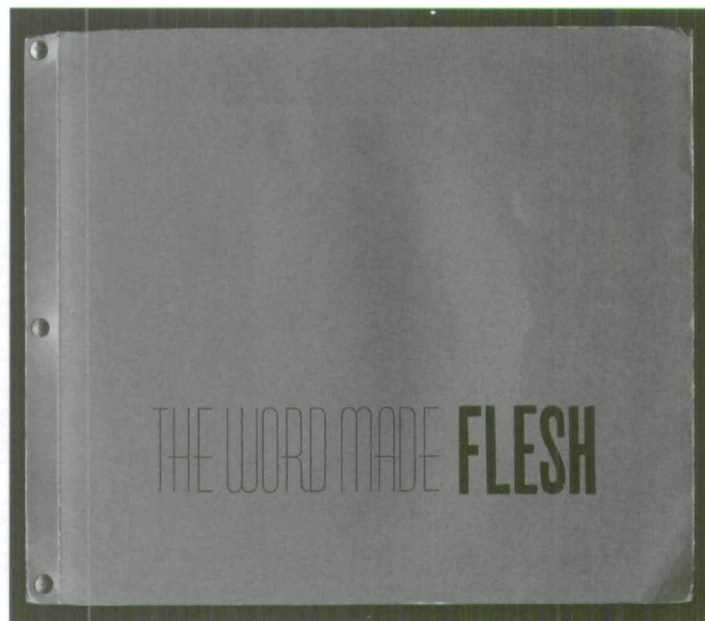


Fig. 5
Johanna Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh* (1989), cover
Original size: 12.6 × 10.6 inches.
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Page sequence establishes the basic syntax of codex forms, while type variations are a specific occurrence or instance of an abstract system of differences that guarantees the identity and semantic productivity of typography as a semiotic system. The initial sentences of the text echo the Saussurean conceptual dichotomy between *langue/parole*, and the Chomskian distinction between deep/surface syntactic structures: "A l'interieur de la/du langue/age" (p. 3), "I" (p.5), "I/T" (p. 7), "I/T / lay / the tongue" (p. 9), "The tongue lies on the table" (p. 11), "The tongue lies on the table / writing, writhing, spelling out THE breath of its efforts in an unseemly desire to be seen / A stick taken up in defense of THE world marks THE struggling back of THE folds of skin" (pp. 13, 15).⁶

Drucker is thinking about typography and codex in terms of a system of differences that has a fully syntactic expression. The syntactic recursivity of language is made to mirror the syntactic recursivity of typography as a combination of type units, and of the codex as a combination of page units. The productivity of the recombination of those units is shown through a process of accretion that, at each turn of the leaf, keeps adding new verbal elements to form sentences and new typographic patterns that eventually extend to the full space of the page. The act of being inside language (and inside the printed book as a reliving of the origin of language) is dramatized in the work's generative development from blank page to a single character, to a few words, to full sentences, and to an entire discourse. Furthermore, the production of self in language and its inscription within the codex has been objectified in the initial transition between "I" (p. 5) and "IT" (p. 7). The codex transubstantiates the word by giving

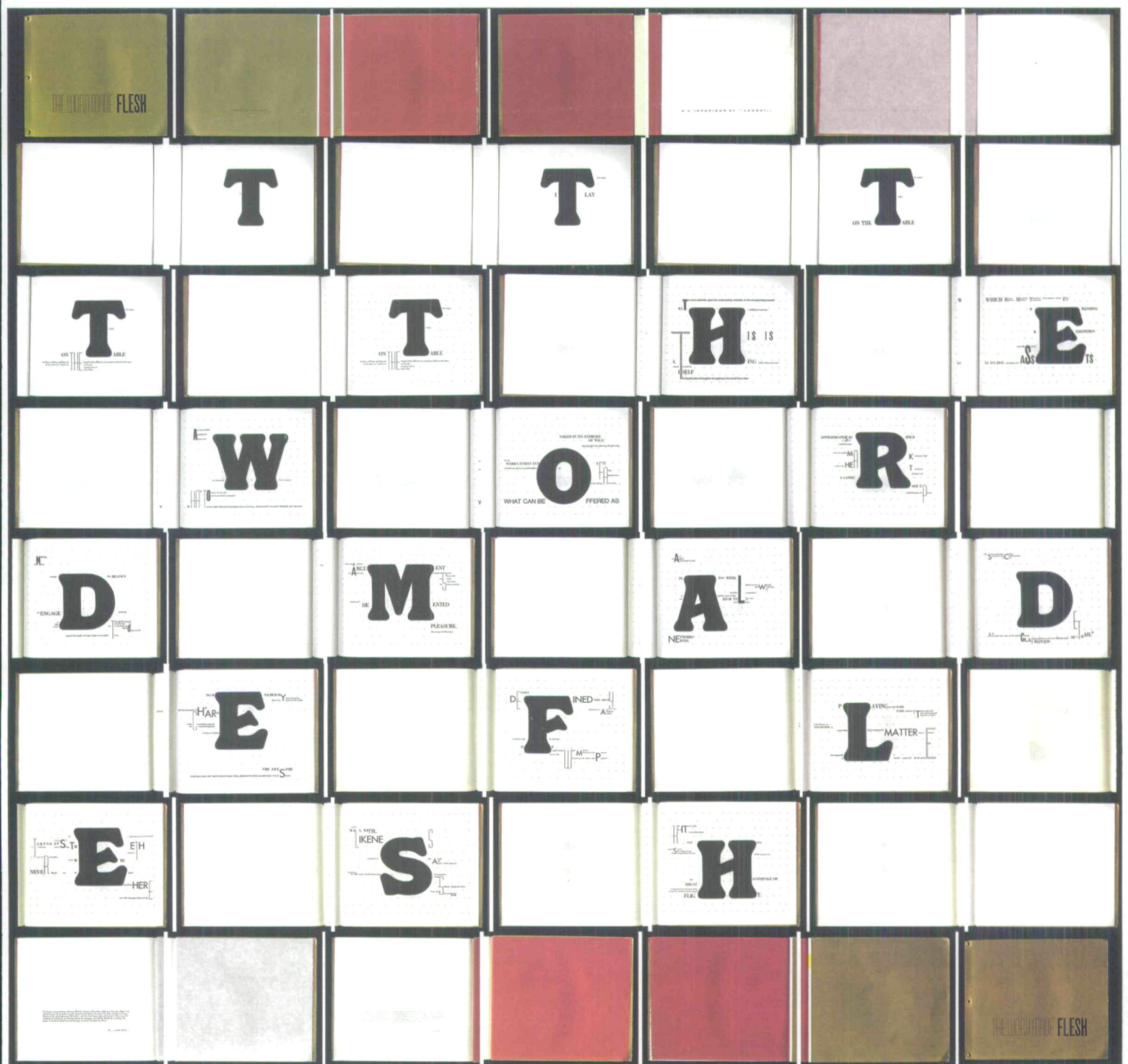


Fig. 6
 Johanna Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh* (1989),
 page sequence, original size: 12.6 × 10.6 inches
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it, as it were, a visual and material existence that seems to give flesh to meaning. The very consciousness of self emerges as a linguistic function, i.e., as a particular product of the empty flesh of signifiers.

In *The Word Made Flesh*, the incarnation of the word is obtained by self-reference to its typographical layout through a given reading performance. But this embodiment of the word is made to take the flesh of paper as well. The

inscriptions of ink on the surface of paper are experienced not just as a series of abstract formal differences that replicate the differential system of language, or a given discourse as a specific cultural and narrative instance of language structures and ideological content. Folios are printed on the recto side of a semi-transparent paper which allows for the following recto page to show through, and also for the recto to be seen from the verso [Fig. 7]. Instead of a printing error, the

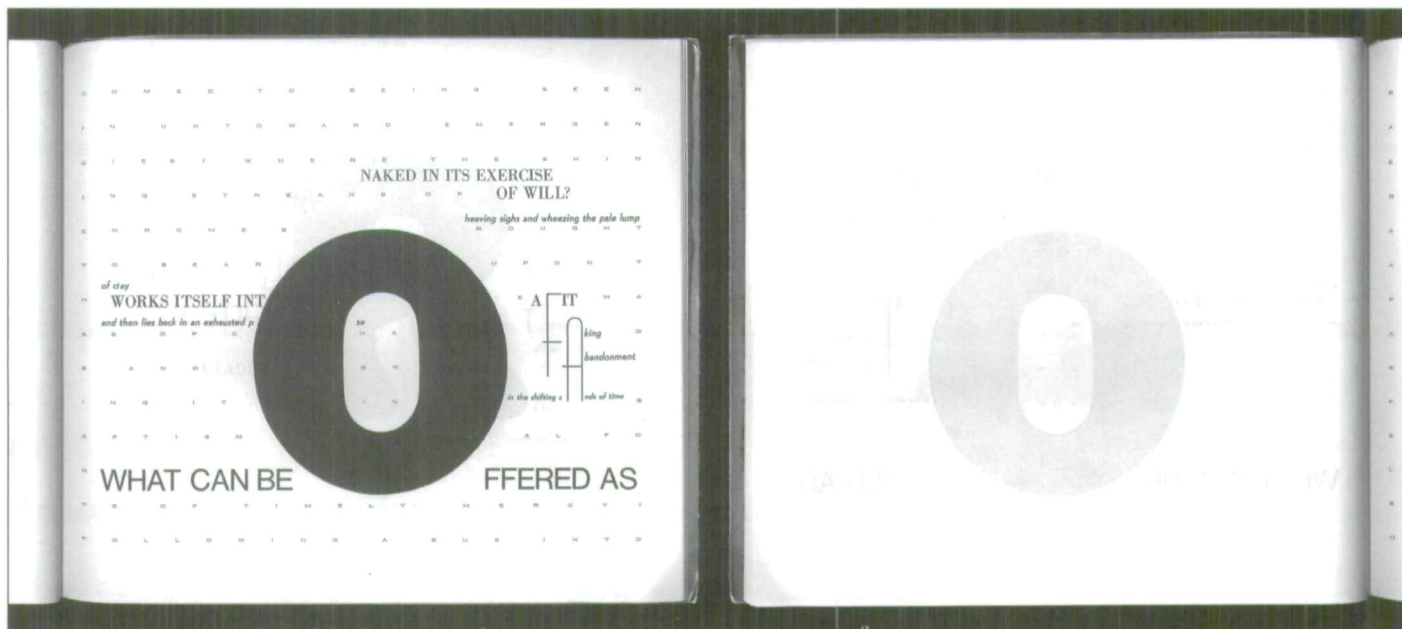


Fig. 7
 Johanna Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh* (1989), p. 23 and p. 24
 Original size: 12.6 × 10.6 inches.
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printed matter which can be seen from the other side of a leaf projects type and word onto codex space. The typographic layering of the two main reading trajectories extends to the three-dimensionality of leaf and codex. Semi-transparency has made paper visible and touchable. Printed words can be experienced not just as inked inscriptions but as paper objects. In *The Word Made Flesh* type and paper are structural components of the meaning of the text. To read *The Word Made Flesh* is a renewed optical and tactile relation with its self-consciously crafted printness and bookness.

Self-reflexivity in codex works contains useful critical insights about the semantic possibilities opened up by formal interventions at the various levels of a book's materiality. Johanna Drucker's aesthetic experiments with the materialities of bibliographic codes provide new modes of critical inquiry into the function of material differences in the creation of form and in the production of meaning. A general theory of self-reflexive formal operations in books will provide a more powerful description of writing and reading acts. In the present context of rapidly evolving technologies that transcend literacy, this understanding of self-reflexivity may contribute to a better understanding of the nature of bibliographic writing and reading acts as both material and social events.

Manuel Portela is Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Coimbra, Portugal. He is the author of *O Comércio da Literatura: Mercado e Representação* (*The Commerce of Literature: Marketplace and Representation*) (Lisbon: Antígona, 2003), a study of the English literary market in the 18th century. He has translated many works, including *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1994, 2007) and *Milton* (2009), by William Blake, and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1997–98), by Laurence Sterne, for which he received the National Award for Translation. In recent years he has been researching electronic editing and digital literature. He is the author of the website DigLitWeb: Digital Literature Web (<http://www.ci.uc.pt/digit>), and one of the creators of a new Doctoral Program at the University of Coimbra: Advanced Studies in the Materialities of Literature (<http://matlit.wordpress.com>).

ENDNOTES

1. Many other works by Johanna Drucker experiment with narrativity, visuality, and bookness. *The Experience of the Medium* (1978), *Bookscape* (1988), *The History of the/my Wor(l)d* (1990) and *Narratology* (1994), for instance, contain similar material reflections on inscriptions, stories, and writing/reading. For a complete list of digital facsimiles of her artist's books, see below (Section 2 of the bibliography).

2. A digital facsimile (accompanied by the author's statement and detailed editorial description) is available at *Artists' Books Online*: <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/atoz.xml> (12 Jan 2011).

3. This grid has c. 19 (horizontal) × 14 (vertical) character positions on each page, i.e., c. 266 possible positions. Spaces between grid words are sometimes distributed unevenly, which adds to the dynamism within and between the red and black layers.

4. This stylistic feature is called 'paragonnage', i.e., the combination of different sizes of type within the same line or word. See Drucker, <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/wmfl/edition1.xml> (12 Jan 2011).

5. In her critical analysis of her own work, Drucker stresses the dialectic between the word-made-flesh and the flesh-made-word: "This project worked as a book on the strength of the typographic argument. The theme of word made flesh and the counter theme (written in the red copperplate field) of the flesh made word, are so completely integrated into the presentation, and in such an unequivocal, graphically striking manner, that the theoretical issues are rendered explicitly." Drucker also refers to her page design as a field/figure relationship, stressing the visuality of the "T" as an emblem of the cross: "[T]he black texts are meant to 'figure' against the red ground, as the images of Christ, a cross, or other devotional images are called out in carmina figurata." Drucker, "Critical Discussion" and "Detailed Analysis," in <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/wmfl/edition1.xml> (12 Jan 2011).

6. The corresponding background red text (which appears for the first time on page 15) reads: "ALL THE WATERS, ELEMENTS AND PRIMAL FISHES BROKE THROUGH AIR AND AROUND US INTO TONGUES. HOW WAS THE TRACE OF DISPLACEMENT INTO PALE AIR MADE INTO SPEECH BY A BREAKING WAVE OF CHANCE? ALL TH NIGHTS, BROKEN GLAS," <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/wmfl/imageindex/1.1.1.21.xml> (12 Jan 2011). This running text upon language concludes (on page 45): "SIGNS OF MONUMENTALITY, SUGGESTIONS AND RECONDITIONED BODIES MANIFEST THEMSELVES LONG ENOUGH TO BE RECOGNIZED ACCORDING TO THE DELICATELY NUANCED PACE OF ARTICULATION OF A RAW AND PASSIONATE TONGUE." <http://www.artistsbooksonline.org/works/wmfl/imageindex/1.1.1.51.xml> (12 Jan 2011).

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