



Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art

Garrett Stewart

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“There they rest, inert, impertinent, in gallery space—those book forms either imitated or mutilated, replicas of reading matter or its vestiges. Strange, after its long and robust career, for the book to take early retirement in a museum, not as rare manuscript but as functionless sculpture. Readymade or constructed, such book shapes are canceled as text when deposited as gallery objects, shut off from their normal reading when not, in some yet more drastic way, dismembered or reassembled.” So begins *Bookwork*, which follows our passion for books to its logical extreme in artists who employ found or simulated books as a sculptural medium. Investigating the conceptual labor behind this proliferating international art practice, Garrett Stewart looks at hundreds of book-like objects, alone or as part of gallery installations, in this original account of works that force attention upon a book’s material identity and cultural resonance.

Less an inquiry into the artist’s book than an exploration of the book form’s contemporary objecthood, Stewart’s interdisciplinary approach traces the lineage of these aggressive artifacts from the 1919 *Unhappy Readymade* of Marcel Duchamp down to the current crisis of paper-based media in the digital era. *Bookwork* surveys and illustrates a stunning variety of appropriated and fabricated books alike, ranging from hacksawed discards to the giant lead folios of Anselm Kiefer. The unreadable books Stewart engages with in this timely study are found, again and again, to generate graphic metaphors for the textual experience they preclude, becoming in this sense legible after all.

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