

thief in the night

modern life Imagine being outside time. That the past and future are revolving around you, and you cannot place yourself properly.

That your body, your receptacle, has been numbed free of history. Because I feel this way, I can see clearly when and where the evil started ...

Richard Zimmler, The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon What we are dealing with is an imbalance, a distortion of communication, in which personal input mostly from media is too high and output too low in modern life. The media system has helped bring about this imbalance in which people listen more than they talk and sing: the load from the media is so heavy that it is stifling human expression; while overwhelming our ears it denies us a voice.

Orrin E. Klapp, Overload and Boredom **dissatisfaction** The artist's book marks a moment of dissatisfaction with art's outreach, a declaration of independence by artists who speak, publish, and at least try to distribute themselves, bypassing the system. The fantasy is an artist's book at every supermarket checkout counter, or peddled on Fourteenth Street ("check it out"). The reality is that competing with mass culture comes dangerously close to imitating it, and can lead an artist to sacrifice precisely what made him or her choose art in the first place. The artist's book is/was a great idea whose time has either not come, or come and gone. As a longtime supporter of and proselytizer for the genre, it pains me to say this. But all is not lost, just misplaced. *Lucy R. Lippard, Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books*

self-expression "Authorship"—in the sense we know it today, individual intellectual effort related to the book as an economic commodity—was practically unknown before the advent of print technology. Medieval scholars were indifferent to the precise identity of the "books" they studied. In turn, they rarely signed even what was clearly their own. They were a humble service organization. Procuring texts was often a very tedious and time-consuming task. Many small texts were transmitted into volumes of miscellaneous content, very much like "jottings" in a scrapbook, and, in this transmission, authorship was often lost. The invention of printing did away with anonymity, fostering ideas of literary fame and the habit of considering intellectual effort as private property. Mechanical multiples of the same text created a public—a reading public. The rising consumer-oriented culture became concerned with labels of authenticity and protection against theft and piracy. The idea of copyright—"the exclusive right to reproduce, publish, and sell the matter and form of a literary or artistic work"—was born. Xerography—every man's brain-picker—heralds the times of instant publishing. Anybody can now become both author and publisher. Take any books on any subject and custom-make your own book by simply xeroxing a chapter from this one, a chapter from that one—instant steal! As new technologies come into play, people are less and less convinced of the importance of self-expression. *Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Message*

storage and retrieval I would like to think of a text, whether book, paper, film, painting or building, as a kind of thief in the night. Furtive, clandestine and always complex, it steals ideas from all around, from its own milieu and history, and, better still, from its outside, and disseminates them elsewhere. A conduit not only for the circulation of ideas as knowledges or truths, but a passage or point of transition from one (social) stratum or space to another. A text is not the repository of knowledges or truths, the site for the storage of information (and thus in imminent danger of obsolescence from the revolution in storage and retrieval that information technology has provided as its provocation in the late 20th century) so much as a process of scattering thought, scrambling terms, concepts and practices, forging linkages, becoming a form of action. A text is not simply a tool or an instrument; this makes it too utilitarian, too amenable to intention, too much designed for a subject. Rather, it is explosive, dangerous, volatile. Like concepts, texts are complex products, effects of history, of the intermingling of old and new, a complexity of internal coherences or consistencies and external referents, of intension and extension, of thresholds and becomings. Texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform connections, bring about new alignments. *Elizabeth Grosz, Architecture from the Outside*

the food chain Somebody asked Debussy how he wrote music. He said: I take all the tones there are, leave out the ones I don't want, and use all the others. *John Cage, Silence* In nature, detritus is dead plant and animal matter that makes new life possible. The very bottom of the food chain, detritus is the rotting leaves in the forest, the silt on the bottom of the pond, the thick dark mud in the salt marsh. It sticks to your shoes, it smells, but someday it will be food for something else, and that something will be food in turn, on and on up the food chain until you pick it up in the supermarket and put it in your

mouth. Our society spends a lot of time telling us that there is some brand new, fresh cultural produce, generated from thin air and sunshine, slick and clean. They package it with pretty plastic & ribbons and then feed it to us. A lot gets thrown away: the ribbons, the wrapping; culture becomes garbage, or it dies, and rots behind the refrigerator. But the new fluffy shiny stuff still gets churned out, and it gets forced between our teeth. And we are told to swallow it. We will not swallow. We will chew, and then spit. We will play with our food, and create something new and interesting from it. www.detritus.net

significance In my effort to divine the meaning of the universe I've traveled, analyzed fables, loved once or twice and have read 64,138 books. Now, what this means is that I've had very little time for reflection. Thus I confuse the true and false, equate curiosity with significance and mistake knowledge for wisdom. So much the worse. *Evan S. Connell Jr., Points for a Compass Rose* For Nodier's struggle was, of course, that of the librarian, torn between a fetishistic bibliophilia and a bibliophobia born of his hatred for the relentless multiplication of books in the era of printing: see, for example, his short story "Le Bibliomane," *Oeuvres*, 11:25-49. *Anthony Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny*

ars poetica If an artist chose to join a human head / To a horse's neck and to cover with many-hued feathers / Limbs assembled in one from all over the place, / So that what was on top a lovely woman, below / Ended ugly and black in the shape of a fish, / Could you, my friends, refrain from bursting out laughing, / If you were allowed a private view of the thing? / Take my word, you Pisos, a picture like that / Would be perfectly matched by a book whose meaningless fancies / Were shaped like a sick man's dreams, so that nowhere within it / Could foot or head be assigned to a single shape. / Perhaps, too, you know how to paint a cypress— / That's no good if they've paid you to do a sailor ... *Horace, Ars Poetica*

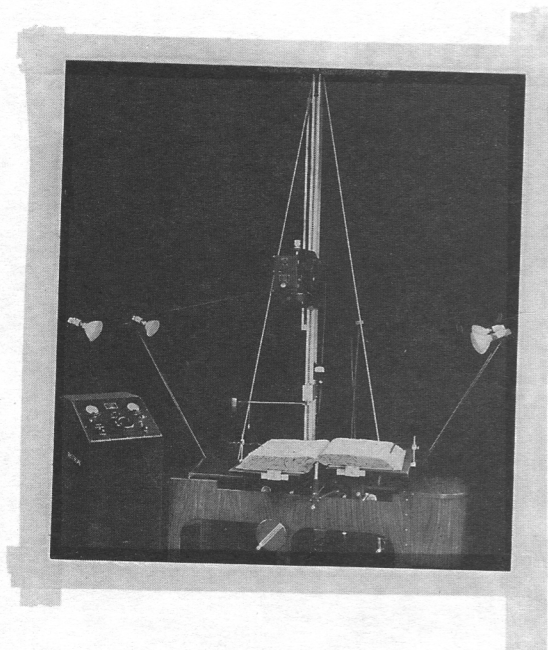
practical use So we are faced with a new space for public culture somewhere between reality and simulation, between action and acting—and this holds not just for latent psychotics but for the rest of us as well. *Thomas de Zengotita, The Gunfire Dialogues: Notes on the Reality of Virtuality* "Now, these are useful books," he said, looking around his cabin. "So far as I'm concerned, no book's worth reading that doesn't offer information of practical use to the reader. What kind of books do you like, Andy?" *Eric McCormack, First Blast of the Trumpet*

Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women Some people are in the vanguard, others are being left behind. There are some who are aware of how much the times and the nature of art have already changed, and there are those who will be informed of it in ten years' time, through reading books.

Andrea Branzi, Learning From Milan

This photograph shows how a rare old book is microfilmed, page by page, to preserve the contents when the book has crumbled. The turning of the pages and the focusing of the camera are done automatically.

Book of Knowledge Children's Encyclopedia



by rob kovitz

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