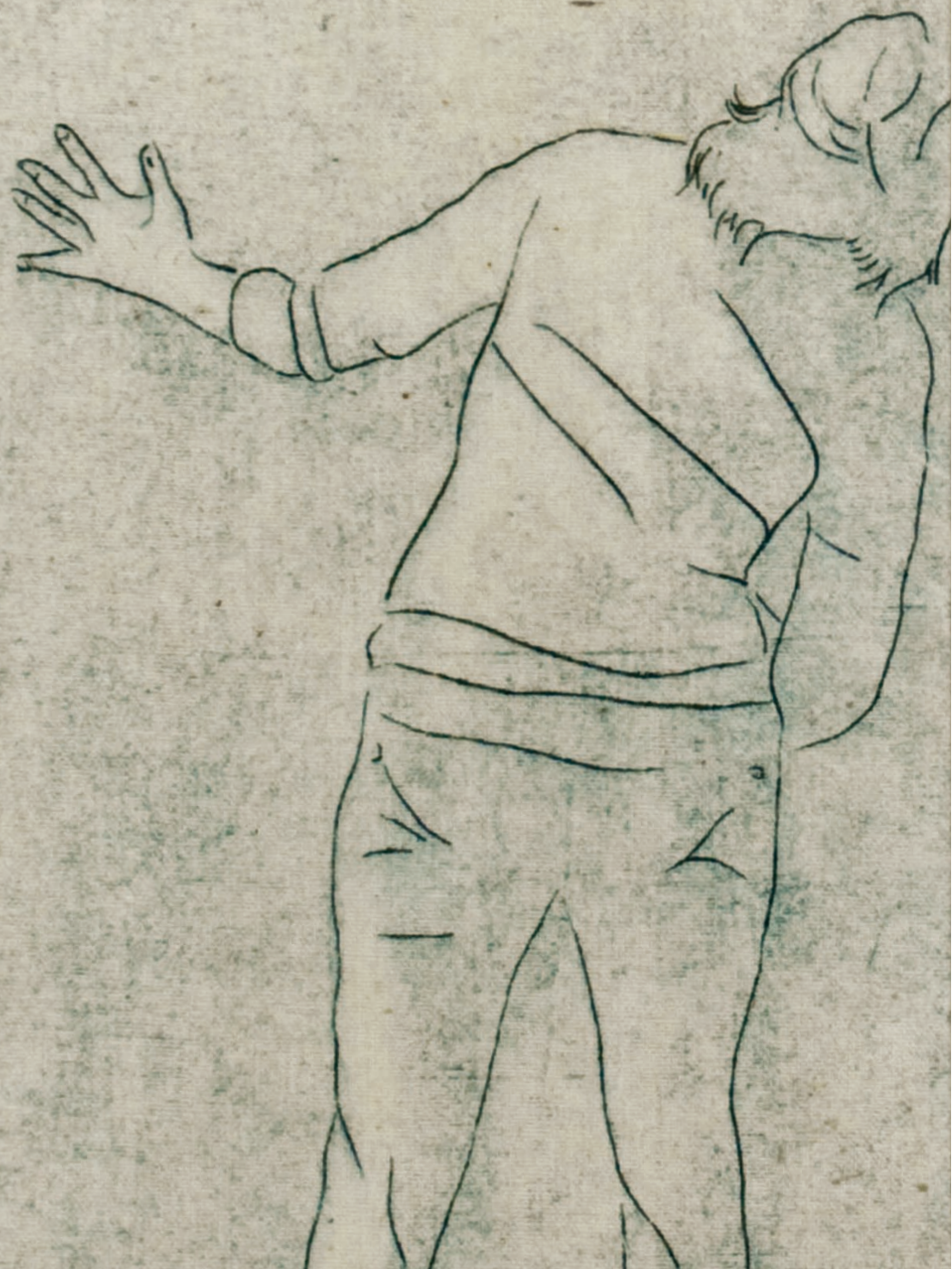


POSITION





The Book as Relationship

“A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.”

— Jorge Luis Borges¹

Borges’s relationship with books was, of course, intimate. Perhaps more intimate than we would ever allow our own imaginations to consider. We are nevertheless drawn to these forms—these things that open, unfold, unfurl, unroll, and reveal—in ways and at depths we are rarely conscious of. This may be because books have become seamlessly integrated into the mental fabric of our human environment—they *are* environments, and as Marshall McLuhan observed, “Environments are invisible.”² The advantage of this is that we need not bend our thoughts to the book in order to reap its benefits; the disadvantage is that we are tragically unaware of its effects. We do not recognize that the book itself, not just its contents, has something to say to us. It might as well be speaking to us from another dimension, and we are sadly, even pathetically, the poorer for it.

In “Position / Opposition” Milwaukee printmaker and book artist Jessica Meuninck-Ganger becomes our herald to the forgotten book, the book not as familiar and comforting container, but as primal relationship; the relationship that serves as the “axis of innumerable relationships”—the relationship of ourselves to the material metaphor of the book, ourselves to the unseen goddess of its creation, ourselves to the singular moment of interaction, ourselves to the inscrutable nature of the world, ourselves to the mysteries of other selves, ourselves to our own unknown selves, infinitely. To do this, to bring us back to a basic understanding of the book as a medium that is its own content, which in relation to its activator becomes a

¹ Borges, Jorge Luis. “A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw” in *Labyrinths*. New York: New Directions, 1962, p. 208.

² McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin, with Agel, Jerome. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Random House, 1967, p. 87.



TOP: "AMNESIOPHOBIA"
ARTIST BOOK, LITHOGRAPHY & COLLAGE
15.24 CM HIGH X 12.7 CM 15.24 CM HIGH X 76.2 CM (OPEN)
2008

LOWER: "JOURNAL" – INSTALLATION VIEW
ETCHING AND LITHOGRAPHY ON THAI MULBERRY PAPER
2.1 M HIGH X 1.2 M
2004-2008 (ONGOING)

doorway to a rich variety of other relationships, seems a herculean task. Yet, Meuninck-Ganger achieves this with elegant (and appropriate) simplicity through subtle manipulations of scale, space, materiality, translucency, the myths that we carry with us about the functions of books and art, the unfailing human desire for intimacy, and the insatiable longing to be understood.

To make art is to engage in the most fundamental of human behaviors: mediation. It is very possibly the thing that truly distinguishes us from other species, even more so than tool-making, language, empathy, war, or understanding mortality. To establish mediations is by definition to consciously instigate relationships; we are by nature creatures that mediate, beings that make art. To make intermediary representations of our experiences in some medium, either explicitly or abstractly, might be well enough, but Meuninck-Ganger goes further by specifically choosing the book form as her medium of expression. While art making may be a distinguishing aspect of our humanity, the book is a defining hallmark of civilization—the most complex of human relationships. Whenever and wherever a critical mass of complex, human, social interactions have fused into the density we call civilization, the book emerges as one of the identifying artifacts of its creation. The book is born out of civilization's absolute need to talk to itself and keep track of itself lest it devolve back into its constituent parts. The book, therefore, becomes a metaphor for cohesive human relationships within the context of civilized discourse. To choose the book as an art form is a decision that carries with it some gravity and not a little bravery.

It seems very odd, then, that in the long history of civilization, the idea of the book as art does not appear expressly as such until the eve of the 20th century. Book artist and book-arts theorist Johanna Drucker goes so far as to identify artists' books as "*the* quintessential 20th-century artform," the medium born of the last century and engaged in by every major art movement of its time.³ It may seem even more peculiar that the book was

³ Drucker, Johanna. *The Century of Artists' Books*. 2nd edition. New York, N. Y.: Granary Books, 2004, p. 1.

not completely hijacked by artists for strictly art purposes, rather than for literary intent, until the 1960s, a time when artists' books could no longer claim to be innocent of what they truly are—expressive media, not just lovely containers.⁴ It is stranger still that not until the advent of the 21st century did the collective consciousness of both the book and art worlds begin to hazily awaken to the notion, let alone become fully aware, of book and art as a unity.⁵ Ironically, this dawning realization occurs just at the moment when the book is beginning to lose its status as the central metaphor for civilized interpersonal relationships. To work in this medium is either very brave indeed or sheer lunacy.

I opt for bravery. But after all, no other medium better suits Jessica Meuninck-Ganger's intent. Her artwork comes directly from her work in journaling and personal narrative. She is a printmaker, but she is not drawn to that medium in order to edition images. Rather, she prefers printmaking as an organizing process for the investigation of experiences. The print becomes illustrative, documentary. Her etchings and lithographs rarely stand alone, but most commonly become parts of larger, assembled wholes to be performed as books or some similar kind of relational device. In order for this to happen, of course, the viewer must become an active participant in the work. The viewer must “fall into relationship” with the book, and therefore with the artist herself, and everything else that the book makes manifest. The prints are not just constituent parts of the book, they become the book. The book is a multi-dimensional, activated print.

In “Position / Opposition” Jessica Meuninck-Ganger plays with the various possibilities of this medium in order to explore the qualities of communication, interaction, and relationship. The installation presents over one hundred etchings and drawings assembled into three narrative forms: a small, hand-held, accordion-fold book; an out-sized, 2.2 meters high, accordion-fold book; and a room-sized suite of eight, suspended print assemblages. Each includes variations of the same content—the expressive faces and hands of two individuals juxtaposed in morphing frames of



“POSITION / OPPOSITION”

ARTIST BOOK, EDITION OF 4
DRYPOINT, LETTERPRESS, PHOTOPOLYMER ETCHING, AND DRAWING
ON THAI MULBERRY PAPER AND MUSLIN
19 CM HIGH X 10.2 CM X 81.3 CM (OPEN)
2011

⁴ Bright, Betty. *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960-1980*. New York, N. Y.: Granary Books, 2005, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.



understanding and misunderstanding—but our experience of that content is qualified by our altering interaction with media that range in scale and format. Interacting with the same content in a variety of different ways alters our understanding of that content. It is the medium, as McLuhan would have us believe, that serves as our principle message, and content is given its actual meaning by the nature of the framework within which it resides.

This is the objective of Meuninck-Ganger's presentation—to encounter the same content from different angles of experience in order to form inquiries about the mutability of dialogue and relational potentials through shifts of scale, movement, space, angles, manipulation, sound, distance, proximity, difficulty, and comfort, as well as the orientation and attitude of our own physical presence. Books are automatic invitations, but in order to accept the invitation, we must first have the encounter.

What do we first become aware of as we enter the space of GALLERY AOP? Very likely, it is the rather large, book-like screen at the far end of the gallery. Its scale and centrality draw us like ants, like bees, hopefully like lovers to its massive, stone-like, yet oddly light and ethereal presence. A few, initial steps forward as we begin to form our acceptance of the invitation, and we encounter, perhaps, something we may not have noticed before—a much smaller version of the same object on a pedestal about waist-high.

We now have a choice: which invitation to accept? Of course, chance may have made the decision for us—perhaps someone else is already engaged in the smaller piece. And, therein lies the specific message of that work: it is an intimate, one-on-one encounter, to be held in the hand of an individual and experienced in the most personal of spatial interactions. Its scale is private, not public, meant for you alone. Yet, if you held it up close to your face and gazed toward the back of the gallery, it would appear the same size as the accordion structure at the far end. This, of course, is a matter of perspective, as is true with all relationships in life.

The object we hold in our hand is composed of a series of lightweight frames connected to each other by modified Japanese screen hinges that allows movement in both directions. Each frame has at its center a double etching

printed on translucent, Japanese, mulberry paper. The etchings are printed on both sides of the paper, so that the image on the verso bleeds through, but remains backgrounded, onto the foreground image of the recto. A cascade of gestural faces and hands convey a conversation with the image of a face opposite, either on the obverse or reverse side. Thus begins the narrative flow of the dialogue as the viewer establishes a progression through the book by turning each page and increasing or decreasing the amount of light that transpires through each translucency. Because it is accordion-folded, when you finish the last frame, you may turn it over and read the other side until you are back to the frame you started with.

Of course, the images are not only in reverse, but also inverted, with the same but opposite set of translucent images precipitating an entirely different, but related dialogue. When you get to the last frame, which is the back side of the frame you started with, you have the option to flip the book back over to reveal the potential for an eternal, cyclical narrative of emotive conversation without end or resolution.

One might think that the giant book object at the rear of the gallery would have the same experience as the hand-held piece, since the content, materiality, and format are quite similar, except for being over 2.2 meters tall by 5.4 meters long. On closer inspection, however, while the print technique and translucent mulberry paper are the same, the individual “pages” are no longer comprised of a single print, but rather an assemblage of dozens of smaller prints creating a similar accretion of gestural faces and hands. Moreover, there are large openings on each page where the material frame of the print is negated, giving way to the openness of the gallery space. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to interact with this work on one’s own, requiring the collaboration of another to fully engage the piece. The work is awkward and difficult to manage even by two, demanding a cooperative give-and-take between the two viewers/participants, who may catch glimpses of each other through the book via the open spaces of the pages.

The arduousness of the task and the integration of the participants’ hands and faces into the art work set up what the artist calls a “quadralogue” between the viewers and the book that closely mirrors the imagery of the two





printed subjects. This experience is not at all the same as our intimate, hand-held encounter. And so the inquiry is established: what are our differing experiences of content, and what does this difference tell us about the nature of each medium's message about relationships?

Lastly, we encounter a rectangular space that perhaps was not fully evident until we reached the back of the gallery. We can see down its length now to the window that encloses the far end. On opposite sides, facing each other, are four pairs of prints suspended a few centimeters from each wall. They too comprise assembled prints of the same subjects as the books. As you enter the space, you recognize that the prints are direct analogs of all the pages you have previously encountered. Here, however, each "page" hovers in space and is in dialogue with its direct opposite and with every other page in the room. The book floats as open space, and you yourself become suspended within the environs of this book. You and anyone else in the space become integral parts of the book's spatial relationships, but without the physical activation of

the page; we only need move through the book. The tension of the imagery, as well as its translucency, remains, but is the experience somehow lightened by the suspension, or by the free-flowing encounter with others in the space?

This experience, I imagine, comes closer in tone and quality to that which stands to succeed the book as the primary metaphor of civilized human discourse—the digital environment. I like to imagine the room as an experience that closely approximates the intersection of our current print and virtual realities: the impressed page and the floating idea; one borrowing the vernacular of the other; each informing each.

Jessica Meuninck-Ganger’s “Position / Opposition,” even in its very title, allows us, I believe, to better grasp Borges’s intimate understanding of the book as a relational being. Indeed, the book does not stand isolated on its own, it never has. It requires us, and we require it. In some ways it may even define us, as we are embedded in its own definition. Borges’s ideas about bookish encounters form an appropriate closure for this discussion: “a book is more than a verbal structure; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory . . . A book . . . is a relationship.”⁶

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⁶ Borges, Jorge Luis. “A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw” in *Labyrinths*. New York: New Directions, 1962, pp. 207-08.

Colophon:

“Position / Opposition”

Date: 2011

Each image documented from the exhibition is a single page from the book installation, and the individual pages are intentionally untitled.

Artist book installation (not editioned)

Size: (2.2 m high x 1.2 m x 10 m - open)

Media: Drypoint, letterpress, etching & aquatint, lithography, and drawing on Thai mulberry paper and muslin.

Miniature version of the large book, edition of 4

Size: (19 cm high x 10.2 cm x 81.3 cm - open)

Media: Drypoint, letterpress, photopolymer etching, and drawing on Thai mulberry paper and muslin.

Series of 8 untitled print assemblages (monoprints)

Size: (66 cm high x 46 cm)

Media: Drypoint, letterpress, etching & aquatint, and drawing on Thai mulberry paper and muslin.





Special Thanks

Shannon Connor
Santiago Cucullu
Sharon Giesfeldt Van Ruiswyk
Christiane Grauert
Yoko Hattori
Kristina Jameson
Greg Martens
Tyler Meuinck

Jessica Myszka Lewis
Thomas Romero
Nathaniel Stern
Wilhelm Van Rensburg
Alet Vorster
Melissa Wagner Lawler
Natalie Wysong

Credits

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Position / Opposition* by Jessica Meuinck-Ganger at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg, June 2011.

All works © Jessica Meuinck–Ganger 2011

Text © Max Yela

Catalogue design: Jeff Ganger

Printing by Ultra Litho, Johannesburg

First published 2011

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OPPOSITION

