

Panel 5: From Paper to Virtual Page: Digitization, Disruption, and the Future of Books

Naomi Kasumi (artist; Seattle University), “The Handwritten and Printed Word in a Digital Age: Book as Art & Art as Book, an intimate relationship with hand-held objects”

How can we sustain the traditions of bookmaking, preservation, and appreciation of old books in an age increasingly dominated by digital technology? The rare book and special collections that are archived in libraries, curated in galleries, and preserved in museums, have contributed successfully to the sustainability of traditions in the past. The appreciation of bookmaking that is taught by educators, and shared by scholars also add value in the process of addressing a balance between tradition and new technology. In this context, what is the evolving role of those concerned with the continued production of bookmaking?

This presentation will introduce the field of book art through its history to a contemporary perspective. During the last two decades there has been an exploration in book arts by many artists that has resulted in non-traditional structures and traditional, but lesser known, binding techniques. A series of handmade artist’s books will be presented to emphasize the importance of tangible hand-held books, show how artists today adopt the form of a book as a medium of their expression, and create something unique as artistic practice.

Michael Bourne (Writer, editor, and critic): “The Virtual Book Page: Literary Criticism in an Age of Disruption”

As print newspapers and magazines shrank over the past twenty years, often the first section to face the budget axe was the book page. But the disappearance of traditional print book reviews helped spur the advent of book blogs, which have evolved into a powerful force in literary culture. But the business model for a book blog is entirely different than of a print book review page. The book page was a free rider on a publication that mostly covered other things. Today’s book blogs tend to be stand-alone publications devoted solely to literary culture, which means they must look for alternative sources of funding. In some cases, book blogs pay writers and editors by offering links directly to e-tailers like Amazon and taking a percentage of any resulting sales. Other sites are run as nonprofits and survive largely on donations and grants, while still others are supported directly by publishers and booksellers.

These online models are being replicated across the web, with the creation of site after site built around narrowly defined communities of interest, whether it’s books, real estate, mountain biking, or astronomy. There are serious downsides to this model, which forces digital publishers to rely on a narrow set of advertisers or direct funders, who can influence coverage. But in the book world, digital publication has fostered a free-wheeling and highly democratic literary culture that is in certain respects more robust than its print counterpart. The question is whether it can last. Will book blogs and those in other fields continue to stumble along as chronically underfunded labors of love? Will they be merged into other publications? Or will their funders - Amazon, book publishers, and the like - take them over for use as marketing skills?