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- 1 Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, Jessica Pressman, eds. *Book Presence in a Digital Age*
- 2 Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 280. ISBN: 9781501321184
- 3 Thomas Mantzaris
- 4 In the midst of changing literary landscapes, *Book Presence in a Digital Age* brings together scholars, authors, and artists who shed light on, and contribute “to a comparative literature hovering between art, media, and literary criticism” (2). Editors Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, and Jessica Pressman have structured the volume in three main parts that comprise a total of thirteen chapters. As each part ends with an interview piece, the structure employed provides ample space for varied perspectives while it blends scholarly contributions and creators’ voices, signaling awareness of the complexities and interdisciplinary nature of contemporary literary production.
- 5 In her introduction to the volume, Brillenburg Wurth proposes a definition of book presence: “the apparition of an ‘analog’ information medium, including its material potential, restraints, uses, conditions of production and distribution, and its novel actualizations in a digitally mediated present” (9). Considering Jean-François Lyotard’s 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux* not “in opposition to matter” but rather “as its extension and experimental intensification” (4), Brillenburg Wurth draws upon McLuhan’s theory in *Understanding Media* (1964) in order to posit the shift of the book from ground to figure. Combining Johanna Drucker’s essay “The Self-Conscious Codex: Artists’ Books and Electronic Media” and Christian Vandendorpe’s concept of “tabularity” (*Papyrus*) in order to disentangle the idea of linearity in literary texts, Brillenburg Wurth observes that “the most experimental reinventions of the book with multiple pathways also enfold its oldest tabular aspects” (11). Brillenburg Wurth

eloquently introduces threads that cut across the volume, and highlights the central aim of *Book Presence in a Digital Age*: “to probe presentifications of the book as apparition and actualization, showing how it continues to inspire as idea and material form” (15).

- 6 In “Pagina Abscondita: Reading in the Book’s Wake,” John T. Hamilton explores the developments of digital technology in relation to print history, considering the former as “another phase in a very long history of transformations and improvements” (28). Addressing current fears and anxieties, Hamilton emphasizes how “the fact of digitization sets up the contrastive conditions by which we can assess humankind’s historical relationships to books” (31). As Hamilton points to a certain fetishization and fundamentalism of print that verges on the theological, he notes the relevance of traditional metaphors of the book as body and flesh as operative in the “contemporary attachment to the printed and bound text” (40). Hamilton concludes his essay by highlighting the “religious tonalities” of the transition from print to digitized screens: “the text’s ascension to this etherealized or spiritualized spaces leaves behind a spectral reminder of the *pagina abscondita*, a discarnate image offered and received in memory of the physically departed codex, a token of a communal farewell to the word that was once flesh” (41; emphasis in original).
- 7 Garrett Stewart in “From Codex to Codecs” employs the concept of the “skeuomorph” in order to discuss conceptual book art installations in various galleries that problematize the operation and design of books, “outmoding the object before our eyes” (45). Viewing the skeuomorph as the engineering equivalent of what Pressman has termed “bookishness” (“Aesthetic”), Stewart observes in the post-book screen culture “the refunctioning of new technology by what we might well call ‘optical allusion’ to the old” (45). Drawing his attention to examples such as the “Look inside” feature on Amazon, the laptop “folders” and the “Memoire” typeface that “blunts its serifs in sixteen barely discernible stages of eroded sharpness” (56), Stewart demonstrates how “[i]nnovation is licensed and acclimated by continuity, rather than rupture” (45). According to Stewart, digitization “induces a new register of dematerialization” that negates the book’s function as a platform for reading (which he terms “demediation”), as word forms in print culture are “codec-driven at every stage of the process” and paper is refashioned “not as scribal surface but as wired antenna” (55). As a consequence, Stewart concludes, book presence becomes “the reading by books of our own presence to them” (57).
- 8 The “Theory and Overview” part ends with Jessica Pressman interviewing book sculpture artists Doug Beube and Brian Dettmer, who have inspired her to explore the cultural phenomenon of “bookishness.” Driven by his interest “in seeing how far [he] can push the book before it falls apart” (63), Beube notes that his art involves a demediation or deconstruction of the medium. Similarly, Dettmer describes his work as “book-breaking” (64), but also considers it “about reading both in new ways and about teaching us to think differently about the media we use” (62). The interview reveals that both Beube and Dettmer clearly distance themselves from the domain of artists’ books due to what they consider an “inherent dishonesty” (65) in its altered context, audience, and purpose of display: artists’ books are no longer a means of democratizing art, but are instead exhibited (ideologically confined, in effect) in galleries. Pressman’s interview sheds light on Beube and Dettmer’s commitment to explore the book in different contexts, revealing our relationship to it in the digital age.

- 9 In “Infrathin Platforms: Print on Demand as Auto-Factography,” Hannes Bajohr examines a current of experimental literature that thematically engages with its “technological condition of production” as print on demand (72). Providing an overview of literature in platforms such as Gauss PDF, Troll Thread, 0x0a, and Traumawien, Bajohr suggests that “what unites their various strategies and elevates their works to the level of literary genre is that they all proceed from an acute awareness of this instability in their structure, production, and dissemination” (75). While Bajohr distances this body of literature from conceptual writing and electronic literature, the platforms he explores “highlight the unstable connection between material object and digital file” (77). As a result, POD literature “acts as both reaffirmation of the book and as its destabilization,” standing in opposition to Pressman’s concept of “bookishness,” as the “POD book is anything but fetishizable” in its simultaneous presence and absence (85).
- 10 In “Genre and Materiality: Autobiography and Zines,” Anna Poletti draws her attention to “the role of materiality in framing genres in paper-based works of autobiography” (94). Considering zine makers “among the most dedicated explorers and proponents of the semiotic power of paper and binding” (104), Poletti explores how “analog materials are deployed in acts of self-representation” (97) by looking at the examples of Bianca Martin’s *new beginnings* and Luke’s *YOU*. Her observations indicate the complex reasons underlying this “memoir boom” (91) against the framework of the digital age.
- 11 In “Doing Things with Literature in a Digital Age: Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* and the Material Turn in Literary Studies,” Liedeke Plate proposes a “move beyond the dematerialized conception of the text that has dominated literary studies” and suggests that the act of reading is therefore understood “as a material practice and an embodied activity that is also a social and historical practice” (140). Embracing the material turn, Plate argues that “reading becomes a performance in which the text’s medium or material support is not incidental but a potential agent” (115). Aiming to retrieve the material dimensions of reading, Plate shows how Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* anticipates contemporary artists’ books and multimodal works that “expose the need for a language to speak of the material, sensory, and affective aspects of the work and elucidate the materiality of reading” (116).
- 12 Such a literary work is explored in “Book for Loan’: S. as Paradox of Media Change,” where Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk examine J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s book project S. as “transmedia constellation” and “a formal experiment that raises questions about the identity of this object, and the implication of its expansive dynamics” (138). The elaborately designed and produced paratexts of the novel result in a significant paradox since, according to de Vries and van Dijk, S. “performs, narrates, and also deconstructs the fetishization of the book” (129). Drawing their attention to the ancient philosophical conundrum “Ship of Theseus”—which is also the title of the book the reader encounters when removing the physical codex from the black slipcase of S.—de Vries and van Dijk demonstrate how “[i]n ways both textual and material, S. invites us to take the paradox of the ship as an allegory of the book” (131).
- 13 Part 2 entitled “Media Changes and Materiality” concludes with “Book Presence and Feline Absence: A Conversation with Mark Z. Danielewski” where Kári Driscoll and Inge van de Ven discuss the position of the print book in the landscape of the twenty-first century with the American author. Remaining adamantly against the idea that “narratives need to be constrained by a certain form or format” (151), Danielewski

articulates the “constant quest” fueling his creative process: his commitment “to labor in the pursuit of an experience that a reader *cannot have anywhere else*” (152; emphasis in original). The lucid discussion between Driscoll, van de Ven and Danielewski flows naturally, ranging from commentary on literary experimentation and the act of reading in the digital age, to the author’s concept of the “signiconic” and his thoughts on the recent book project *The Familiar*.

- 14 Artist Simon Morris in “Learn to Read Differently” discusses four of his works, proposing that they be read as “conceptualist performed readings” (163). Invested in employing “strategies as extensions of the act of reading, which we take to be an aesthetic experience in, and of itself” (192), Morris reveals his ideological standpoint, influences, and creative process. Using Ed Ruscha’s *Royal Road Test* (1980) “as a lens through which others could read Freud’s words differently” (168), Morris describes how *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (2003) was created, which involved magnifying the words from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, crowd-sourcing seventy-eight students to cut them in pieces, and throwing the words out of a moving car (echoing Ruscha’s work) in order to produce “a temporary escape from the rational, a brief celebratory moment of non-meaning” (172), while capturing the scattered words through photographs, and subsequently binding them into “an analogue work that explores the materiality of language” (175). In his next project, *Re-Writing Freud* (2005), Simon Morris feeds Freud’s text into a computer program that reconstructs the entire book in seventy-eight hours, using the same words differently. Aware of Kenneth Goldsmith’s “ruminations on the malleability of digitized text” (176), he foregrounds “the virtual separation of language” in *Re-Writing Freud* instead of the “physical separation of language” in *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*. In order to explore the workings and artistic possibilities of copying, he uses Jack Kerouac’s Original Scroll of *On the Road* and blogs the outcome one page a day, before “pour[ing] the rewritten language back into the form of a book,” inviting, in his own words, “a thinkership” (185). Finally, his work *Pigeon Reader* (2012) involves reprinting George Perec’s *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, with Simon intervenes in a single chapter devoted to reading in order “to ask what it means to engage with a text physically” (191). Simon’s contribution to the volume not only sheds light on the making of his works, but also demonstrates the potential for creative re-imaginings of existing literary works that forge engaging reading experiences.
- 15 Turning her attention to Fred Berenson’s *Emoji Dick: or, The Whale* (2010), a re-imagining of Herman Melville’s classic novel, Lisa Gitelman suggests that the project “offers a lucid contact zone between human intelligence and algorithmic processing” (195). Created through crowd-sourcing and crowd-funding, *Emoji Dick* serves as “a good reminder that books have always been the results of distributed labor” (197). Gitelman argues that Berenson’s work “speaks both from and to an extended contemporary moment in which the image/text distinction exists under pressure” (203) and describes the emoji as “a transliterated untranslatable evolved in and of our networked present” (205). Gitelman concludes “*Emoji Dick* and the Eponymous Whale” by arguing that “[n]ot reading *Emoji Dick* is the point” (206), a work that “directs our attention to varieties of not reading that today beset and describe the literary field” (206; emphasis in original).
- 16 In “The Demediation of Writing in *Memory Palace* and *Fugitive Sparrows*,” Kiene Brillenburg Wurth investigates alphabetic writing in relation to developments in the study of bookishness and media archaeology. Suggesting a transition from a “graphic”

to a “plastic” age “that connotes both the synthetic and the mutable” (212), Brillenburg Wurth shows how both works “are typical instantiations of the plasticity of alphabetic writing in the digital age” (220). Highlighting the collaborative process of its production that involved several illustrators and graphic designers, Brillenburg Wurth demonstrates how Hari Kunzru’s *Memory Palace* (2013) requires significant multitasking in the act of reading since the images “distract” (215; emphasis in original) rather than merely support the story. Invoking Baudrillard, Brillenburg Wurth notes that “[u]sing the novella for the laboratory of human experience, Kunzru offers us a version of ‘preliterate’ society as we can only imagine it *after* and *according* to the realm of the sign” (214; emphasis in original). Moving on to the exploration of Zachary Sifuentes’s *Fugitive Sparrows* (2008) as an example of “visual archiving” (218), Brillenburg Wurth observes how Sifuentes’s rewriting of Emily Dickinson’s poetry “indicates new potentialities of writing as *overwriting*” (218; emphasis in original). Commenting on the opacity in *Fugitive Sparrows*, Brillenburg Wurth suggests that “demediation does signal not an end but a *transformative* use of alphabetic script” (219; emphasis mine), providing fertile ground for its potentialities in literary production and criticism.

- 17 Within the context of “conjoined processes of digitalization and globalization” (225), Inge van de Ven in “Revisiting the Book-as-world: World-making and Book Materiality in *Only Revolutions* and *The Atlas*” considers the book-bound novel as a site for “the vast un-representability of the globe and how the United States intersects with the rest of the world” (226). Marking William T. Vollmann’s *The Atlas* (1996) and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006) as “hybrid” novels that “perform matters of globalization and scale,” van de Ven argues that these works “reverse the familiar trope of the book-as-world into that of the world-as-book” (227). As “the book-object spatially performs our experiences of worldliness under the influence of globalization” (227), van de Ven shows how the book “becomes at once a space to escape *in* and space that is impossible to escape from—a non-totalizable totality” (232; emphasis in original).
- 18 The final part of the volume, “Conceptual Possibilities of the Book,” ends with Brillenburg Wurth’s interview of Ernst van Alphen that focuses on the idea of books as archives. van Alphen discusses how “reading processes have created books” (251) and how media specificity is “historically conditioned, but it is *also* materially conditioned” (252; emphasis in original). Outlining an archival turn, van Alphen discusses the presence of the book in relation to the artists’ experimentation with its standard form.
- 19 *Book Presence in a Digital Age* emerges out of, and in response to, a series of transformations dominating the present moment in literary production and criticism. Echoing inter-disciplinary sensibilities in the digital age, the eloquent contributions by scholars, authors, and artists capture and illuminate the changing literary landscape of the twenty-first century, as well as highlight the significance of the book as a rich terrain for creative experimentation. *Book Presence in a Digital Age* constitutes not only a valuable and essential volume for scholars of contemporary American Studies, but also an insightful scholarly intervention revealing how, contrary to earlier claims, it is the book that permeates the realities of the present.

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