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Floppy

The Gutenberg Project is a bibliographic art project that takes the form of at least one book-object. At least one because the project itself consists of a few sparsely populated pages of paper bound between two floppy disks, which would seem to consist of slightly more than the minimum criteria for being considered a book-object, as the author describes the project itself as a singular book. In addition, the floppy disks binding the project are said (by the paper text) to contain copies of several books that may be considered historically significant (the Bible, the Iliad, the Epic of Gilgamesh, etc.), which, again the author refers to as books (independent of the bound book-object).

We know much about the author, the fabrication of the paper-book-object and the context within which the project was fabricated from the colophon at the end of the book. It was made by Edward Bateman in 2002 in Utah. The text is printed on Rives BFK in "Mrs. Eaves," a typeface designed by Zuzana Licko of Émigré. Some details can be read off the floppy disks as well, from the Hewlett-Packard logo on its case.

In turn, from these details combined with the similarities of the current cultural context to that of the author's, much more can be inferred regarding the circumstance of the project's fabrication. We can tell of the manufacture of the project from the HP logo on the side of the floppy disk, and it isn't far-fetched to assume the disks were bought at an electronics store and programmed on the computer of the author. Its production was likely funded by the academic

department with which it is associated with, the Book Arts Studio of the University of Utah, and it likely resides in the Cornell collection because it was, in some sense, designed to be.

We can tell this from the colophon that states that twenty-four copies of this project were fabricated. I imagine that number was chosen because it's nice ("we'll make two dozen or so"), and the departments, museums, and collections each instantiation would be distributed to were likely chosen before their fabrication. Additionally, it is clear the "covers" of the project were never intended to be read as the rings that bind the covers and the paper prevent it from being inserted into a computer (even if you could the rest of the "book" would be awkwardly dangling out of the disk drive). Compared to a traditional paper book, it handles awkwardly, it isn't immediately clear which side is up, and there is no title page, making it cumbersome and awkward to flip through.

While it may be hard to believe that an unreadable and awkward book made from strange materials by an art department is an art project, the project itself is also ripe with artistic flair and meaning, essentially asking for an artistic analysis of its form. The paper-book-object of the project details the inevitable decay of the magnetically encoded books inside the covers. It emphasizes the impertinence of the information inside by specifying that, in a few years' time, paragraphs will be lost to corruption, not just single characters. It also goes on the claim that the paper-text will eventually become the entirety of the project itself, once all the electronic books have decayed into meaninglessness.

These observations speak to the author's concern with the bibliography of the thing that they had just created. It's clear the writing is very intentional, and the author is very careful in what they label a book-object or a text. Additionally, there is an appreciation for a common trend in bibliography that newer, cheaper mediums, while able to disseminate information more

readily and freely, lack the craftmanship required to make older books, leading to them fading with time ever faster. Think, for instance of a pulp-paper copy of *Nicholas Nickleby,* made in 1839 withering in one's hands alongside a healthy goat-skin book of hours from 1200.

Regardless, it's fair to suppose the author themself was at least somewhat interested in such a discussion of books and our knowledge of that interest leads to some interesting conclusions. Analyzing the author's commentary and comparing it to the commentary one might infer from the piece if it had been made today tells us something about how technology and bibliography has changed in the last twenty years.

What that something is depends on how we analyze the art piece. An interesting example that highlights the changing context of the floppy-disk-covers is the skeuomorphism of the piece. A skeuomorph is a piece of technology that's function is wrapped in design elements that were functionally necessary for earlier technologies with the same functional purpose. These details are often retained to facilitate easy adoption of the new technology. An example may be a candleholder fit with electric lights or a digital icon for a clock that is an analog watch face (software user interface design is truly replete with these).

In both the current context and the author's, the form factor of the entire project is a skeuomorph. The new technology is the digital encodings of text on the floppy disks, which is then bound into a book, the old technology for such information conveyance, and presented as an interesting juxtaposition.

This project is especially interesting because it undermines the use of a skeuomorph in three distinct ways. First, the purpose of a skeuomorph is normally to provide new technology in a familiar form factor to facilitate its use but binding a floppy disk into a book does the

opposite—it makes using the floppy disk much more cumbersome to use. Second, the form factor of the bound floppy disks constitutes a different information carrying device altogether. In a sense, creating a reverse-skeuomorph where design aspects of newer technology are appropriated into older forms.

Finally, by highlighting the fragility of the information carried by the floppy disks, and because the newer technology is made harder to use by these design choices, the author seems to subvert the normal dynamic of a skeuomorph—in a sense, arguing the old technology for information carrying as superior to the new. It is implied in the traditional use of a skeuomorph that the new technology has some desirable characteristic. So desirable, in fact, that we are willing to "dress it up" with the design choices of what it is replacing to make it more pleasant to replace. By implying instead that the older technology is superior, the author subverts the philosophy underlying skeuomorphs and instead seems to, at least, call the march of technology into question.

From a contemporary perspective, we might note the fact that the floppy disk is one of the most ubiquitous examples of a skeuomorph—it is the save icon for almost all software. This, then lends a new perspective to the skeuomorphic analysis we've been performing as the project is a skeuomorph of a skeuomorph. New meaning can be supposed for the author's perspective if we analyze this from a modern context—namely one orthogonal to the commentary of the author in the original context.

In the modern context it's not entirely clear what the meaning is behind the choice of a floppy disk as a cover. It's not even entirely clear that a skeuomorph is being formed by the use of the floppy disks as books are still recognizable as a communication medium and, to many young people, floppy disks are not. This undermines the subversion of the skeuomorph since it's

not even clear to most viewers that the floppy disks' use is being restricted. Instead, it would seem to be an antiquated piece of technology used as a simple binder for a book, maybe instead commenting on the wastefulness of modern technology, as the exteriors don't actually hold information and no one can use them anyways. It's wholesome, then, to bind a new book with trash from the past. With disregard for the original context, this could, then, become a piece about recycling.

Since the floppy disk has lost cultural meaning outside of standing in for a "old piece of technology," much of the bite of the original critique of the author seems to fade with time. Within a new cultural context, the work seems to have an optimistic, almost uplifting tone, whereas the original context seems to suggest an urgency or a fear of losing information.

It's hard to find a similar historical example of such a drastic change in cultural context over such a short time period. Never before has our technology changed so that someone born when a book was made would exist in a technological environment that makes that book foreign by the time they are twenty two. This shows us that while we live in time of accelerating advancements in information technology, the principles of bibliography hold true—the mediums we use to express ourselves continue to carry a meld of meaning consisting both of unknowable cultural context and, as in this case, the original intent of our own work.