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Book Report

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The quote that struck me the most on Amaranth Borsuk’s companion site to *The Book* was“The book is a hybrid device – a storage, display, and distribution mechanism for literature, art, and information. Paired with an alphabet, it is the greatest invention of mankind: a dedicated object with the capacity for access and retrieval, without fail, for hundreds of years – in version 1.0” – Steve Woodall. This quote stood out to me because it addressed neither the form nor content of a book and focused solely on its use: storage, display, distribution, access and retrieval of literature, art, and/or information. This focus on use made the Woodall’s definition flexible without the qualifications, extreme wordiness, or vague meaning of most content focused definitions on Borsuk’s companion.

Steve Woodall

Woodall is currently a Collections specialist at the Achenbach Foundation, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. Prior to this role, his first job in the field was Artistic Director of the San Francisco Center for the Book, which he helped start in 1996. He left that role after twelve years and became the director of the center for book and paper arts at Columbia College Chicago. In both of those earlier roles Woodall engaged in practicing and preserving letterpress printing, papermaking, and book binding as well as producing and preserving artist books. Woodall’s professional experience worked its way into his definition in two ways, his inclusion of art and his view of a book as an object. Many poets or novelists might neglect artist books in their definitions of a book (in Borsuk’s companion page many do) because artist books are still a fringe genre. As an artist book collections specialist, Woodall was guaranteed to include artist books in his definition. In his prior position Woodall focused on the mechanical processes behind the creation of books. This extensive experience building books was reflected in the phrasing “dedicated object”. Woodall’s diverse experience in conventional and artist book making lead him to compose a flexible definition of a book that is separate from the words on the page.

Examples of Books that Confotm to Woodall’s Definition

Woodall’s definition encompasses a wide variety of books in addition to the ubiquitous novel from standard informational books to art books. Informational textbooks such as *The Handbook of Fixed Income Securities* fulfill each of the uses of Woodall’s definition. This book is used to store information in libraries. The hard cover and sturdy pages used in building the book help achieve this purpose by making the book durable. The book displays information inside the book through text, charts, and graphs and displays the title, author, and publisher on the spine and book jacket. The textbook is distributed internationally through its publisher, and is used by readers to access and retrieve specific pieces of knowledge. To facilitate this process the books content is divided into chapters with headers dispersed throughout each chapter. Each page within the book is numbered and the table of contents lists the page number of each chapter and header within the book. Whole book is designed for optimal storage and reference and the physical design of the book affects how the reader interacts with the content. This same content could be delivered to audiences through a series of live and or recorded lectures. These lectures would be a completely different experience of the content solely because of the change in media.

Books such as The Completer Works of William Shakespeare show how a book is divorced from content. Shakespeare wrote plays to be performed for a live audience. Shakespeare’s plays are not books, they do not fit Woodall’s definition. Once the plays are written down and bound into one object that object fulfills the requirements of Woodall’s definition of a book it can store, display, distribute the literary work and provide access to and retrieval of the literature. The same content, Shakespeare’s plays, can be presented as a book or play. The book form loses the effects of a live performance but a book form allows for more effective storage than memory, wider distribution, and easier access to the literary work. Shakespeare’s plays were converted to book form during his lifetime to increase the distribution of his plays outside the stage of the globe theater. Soon after Shakespeare’s death two actors he worked with compiled 36 of his plays into a book, the First Folio in order to preserve his work for later generations. Today the book form of Shakespeare’s work is still dominant even in the age of video. Shakespeare is taught through books in school and studied from books by academics. This is because the book form of Shakespeare’s work is something much easier to manipulate for access and retrieval. A reader can easily consult specific lines of the play or control the pace at which they absorb the content, something difficult or impossible to do watching a live play or a recording of one. Woodall’s definition’s purposefully wide range of content for a book, literature, art, and information (practically everything fits into those three categories) allows for a collection of works bound into a single volume to be considered one book. Woodall’s definition makes no comment on a book requiring a single narrative or topic.

Artist books of course fit into Woodall’s definition. Dorothy A. Yule’s artist book, Memories of Science, a short homemade feeling book composed of verse and four pop-up illustrations is a good example. The book form gives Yule a unique mode of display for her pop-up illustrations and the sequential order to the pages within the book encourage Yule’s audience/reader to experience the book in the order she can control. The book form also provide Yule with a more durable artwork that can be stored or distributed widely with less adverse effects. Yule probability was not interested in the access and retrieval features of a book but it is possible in the form she has chosen.

The final book that shows Woodall’s definition of a book is not reliant on content is that a blank notebook. A blank notebook fits Woodall’s definition of a book. A blank notebook does not yet contain literature, art, or information but, even without content a blank notebook is still a mechanism for storage, display, and distribution capable of access and retrieval, just of content yet to be entered. It is especially important that empty books are included in any definition

Examples of Books that serve as Counter-examples to Woodall’s Definition

Woodall’s definition is extremely flexible and pretty comprehensive but I see two weakness that need to be corrected. The first weakness in Woodall’s definition is that the phrase “dedicated object” excludes all e-literature right off the bat. There are many different forms of e-lit but Woodall’s definition excludes all of them. To me the most glaring example is the exclusion of e-books like the ones read on a kindle. A kindle e-book fulfills all of the uses that Woodall specifics in his definition. Literature, art, and information can be stored, displayed, and distributed by an e-book in many cases better than with a physical book and e-books can also be used access and retrieve information easily. Woodall’s definition also excludes a variety of e-literature that I would consider books that do not meet all of his use requirements. The specific work of e-lit that comes to mind is Agrippa. Agrippa, an electronic book by William Gibson and Denis Ashbaugh could only be read once. As the reader read the book the text was erased from the computer screen and disc the book was saved on. This loss of the book upon reading violates the storage, access and retrieval requirements of Woodall’s definition but Agrippa is none the less clearly a book. This examination of e-lit’s status as not books in Woodall’s definition suggests that the definition needs to abandon its requirement for a physical object and lessen its requirements for use.

The second weakness in Woodall’s definition is that it includes too many things as a book, specifically laptops. A laptop is a hybrid device that can store, display, distribute literature, art, and information with the capacity to access and retrieve that content. By searching the web a laptop can access more content than a book could ever dream of containing and distribute that content globally with a click of a button. Even disconnected from the web a laptop could possess vast amounts of literature, art, and information in its internal drives. The question is if a laptop fits Woodall’s requirements of a book what is his definition missing? I my mind a laptop is not a book because all of the literature, art and information it can store is not related to each other. A laptop more closely resembles a library than a book. A library almost fits into Woodall’s definition of a book, “device” and “object” disqualifiy a library but everything else fits exactly.

Based on this analysis of counter examples to Woodall’s definition, the second definition and my own definition need to divorce the book from a physical object, provide more flexibility on use, and show the single entity nature of a book.

Second Definition of a Book

Tatiani Rapatzikou’s quote from Borsuk’s companion site is a definition that achieves each of these things.

“As a network of embodied interactions, the book invites us all to delve into the spatial, temporal, visual, verbal and tactile experiences it brings together.” —Tatiani Rapatzikou

This definition makes no reference to form or content and does not place any requirements of use on the book. If I had to choose only one definition I would stick with Woodall’s definition I think it has more use in explaining and deciding what is a book but this quote perfectly encapsulates how my thinking has evolved on the shortfalls of Woodall’s definition. The key phrase in the definition to me is experiences it brings together. This phrase shifts the book from Woodall’s definition where the book is tool to convey something else to something that creates meaning through how its component parts interact. Overall, Rapatzikou’s definition is a little too vague but the core meaning behind it a book is the purposeful interaction of all its element is the key. A book is not just a tool it convey’s meaning beyond its content.

My Definition of a Book

Based on my research laid out in this paper my personal definition of a book is “A Book is a portable collection of literature, art, and/or information for a reader to interact with, bound together for a unified purpose.” In this definition I attempted to combine the elements of the Woodall and Rapatzikou definitions that I liked into one definition. Reader interaction stands in in my definition for Woodall’s display, access and retrieval requirements. I see portable as matching Woodall’s distribution criteria and collection as implying storage capacity. I copied Woodall’s description of a book’s content because I liked its broad nature. From Rapatzikou I took inspiration from “experiences it brings together” and said “bound together for a unified purpose” I chose bound over bring because bound together has a more permanent implication than bring together and I added for a unified purpose to include the intentionality behind each decision that goes into the bookmaking process.