

The Ready at Hand and the Book To Come: Joanna Vestey's *Support Systems*.

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In his infamous analysis of tools, Martin Heidegger drew a distinction between the states of an object being 'ready at hand' and 'present to hand'. His observation, that the 'ready at hand' object is one we use without a consciousness of its properties – we only notice a hammer when it fails in its duty – acutely mirrors both the photograph and the book. The technologies and supports of both image and text are things we ignore in the task of gathering information, looking at an image or reading. We might update Heidegger's observation, however: the 'ready at hand' tool also emerges to us when it has been superseded by a new technology with a similar purpose. In the compulsion to see the new as superior, the properties of the old are also revealed.

Such technological updating aside, Heidegger's tool is evident in the art historical notion of the support: here, only in the language of modernism's medium reflexivity, have we considered its presence. In modern or concrete painting, the 'support' is the canvas or linen with its flatness and absorbent properties, which determines what is to be painted; in poetry, the white of the page is a space that is part of the poem's reading and therefore its meaning. Elsewhere, the support or tool elides our consciousness. Supports do not only facilitate the reading or viewing of an image or text, but also frames the conditions of encounter: a support might be invisible, but the image, object or document may depend or rest upon it. It may shape the very means by which we see and use what we are to work with. It often takes a technological or epistemological break to bring such objects into view.

A book is held in the hands whilst the reader encounters what is laid down in a text. In our close attention, we hold it at a close yet comfortable distance. Between the resting of the arms and the limits of the eyes and neck, a balance occupies the body, in order to place the book at the centre. Given over to it, we are absorbent, enclosed with our upper torso folded around the object. Such a state is both receptive and semi-passive – the book enters the body or washes over us.

As much as this describes a romantic and intimate idea of reading, and the close attention that the book might have induced in us, it is only half the story of the book. The rarity of early codices, and the cost of building a collection meant that they were objects of communal study (and it is perhaps only a sign of our neoliberal times that community libraries are displaced by individual possession). When a book has historic or communal importance, our enfolding proximity to it changes – it is intended for posterity, and for many readers. The individual user's gestures – holding the book to read it, cracking its spine, or marking the pages – become a threat to the long-term use that the book may provide.

When we are studying such a book, and using it in depth, the book has a different place in relation to our body. It is set on a desk, in our range of vision, but just to the side. If you are left handed (as I am), the book probably rests to the right. On the centre left, a notepad, or perhaps a keyboard, takes the other space. Here, the body can rest, and move gently from one side to another, as reading produces, as it does here, transcription – note taking, quotation, or analysis, or as the act of writing often requires, verification. We move between supports: from note paper or word processor, to the book and its support. Where the book is rare, valuable or fragile, it will be resting upon a support. New tablet computers come with just such devices, with the aim of orienting the screen towards our vision.

Staggered in layers, and made of inclined and flat planes, the book support is an object of utility with architectural forms. Whilst some are ornate, baroque or rococo, the majority are of a utilitarian international style, engineered with a form that follows function. Lined up, they are like the pitched roofs of terraced houses, rising and falling. Some are low lying whilst others are stepped or stacked steeply. Each plays with gravity and friction: just as the roof is designed for rain and snow to slide down its surface gently, the rest draws the book into its centre, to a join or well which collects the spine and allows the book to hold laterally by the foam's friction. This form of the book support, familiar to researchers, originates in Oxford at the historic Bodleian Library, with the conservator Christopher Clarkson. It has been widely replicated, and is a familiar and now unquestioned sight.

Joanna Vestey has photographed the many book supports of the Bodleian, to produce a typology that reveals their subtle variations and architectural resonances. But whilst the forms of the supports are telling, the project is also an enquiry into the conditions of knowledge: Vestey's project sees in the book support an object that reveals the specific conditions of both libraries and books as forms, at the same time as noting their seeming disappearance, or disappearance to come, under the

conditions of digital knowledge. The support is a signal of the infrastructure and history of knowledge resulting from the form of the book – supports were developed as the ageing and wear of books became coupled with ever more sophisticated understanding in the field of conservation. Vestey presents a large array of such supports: they speak of, perhaps even stand for, the wide range of books and their subjects. They are an archive of what has been and an object that speaks of a knowledge to come. We look in detail at these utilitarian objects, and they reveal not specific use, but an accumulation of traces, similar to the apparition-like marks of a invigilator against a gallery's white wall over an exhibitions long run. They reveal therefore, a deep history, whilst also prompting consideration as to whether the form of the book is truly going to change, as books remain absent from their waiting supports.

The materiality of the support draws our attention not to what any one book contains, but the uses of books more generally. Each support alludes to the many volumes that have rested upon it, and here the act of reading also becomes the gathering of specialized knowledge and its redistribution over time. Such knowledge gathered is not simply a collecting, but a restructuring of what can and should be known. Knowledge is used and circulated, valued by being made current, but also by being given space. In the act of reading from a book rested upon a support, information is received and re-articulated – as a note, a sentence or as a citation placed into the world – a knowledge becoming, in-formation. In our present, one piece of information quickly follows another: contemporary content is made to be redundant, and images and texts are quickly followed by others that quickly slot into their place. The seeming dematerialisation of this knowledge renders it placeless and leaves much of it without trace. Umberto Eco, who has frequently dismissed the claim that the book will be replaced by the digital copy, has asserted that “the Internet provides a fantastic store of information, but offers no filters, whereas education is about not only transmitting information but also teaching the criteria for selecting it.” Vestey's images reveal something of that slowness, that choice that must emerge from mass. We move from image to image, in a comparative mode. Looking closely, and comparing, her images make researchers of us. What has been valued in the present is not the distribution of ideas, but the act of circulating, the quantity of circulation take place, as if mass equates to efficacy. Vestey's typology of the book support shows us something different in the book's material form: the distinct physical customization of the support reveals not only traces but also the bespoke accommodation of book and reader. Each support is tailored to hold a specific form of book, to allow it to rest, or to keep it tightly bound. It provides friction as opposed to rapid movement, and it calls for time to be taken – there is a labour in the ritual of preparing the book and its support, which encourages the making-worthwhile of that venture.

Alongside the labour that such a book encourages, its condition of display and its arrangement on our table gives up the book to its reader. A kind of hospitality or generosity that the book proposes is often referred to as a commonwealth, something that exists beyond mere possession. The knowledge inside a book is a commonwealth, whilst its paper and spine might be possessed. A book gives up its information as we stand in the library or bookshop and browse through its pages. As the transmission of digital information moves from being non-hierarchical to servicing commercial needs, and as books are controlled through digital licences prioritizing those with capital, we might wonder whether the spaces of digital communication will replace the book, but also close it behind virtual walls. To recognize this, we might have to detach knowledge briefly from its container. The physical book can be itself a commodity, of course – though this fetish is not for the words so much as the age of its printing – but its common form is more everyday: a copy at home, or the library book, or which has been passed from person to person. It encourages precise but continued exchange that produces and maintains the space of the social, into a commonwealth. We need not fear or valorize new technology – just as we should not be nostalgic for past forms – but we must question the efficacy of each technology in its fullest consequences¹.

In another of his essays on the subject, Umberto Eco recalls a parodic advertisement that he encountered, which applied a similar evangelical promotion to analogue devices as it did digital ones. Its effect is strangely leveling. Promoting the ‘Built-In Orderly Organised Knowledge’ device (BOOK), he recalls an object that can claim

“No wires, no battery, no electronic circuits, no switches or buttons, it is compact and portable – you can even use it while you’re sitting in an armchair by the fire. It’s a sequence of numbered sheets of recyclable paper, each of which contains thousands of bits of information. These sheets are held together in the correct sequence by an elegant device called a binding.

Each page is scanned optically and the information is registered directly in the brain. There is a “browse” control that allows you to pass from one page to another, either forward or back, with a single flick of the finger. By using the “index” feature you can immediately find

¹ If our books and images are to be transferred to digital spaces, we must negotiate two final factors: the first, is to compare the material actuality of the book with the material actuality of the tablet, the digital network, and network storage. The second is to consider the qualities of attention of both devices. It is necessary for us to demythologize the dematerialization of the network – to see it for its messy materiality, and server storage, in climate-sensitive landscapes. If this can equate to less energy and material use than the book, then digital spaces become attractive propositions. The second challenge cuts the centre of the philosophy of the network: how is a quality of attention that facilitates the in-depth acquisition and use of knowledge enabled on a platform that has heretofore produced a 24/7 culture of constant distraction? Such a challenge to transform the digital network, and to remove it from the predominantly consumptive logic upon which it is currently based, is one of the biggest barriers to the long-term use of the Internet as a viable technological infrastructure and social tool. At present, the technological space of our digital culture is a space of disappearances, smoke and mirrors. How much energy does our digital memory consume, being constantly switched on, primed for action?

the information you want on the exact page. You can also buy an accessory called a “BOOKmark”, which enables you to return to where you left off in the previous session, even if the BOOK has been closed.”

Eco’s account is a useful reminder as a step away from both nostalgia and technological positivism. It allows us to recall that technological advances are both necessary but are also, sometimes, false prophecies. Any such evaluation about the accumulation and dissemination of our knowledge requires a more lengthy and complex negotiation of what we know and how we come to use and apply that information. Vestey’s project captures the library in this very moment of its evaluation: whilst libraries digitize ancient tomes, they balance the demands and potentials of each decision. *Negotiating an Absence* is therefore also a study not only of the library and the book’s potentially disappearing form, but also the quandary of institutions of knowledge, which must necessarily look both into the past and towards the future. It echoes Stéphane Mallarmé’s project 19th century project ‘Le Livre’ (the book), in which the poet imagines a volume comprising “all existing relations between everything.” Mallarmé’s book was, he writes in 1866, going to be comprised of five volumes, though as Maurice Blanchot has pointed out, he arrived at this only after considering originally that it would be “many tomes”. Blanchot remarks on something important for Mallarmé’s thought, but also for the book in general: it is a multiplicity. Is not the book, like the image, both a thing and not a thing, an object that could be ‘ready at hand’ and ‘present to hand’, used and contemplated, in not one, but many forms? Is this not the very condition of knowledge, a logical paradox of the concrete and the fluid, of presence and absence at one and the same time? A useful analogy is to remember that the book is, both Mallarmé and Blanchot suggest, architectural. And so the architectonic panels of the book support tell us something: they both preserve knowledge whilst striking a curiously futurist note: they have hard edges and oscillating planes, but contain the classical knowledge of ancient texts. Is the future perhaps already in the book?

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