Book Presence in a Digital Age

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Learn to Read Differently

Simon Morris

I am still alive.

I am an artist living at the beginning of the twenty-first century, working in the digital age.

I make work by reading or purposefully misreading the words of others, conducting these investigations with my tongue pressed firmly against the inside of my cheek.

In 2003, the psychoanalyst Dr. Howard Britton referred to me as "philosophically irresponsible" (Britton 2003, 136–41) in a special edition of the French journal, *the Revue d'esthétique*, which examined the relationship between contemporary artists and philosophy. More recently, the English critic Robert Clark referred to me as "an inspired lunatic" (Clark 2010) in the *Guardian* newspaper in reference to an exhibition I had curated, entitled "The Perverse Library." These playful epithets make reference to my experimental work with the book as a form ripe for examination in the digital age. Using art strategies, I test the very nature of the literary medium to find out what its limits are. My work tampers with language, its use and misuse, its presentation, and its reception. My work is intent on disrupting the triangulation between meaning, support, and context—the materiality of words and the materiality of the ground on which they are inscribed, the context that frames the meaning, the margins, the edges, the borderlines. In my creative practice, I aim to achieve an engaging interplay between word, context, and the medium of the page, as well as recording the current shift between the analogue and the digital. These playful interventions recognize reading and publishing as aesthetic acts, in and of themselves.

This chapter examines four of my works of conceptual literature, proposing that they can be read as "conceptualist performed readings." I set out the conceptual

strategies used in *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (2003), *Re-Writing Freud* (2005), *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* (2010), and *Pigeon Reader* (2012). All of these works are self-published by "information as material" (iam), the publishing imprint I established in 2002 with a resolute commitment to DIY politics.

Introduction

It may help to start by thinking about the artist's relation to theory, which is different from that of the academic or the scientist. The artist is not trying to establish some law or rule based on reason. Quite the opposite: he or she is interested in the potential of the irrational, in celebrating the nonsensical. As the American artist Mark Dion pointed out in an interview:

> Artists are not interested in illustrating theories as much as they may be in testing them. This is why artists may choose to ignore contradictions in a text or choose to explode those contradictions. The art work may be the lab experiment which attempts equally as hard to disprove as prove a point. (Dion 1999, 39)

Figure 10.1 Simon Morris, *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (York: Information as Material, 2003).

It is also worth noting the artist may, or may not, know what they are doing. As the art critic David Sylvester observed in a conversation with Gilbert & George: "The artist works in order to find out how to do it" (1999). Nonetheless, Dion's position statement would certainly find agreement with Sol Le Witt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art," particularly sentence number five: "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically" (LeWitt 1992b: 837).

LeWitt's sentences resonate strongly for me as an artist, particularly his invocation to follow irrational thoughts logically.

The Royal Road to the Unconscious, 2003

I conceived of the project *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* in order to conduct an experiment on the writing in Sigmund Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).

I had observed a contradiction in Freud's work that I wished to explode. Freud investigates the realm of the unconscious, the space of the irrational,
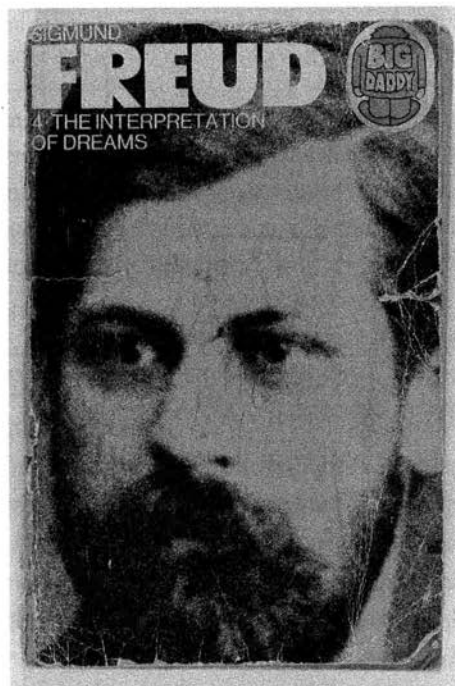

Figure 10.2 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated and edited by James Strachey, assisted by Alan Tyson, revised by Angela Richards (Harmonsdworth: Penguin, 1985).

but to do so he employs rational procedures such as syntax, grammar, and punctuation.

The unconscious mind upsets the natural order of things. In dreams, objects can often appear the wrong size, words may be disconnected from their meanings, and ideas can seem arbitrary and unrelated. Freud explores these phenomena, but in words that are, themselves, highly considered, in sentences that are carefully constructed and through arguments that are deliberately crafted.

I wondered, what would happen if I were to subject his altogether consciously produced text to an aleatory moment, a seemingly random act of utter madness? What would happen if we were to re-encounter his text as if in a dream-like state? And how might I undertake such a purposeful misreading of Freud's work?

The Royal Road to the Unconscious is the result of an extended dialogue and exchange of ideas with Dr. Howard Britton, a psychoanalyst who was enthusiastic to find out more about contemporary art. In 2001, Dr. Britton gave me a crash course in the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. One evening, in Spring 2002, I was reading Freud when I came across the following famous passage:

> In waking life the suppressed material in the mind is prevented from finding expression and is cut off from internal perception owing to the fact that the contradictions present in it are eliminated—one side being disposed of in favour of the other; but during the night, under the sway of an impetus towards the construction of compromises, this suppressed material finds methods and means of forcing its way into consciousness.
>
> Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.
>
> The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. (Freud 1985, 768–69)

That last of these sentences stopped me in my tracks. I felt as if I had been physically tripped up by the combination of the words "royal" and "road" in Freud's sentence. Those particular words gave me an idea. The way I make work is through reading or misreading of the words of others. Sometimes I get stuck on a particular word, a sentence or a longer passage of text. I end up a bit like a stuck record, repeating the same phrase over and over again. When this happens I feel an obligation to do something about it: to make a work.

In this instance, Freud's lexicon made me immediately think of another work by the American artist Ed Ruscha, entitled *Royal Road Test* (1967).
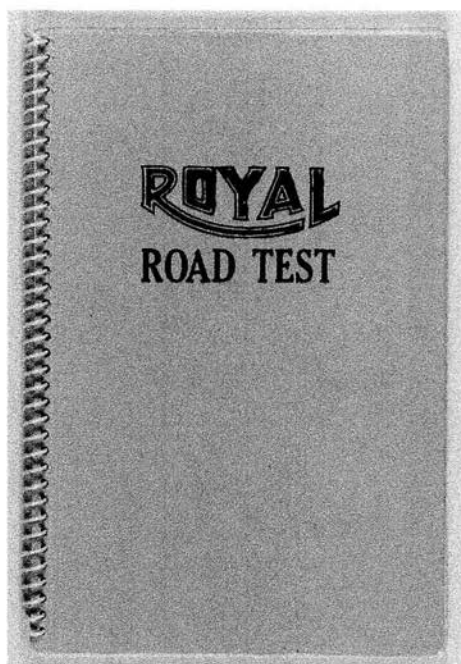
Figure 10.3 Patrick Blackwell, Ed Ruscha, and Mason Williams, *Royal Road Test*, fourth edition (Los Angeles, 1980). Signed copy of the book gifted to me by Ed Ruscha.

I first encountered Ruscha's book back in 1996; by 2002 his playful capers were but a distant memory; my journey back to Ruscha's work was taken through Freud.

In 1966, Ed Ruscha (Driver), Mason Williams (Thrower), and Patrick Blackwell (Photographer) drove 122 miles Southwest of Las Vegas, Nevada in a 1963 Buick Le Sabre. The desolate area is known as the Devil's Playground.

The weather was perfect. They were traveling along US highway 91 at a speed of 90 mph. The time was 5:07 p.m. when the writer Mason Williams threw a Royal (Model "X") typewriter out of the window. Patrick Blackwell, the photographer, documented the scene of strewn wreckage. His documentation of the action was subsequently bound into a book, *Royal Road Test*. The book has become something of a cult classic and Ruscha is widely acknowledged as one of the first artists to make artworks in the form of books. This was not a book being used for the purpose of documenting an existing artwork but the book being employed as a container for an idea—which is the work itself. Like much conceptual art of the period, the work contains a minimal set of previously agreed instructions that the protagonists followed as they completed the action.
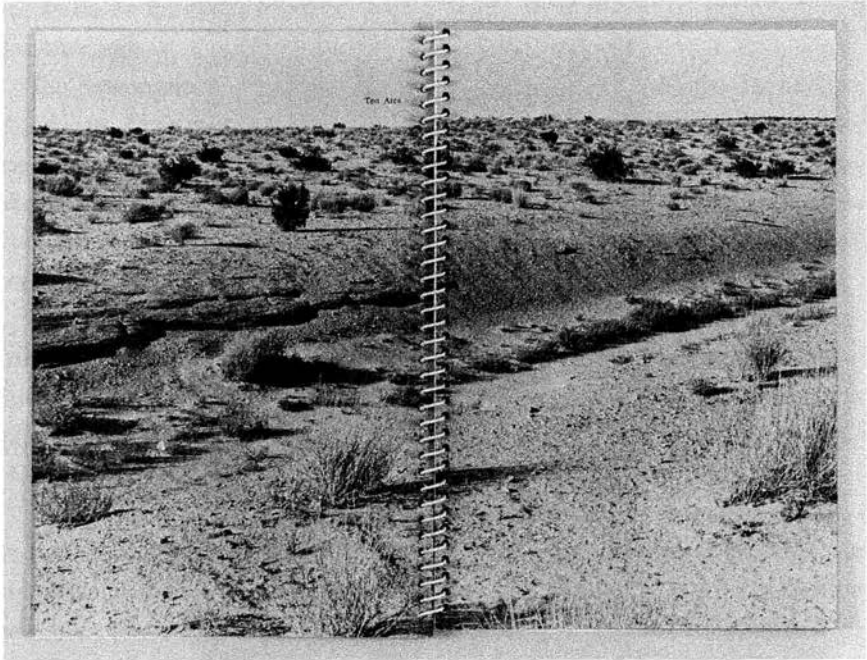
Figure 10.4 The Devil's Playground, double-page spread from *Royal Road Test.*

Utilizing Ed Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* as a readymade set of instructions

The chance of the words "royal" and "road" appearing in both Freud and Ruscha suggested, to me, a way of subjecting Freud's text to a similarly random act of madness. It should be understood that I was using Ed Ruscha's project as a readymade set of instructions in order to carry out a new experiment on Freud's writing. This was in no way an attempt to repeat the work made by Ruscha. On the contrary, I wanted to use Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* as a lens through which others could read Freud's words differently.

In *Royal Road Test*, Mason Williams threw a typewriter out of the window of a speeding car—for my reading experiment, it seemed perfectly illogical that words should follow. First, though Freud's words would have to be disconnected from the logic of the "sentence" he had imposed on them. As Pablo Picasso is so often quoted as saying, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." Cut-ups provided me with necessary methodology to destroy (in order to recreate) Freud's seminal work.

However, I am far too lazy to cut-up 223,464 words all by myself. So, in 2013, as part of the preparations for the work, I invited my students to collaborate on the project with me, by cutting up Freud's sentences into individual words. Seventy-eight students generously turned up, each brandishing a pair of scissors. This was crowd-sourcing for the purpose of a literary happening.

Each student was given ten pages of text, the font of which had been blown up on a photocopier to 880 percent. It's worth noting that I'm not bibliocidal and no books were harmed in the making of this work. My work is at the opposite end of the spectrum to Doug Beube and Brian Dettmer's respective working methods, involving a remediation rather than a demediation. Obviously, by cutting up Sigmund Freud's text, I was also directly referencing a whole history of cut-ups from Tristan Tzara in 1927 to Bryon Gysin and William Burroughs in the 1960s. Tzara had infamously cut one of his poems into single words and then performed the piece, on stage in a theater in Paris, by pulling the words out of a bowler hat and reading the words out loud in the random order that chance dictated. Gysin and Burroughs are celebrated for further developing the literary
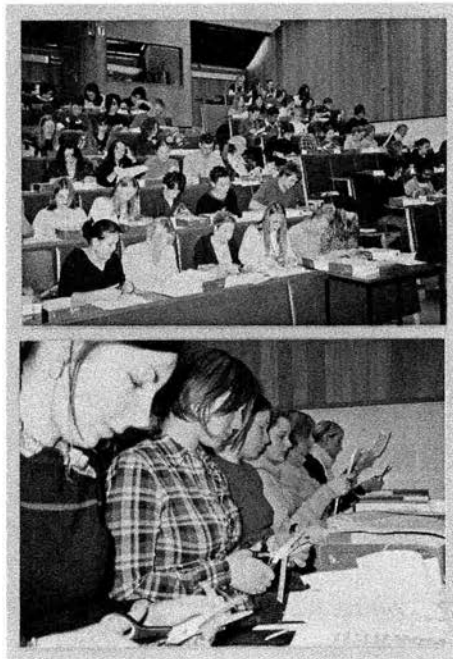

Figure 10.5 Seventy-eight students from York College cutting up Professor Freud's text, 2003. Photographs by Simon Morris.

and artistic use of this technique. Here are some of William Burroughs's own words about the magical potential of the cut-up technique:

> Any narrative passage or any passage, say, of poetic images is subject to any number of variations, all of which may be interesting and valid in their own right. Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands. (1978, 4)
>
> The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. . . . The best writing seems to be done almost by accident. . . . You cannot *will* spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors. (1978, 29)

During the making of this project, a phrase by the English poet John Keats kept spinning around my head: "That which is creative must create itself" (1974, 238). I take this to mean that the art work must operate beyond the control of the artist who might establish the parameters of the project but not predetermine the eventual form of the work. Everything in the project had to be highly structured
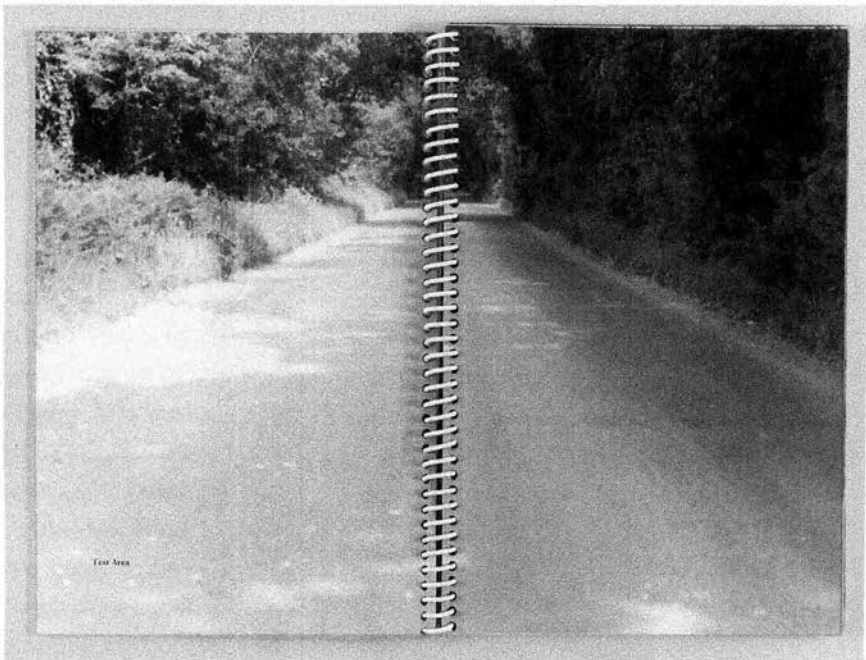

Figure 10.6 Redbridge road, Crossways, Dorset, approximately 122 miles southwest of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical couch, double-page spread from *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*.

and carefully planned in order to facilitate one brief moment of creative madness. All the further elements in the planning of the work were dictated by the logic of Ruscha's instructions, which I used in much the same way as a poet would use stylistic devices or the rules of verse.

John Keats defines the rationale.
Sol le Witt provides the permission.
Tristan Tzara supplies the method.
Ed Ruscha presents the rules.

The location was approximately 122 miles southwest of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical couch (using Freud's couch as a marker instead of Las Vegas, Nevada).

The action occurred on a Sunday, as it did back in 1967.

The weather was perfect, as it was thirty-six years ago.

Ruscha's project took place at 5:07 p.m.—our project took place at 7:05 a.m. (a safety consideration as much as a deliberate inversion of the original time—no
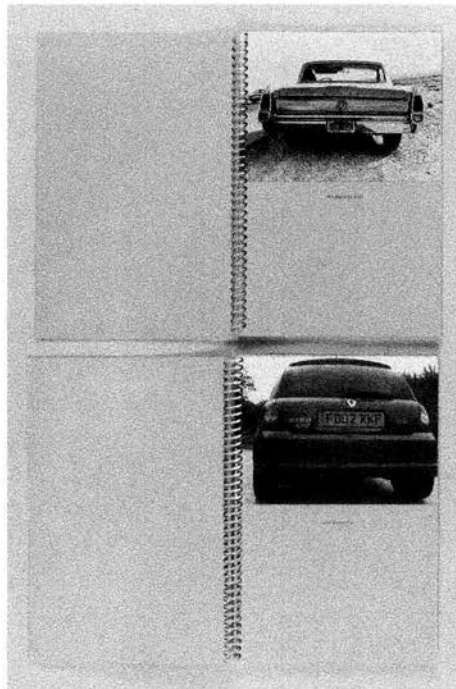

Figure 10.7 1963 Buick Le Sabre and 2002 Renault Clio, double-page spread from *Royal Road Test* and *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*, respectively.

one would be around at 7 a.m. on a deserted Dorset country lane). The speed, however, remained the same. Ed Ruscha had driven the car at a speed of 90 mph along the desert highway. In order to subject Freud's text to the aleatory moment, it was necessary to contravene certain rules, such as the national speed limit: Dr. Howard Britton drove at a speed of 90 mph along the small country lane in Dorset. The art critic Matthew Collings would later remark, "I really think you ought to slow down" (Collings 2003).

By throwing Freud's words out of the window of the car moving at speed, chance was allowed to enter the work.

The eruption of words from the window of the speeding car produced a temporary escape from the rational, a brief celebratory moment of non-meaning.

In the aftermath, I asked two photographers to act as ciphers of indifference and for the psychoanalyst Dr. Howard Britton, as a professional translator of the unconscious, to direct them toward any interesting moments in the reconfiguration of Freud's words as they appeared newly scattered across Redbridge road and its surrounding flora. In a review of the project in the
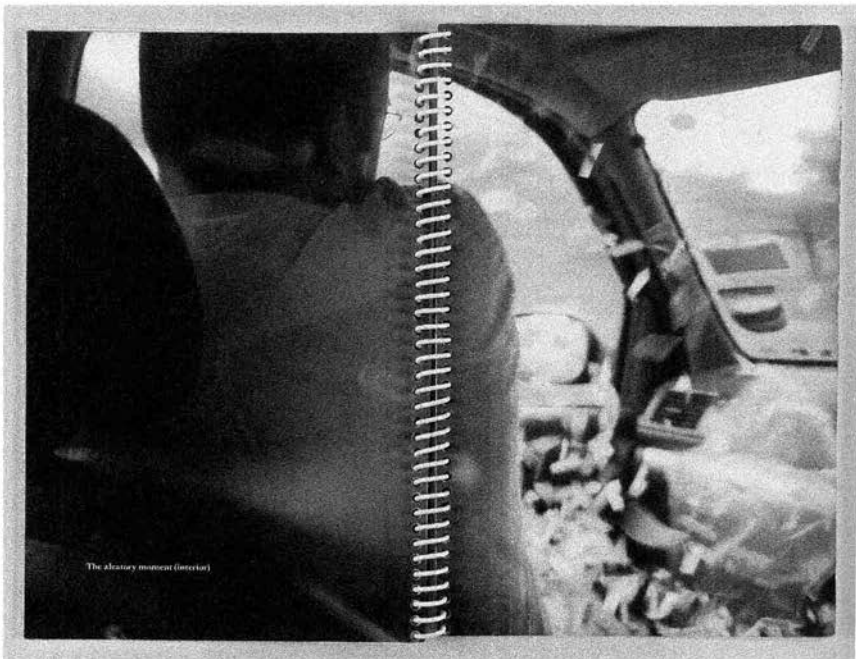

Figure 10.8 Throwing Sigmund Freud's words out of a car window from *The Royal Road to the Unconscious.*

Figure 10.9 223,464 words traveling at 90 mph, from *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*.

American journal *Art on Paper*, Anne Dorothee Boehme writes beautifully about the images that resulted from the word distribution, making her own construction from the deconstruction of meaning:

> Just as dreams inhabit our sleep without any conscious interference and outside of our control, the scattered word scraps wash up as an immaculate wave of flotsam on the side of the road. These images are extremely evocative and of great celebratory quality, recalling the aftermath of ticker-tape parades, Mardi-Gras residue, or the surreal-ness of snow that has fallen at the wrong time of the year.
>
> The connection between the general phenomenon of a dream and the metaphorical authority of these individual word strips, now strewn along the road in abundance, is clear: both express themselves by simply being, effortlessly, and are unconcerned if their existence can be communicated to anyone else. Dreaming allows us to play with experiences that were gained during waking hours; we re-arrange and stabilize them and thus enjoy a form of liberated, poetic, thinking that might in fact be the least repressed. Engaged in a nocturnal process of sorting and categorizing, we add seemingly illogical text and thought fragments to existing mental patterns. (2004, 82–83)
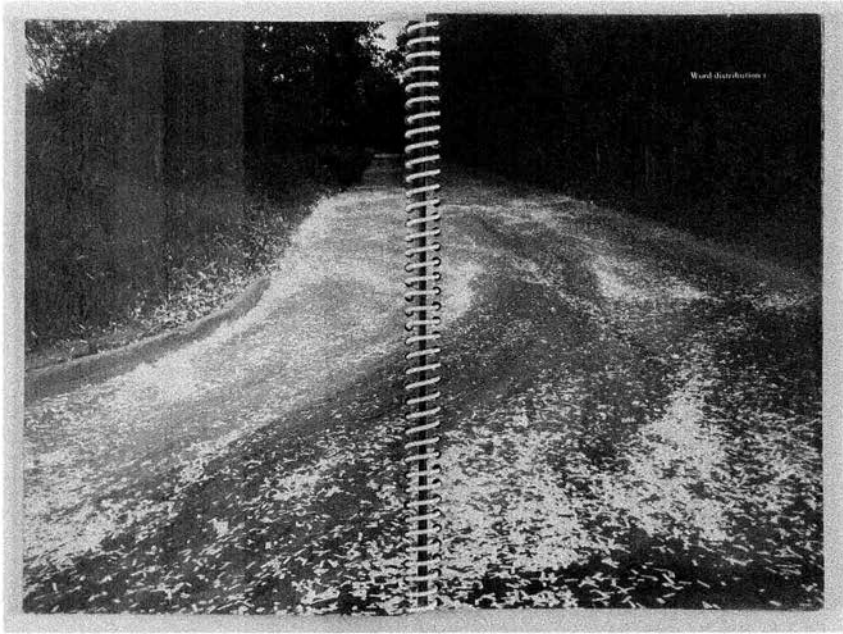
Figure 10.10 The surrealness of snow that has fallen at the wrong time of the year, from *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*.

Figure 10.11 Fever and Night-terrors, from *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*.

The Royal Road to the Unconscious is an analogue work that explores the materiality of language, from the words on the page to the material support of the paper that holds them in place. But, having never actually read Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* in its entirety—having recently thrown the contents of the book out of a car window traveling at high speed instead—I decided that my next project should be to rewrite it.

Re-writing Freud, 2005

For *Re-Writing Freud*, I worked with the creative technologist Christine Farion to rewrite Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.

Freud's book was fed into a computer program designed by Christine Farion. The text was taken from an online 1913 English translation by A. A. Brill that was outside of copyright restrictions. In taking digitized text from one place and literally pouring it into another form, I was well aware of Kenneth
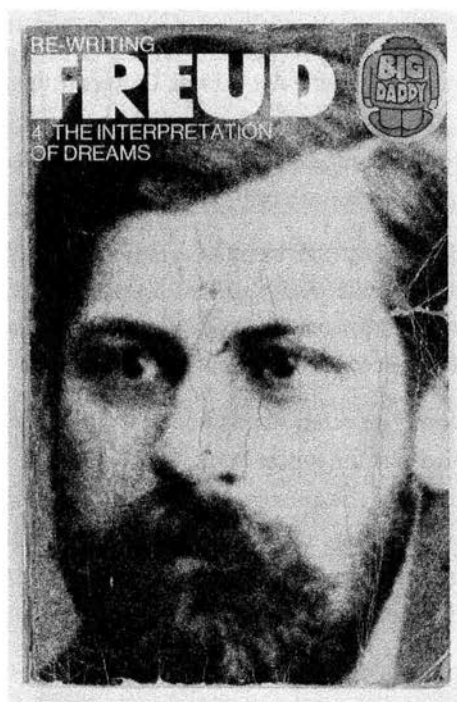

Figure 10.12 Simon Morris, *Re-Writing Freud* (York: Information as Material, 2005).

Figure 10.13 Simon Morris (artist) and Christine Farion (creative technologist), Interactive touch screen kiosk reprocessing Freud's text for the exhibition, *An Art of Readers*, curated by Yann Serandour, Galerie Art & Essai, Université Rennes 2, France, 2005.

Goldsmith's own ruminations on the malleability of digitized text. As he notes in a conversation with the literary critic Marjorie Perloff:

> Now, once language is digitized, its transportative and morphic tendencies are foregrounded. Great chunks of language have been melted and are free to assume a myriad of forms. In a way, it highlights the formal properties of language more than has ever been realized before. (Perloff 2003)

The program randomly selected words one at a time from across Freud's text and began to reconstruct the entire book, word by word, making a new book with the same words in the process. The algorithm worked by recognizing individual words and the punctuation and spaces either side as individual fields. In other words, the program worked by using the gaps between the words. It would remove each field, randomize the order of the individual units, and then redistribute them.

This work has been displayed in galleries and museums in a wall-mounted, touchscreen kiosk with attached printer, as well as an App version. While the
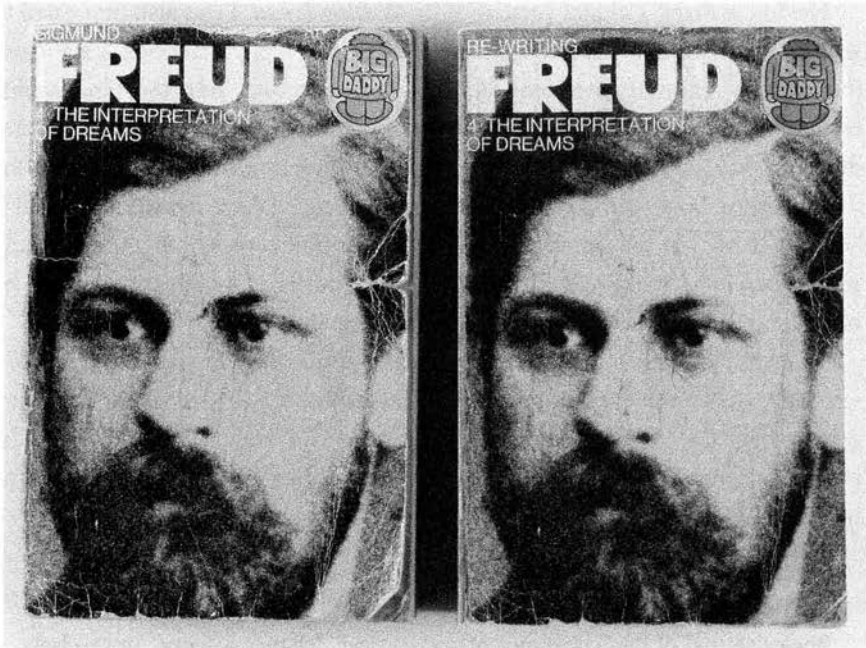
Figure 10.14 Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, adjacent to Simon Morris's *Re-Writing Freud*.

text was being randomly rewritten, it could also be reprinted and published. It took approximately seventy-eight hours to rewrite Freud's 223,624 word text.

It is possible to see a direct relation between *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* and *Re-Writing Freud*. The former I view as the physical separation of language (analogue edition) and the latter as the virtual separation of language (digital edition). "The spattered text" in *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*—described by Stephen Bury as "the blood of Ruscha's typewriter"—has now been picked up off the asphalt of Redbridge road and thrown back onto the rewritten page in *Re-Writing Freud* (2004, 39).

The benefits for the potential audience were the opportunity to engage with an interactive art work that utilized technology and new media. The spectator soon realized that he or she could authorize their own rewriting of Freud's work, taking control of the work and print directly from the screen by using the touch-sensitive interface. By pressing play and pause, they too could intervene in Freud's original text, rupture it, interrupt it, create new poetic or nonsensical juxtapositions, and return it to us in a new order.

Having realized a digital version of *Re-Writing Freud*, I was also interested to see the rewritten text poured back into the form of a physical book. I set about putting the randomly selected, digitized language back into the typographic layout found in the 1976 Penguin edition of Freud's work, replicating its chapter divisions and the length of its paragraphs. This intentional close attention to the design of the host copy I refer to as "undesigning"; I have heard others call it "brandjacking." In the gallery there were two bound copies of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. The first was the "conventional" publication written by Freud and the second one was the rewritten version.

To create the first published edition of *Re-Writing Freud* (edition of 1000) I worked closely with the Master printers Imschoot in Belgium. Craig Dworkin, professor in the Department of English at the University of Utah, edited the publication and wrote an editor's introduction entitled "Grammar Degree Zero," in which he observed:

> Language simply cannot help itself. And we realise, reading this book, that we can't do anything for it. It is *through* and not in spite of its methods that "the book dreams" of the "coherence of nonsensical" "chance activity". In precisely those moments of this text where even the screen of chance cannot prevent two adjacent words from unexpectedly making sense, or suggesting a common unwritten third term, where themes emerge like shared secrets between certain words, where the very materiality meant to obviate reference only allows language to point back to itself in a series of differences and repetitions, in the rubbing of one word against the next, we catch language in its ceaseless symptomatic acts and assignations: dangerous idiomatic liaisons, anxious avoidances, teasing connotations, flirtations with syntax, illicit frissons, incestuous marriages of words with shared etymological lineages, narcissistic mirrorings, and all the perverse and unnatural combinations of aberrant ungrammatical coupling we cannot, as readers, resist seeing as such.
>
> Don't look away—for therein lies the lesson of the aleatory text: so many graces of fate, so many fates of grace. (2005, 7)
>
> The reader who responds to this book by complaining that it is nonsensical is neither right nor wrong, but asking the wrong question, posing an impossible problem in response to this book's insistent imaginary solution. (ibid., 3)

I had dreamed of making an unreadable book, of taking words back to Jacques Lacan's concept of *lalangue*, moving them from the representational to the abstract. As it was, the audience for *Re-Writing Freud* thwarted this ambition by stubbornly reading the rewritten text. When one word is placed next to another,
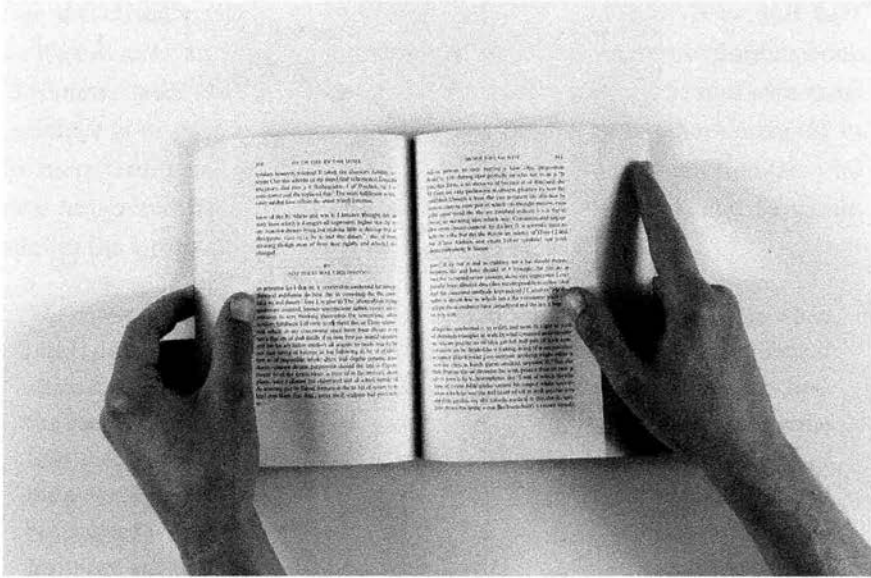
Figure 10.15 Double-page spread from Simon Morris, *Re-Writing Freud.*

meaning is suggested. The syntactical certainty of Freud's sentences has been ruptured by the aleatory process, but still flashes of meaning persist, haunting the text. Despite achieving an emancipation of syntax through its digital procedure, the book remains stubbornly present in its reconfigured state.

Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head, 2010

Kenneth Goldsmith is one of the key protagonists in conceptual writing, and in 2007 I made the first film of him and his work, entitled *sucking on words*, which was premiered at the British Library and was shown in the program of the Oslo Poetry Festival, 2007. Presented alongside the DVD edition was a short booklet with a text written by Goldsmith. In the process of proofing this text repeatedly for publication, I read the following anecdote several times:

> A few years ago I was lecturing to a class at Princeton. After the class, a small group of students came up to me to tell me about a workshop that they were taking with one of the most well-known fiction writers in America. They were complaining about her lack of imagination. For example, she had them pick their favorite writer and come in next week with an "original" work in the style of that
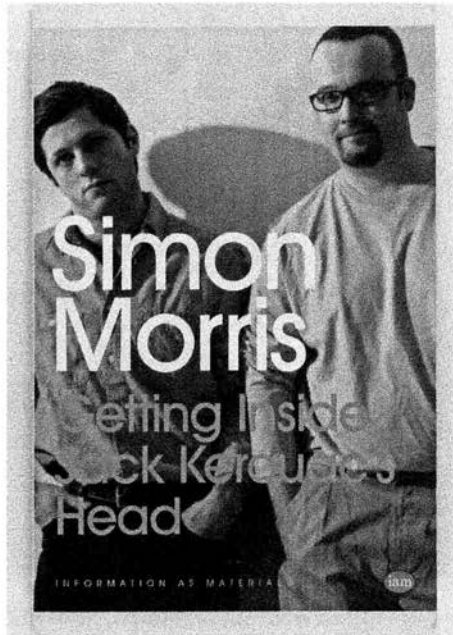
Figure 10.16 Simon Morris, *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* (York: Information as Material, 2010).

author. I asked one of the students which author they chose. She answered Jack Kerouac. She then added that the assignment felt meaningless to her because the night before she tried to "get into Kerouac's head" and scribbled a piece in "his style" to fulfill the assignment. It occurred to me that for this student to actually write in the style of Kerouac, she would have been better off taking a road trip across the country in a '48 Buick with the convertible roof down, gulping Benzedrine by the fistful, washing 'em down with bourbon, all the while typing furiously away on a manual typewriter, going 85 miles per hour down a ribbon of desert highway. And even then, it would've been a completely different experience, not to mention a very different piece of writing, than Kerouac's.

Instead, my mind drifted to those aspiring painters who fill up the Metropolitan Museum of Art every day, spending hours learning by copying the Old Masters. If it's good enough for them, why isn't it good enough for us? I would think that should this student have retyped a chunk—or if she was ambitious, the entirety—of *On the Road*. Wouldn't she have really understood Kerouac's style in a profound way that was bound to stick with her? I think she really would have learned something had she retyped Kerouac. But no. She had to bring in an "original" piece of writing. (Goldsmith 2007, 6–7)

This theoretical proposition stuck with me and I thought: Why not? Let's realize this as an art work. Let's copy Kerouac's text, from start to finish, a book I had never read. Although copying the words of others can be met with some resistance (and even rare cases of spluttering outrage) from those schooled in the more traditional creative model, there are several important thinkers who have recognized the value of copying the words of others. Walter Benjamin extolled the virtues of copying:

> The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger see only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands . . . . Only the copied text commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of day-dreaming, whereas the copier submits to its command. (1978, 66)

Gertrude Stein suggested that the only real way to know a book is to copy it: "I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it. It then does something to you that only reading never can do" (1990, 113).

The celebrated author W. G. Sebald allegedly gave the following advice to his creative writing students: "I can only encourage you to steal as much as you can. No one will ever notice. You should keep a notebook of tidbits, but don't write down the attributions, and then after a couple of years you can come back to the notebook and treat the stuff as your own without guilt" (qtd. in Wershler 2013, 340; cf. Lambert and McGill 2009, 9).

James Joyce, billed as the Shakespeare of modernism, wasn't immune to borrowing from others either: "I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man," Joyce told the American composer George Antheil, "for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description" (1966, 1:297).

And even writing what is typically considered "original" material might, in fact, involve ventriloquizing someone else's words, as in this humorous case described by the author Mark Twain:

> Oliver Wendell Holmes . . . was . . . the first great literary man I ever stole
> anything from—and that is how I came to write to him and he to me. When my
> first book was new, a friend of mine said to me, "The dedication is very neat."
> Yes, I said, I thought it was. My friend said, "I always admired it, even before I
> saw it in *The Innocents Abroad*." I naturally said: "What do you mean? Where did
> you ever see it before?" "Well, I saw it first some years ago as Doctor Holmes's
> dedication to his *Songs in Many Keys*." . . . Well, of course, I wrote to Dr. Holmes
> and told him I hadn't meant to steal, and he wrote back and said in the kindest
> way that it was all right and no harm done; and added that he believed we all
> unconsciously worked over ideas gathered in reading and hearing, imagining
> they were original with ourselves. (Sacks 2013)

The precedents are undoubtedly there, throughout history. What makes
copying today distinct, however, are the digital tools and the networks of the
internet, which make possible shifting large chunks of language from one place
to another in an instant. In the digital age heaps of language—to borrow from
Robert Smithson—are reorganized, remediated, and reconstructed all the time.
In the process, the distinction between the writer and machine is becoming
increasingly blurred.

At one extreme, there is Andy Warhol, who "want[ed] to be a machine,"
(Swenson 1963, 26) his idea developed further by Christian Bök as "robopoetics."
Bök's concept refers to a condition where "the involvement of an author in the
production of literature has . . . become discretionary" (2002, 10). He asks, "Why
hire a poet to write a poem when the poem can in fact write itself?" (ibid.). Bök's
bleak prediction for our literary future is that

> we are probably the first generation of poets who can reasonably expect to
> write literature for a machinic audience of artificially intellectual peers. Is it not
> already evident by our presence at conferences on digital poetics that the poets
> of tomorrow are likely to resemble programmers, exalted, not because they can
> write great poems, but because they can build a small drone out of words to write
> great poems for us? If poetry already lacks any meaningful readership among
> our own anthropoid population, what have we to lose by writing poetry for a
> robotic culture that must inevitably succeed our own? If we want to commit an
> act of poetic innovation in an era of formal exhaustion, we may have to consider
> this heretofore unimagined, but nevertheless prohibited, option: writing poetry
> for inhuman readers, who do not yet exist, because such aliens, clones, or robots
> have not yet evolved to read it. (ibid., 17)

Or as Bök puts it, referencing Calvino in an earlier section of the same essay, perhaps we can use algorithms to extend the lives of dead poets and create an ever-extending series of posthumous works:

> Calvino (a member of Oulipo) remarks that every author is already a "writing machine," producing literature according to a set of involuntary constraints that, under rational analysis, might be codified into a set of adjustable algorithms. Oulipo implies that, when computers begin to reveal the stylistic constants of an author, we might begin to emulate these idiosyncrasies of diction and grammar, thereby manufacturing an automatic, but convincing, facsimile that might conceivably extend the career of a writer into the afterlife of postmortem creativity. (ibid., 11)

As if anticipating this robopoetic future, in the 1950s the notorious journalist Hunter S. Thompson used to retype Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's novels: "He chose, rather than writing original copy to re-type books like *The Great Gatsby* and a lot of Norman Mailer, than *Naked and the Dead*, a lot of Hemingway. He would sit down there on an old type-writer and type every word of those books and he said, 'I just want to know what it feels like to write these words'" (qtd. in Spencer 2014). Thompson's literary workouts explored a complex relationship between typing and writing as it is determined by the ways in which we engage with the machine. Central to Thompson's project is the desire to embody the experience of pressing the metallic keys of the typewriter, as if staging a peculiar re-performance of the acts of Fitzgerald's or Hemingway's writing, hammering the words onto the space of the page until mechanical typing assumes the quality of creative writing. Here, copying what one loves results in eventually finding oneself in the writing. As Yohji Yamamoto put it, "Start copying what you love. Copy, copy, copy. And at the end of the copy, you will find yourself" (qtd. in Goldsmith 2015).

The machines might be changing the way we engage with or think about writing, but the writer continues to be present in our new media age, navigating the complex landscape of writing as rewriting at the contemporary Iterative Turn; a turn toward writing as rewriting in a culture of ubiquitous "'re'-gestures—such as reblogging and retweeting" (Goldsmith 2011, xix). As the literary theorist Kaja Marczewska has noted, unlike copying traditionally understood, iteration "recognises the creative potential of copying. Iteration . . . represents a tendency to repeat available material as a creative gesture; as an extension rather than a synonym of copying and appropriating. . . . Thinking about creative practice

as iterative necessitates a completely new set of questions, which . . . define contemporary attitudes to creativity and the cultural moment that breeds them . . . the moment [described here] as the Iterative Turn" (2016, 19).

My copying process was carefully considered. I decided to blog the book using Jack Kerouac's legendary Original Scroll from 1951 which had finally been published in 2007. This was just as Allen Ginsberg had predicted: the unedited version would only be published after all the main characters, including himself, had died. This is the version in which Kerouac hammered away a 120,000-word novel in twenty-one days flat on a typewriter. He felt that even changing the sheet of paper would interrupt the flow of his prose. So, he stuck 120 feet of tracing paper together to make a scroll and typed continuously. He worked so fast, he had had to change his sweaty t-shirt regularly and friends said that the sound of the bell ringing as the carriage in the typewriter slid back and forth was going so fast, it sounded like the doorbell. After twenty-one days of this, he rang up his publisher in New York City, declaring: "I've done it." His publisher asked: "What have you done?" Kerouac replied: "I've finished *On the Road.*" His publisher said: "Well, bring it on over and show it to me then." Kerouac sped across Manhattan and up the flights of stairs to his publisher's office. As he walked through the door, he threw the scroll at him. The scroll unfurled as it sailed across the room. His publisher picked it up and said to Kerouac: "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

It was a further six years before *On the Road* finally appeared in print. My version was typed slowly and deliberately in direct contrast to Jack's expressive act. I typed a page a day as a form of meditation, proofing each page and then posting it on a blog. With a blog, each subsequent post supersedes the previous one, pushing the posts further down the thread as you go, so the first post becomes the last post, etc. It took the best part of a year to retype Kerouac's book from start to finish. I started on Saturday May 31, 2008 with the opening sentence: "I first met met Neal not long after my father died . . ." and I finished, 297 pages later on Tuesday March 24, 2009 with the classic line: "I think of Neal Cassady, I even think of Old Neal Cassady the father we never found, I think of Neal Cassady, I think of Neal Cassady." It should be noted that in my copying odyssey, I made an error in my replication of the very first line in Kerouac's book. The first line of Keroauc's text from the *Original Scroll* edition contains a double "met." Proofing my first page of copying, I deleted the second "met" thinking I had written it by mistake for a second time. Howard Cunnell, the English editor of Kerouac's *Original Scroll*, said the double "met" is on the scroll

and he left it in, because it sounded to him like a car misfiring at the start of a journey.

Shifting from the digital to the analogue, I then poured the rewritten language back into the form of the book. But, with the first blog post having become the last post, my version was now going backward. If Jack was traveling from the East Coast to the West, I was now traveling from the West to the East in reverse and a reader would have to read my edition in the Arabic or Japanese manner: from right to left.

Using the method of undesigning, I wanted the analogue version to closely reference the recent UK edition of Kerouac's novel. In relation to the cover image, there are some technical details an attentive reader might enjoy. My friend Nick Thurston is taller than me so I had to stand on a bucket to get the height right for the cover shot. The clothes we're wearing were borrowed from the local Tesco superstore chain; afterward we took them back, claiming they didn't fit! Undesigning is employed on the back cover, too: I used the space as an opportunity to promote a number of my other titles/bookworks.

I think of the differences between the Penguin edition of Kerouac's novel and my own edition like this: one is a work of literature which you are supposed to read, the other is a work of art that you are supposed to think about. One requires a readership and the other requires a thinkership.

Then, a London artist called Joe Hale decided to retype my edition and release his version, titled *Getting Inside Simon Morris' Head*. By retyping my edition,
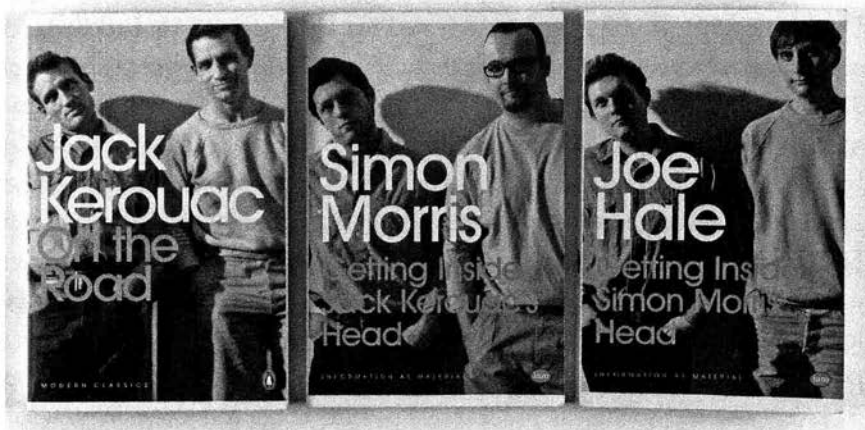

Figure 10.17 Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, 1957, Simon Morris' *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head*, 2010, and Joe Hale's *Getting Inside Simon Morris' Head*, 2014.

posting it as a blog daily for almost a year, and then pouring it back into the form of a book, Joe put Kerouac's text back in the right order.

So here are all three editions together: *On the Road, Getting Inside Jack Keroauc's Head*, and *Getting Inside Simon Morris' Head*.

A year later in 2011, the artist Richard Prince presented his facsimile hardback first edition of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in which he removed every mention of Salinger's name from the work, replacing it with his own name, Richard Prince. The work was referred to as a sculptural edition and it clearly states that it is art rather than literature. It was a dead-ringer through and through for Salinger's text—not a word was changed—with the exception that the following disclaimer was added to the colophon page: "This is an artwork by Richard Prince. Any similarity to a book is coincidental and not intended by the artist." The colophon concluded with: © Richard Prince.

Pigeon Reader, 2012

This final bookwork riffs off a wonderful collection of experimental prose by the French writer Georges Perec, entitled *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. But the game it is playing has precedents in the work of Marcel Broodthaers and Rodney Graham. In 1969 Marcel Broodthaers conducted an interview with his publisher Richard Lucas on a dust-jacket which he then wrapped around a novel by Alexandre Dumas entitled *Twenty Years After* (the sequel to *The Three Musketeers*), taking on authorship of the publication by occluding the name of Dumas. In 1991, Rodney Graham, created his *Dr No* insert. He had designed and produced a bookmark with text that can be inserted between pages 56 and 57 of the original first edition of the Ian Fleming classic to extend and loop a scene in which a poisonous centipede traverses Bond's naked body. As a reader, by inserting the bookmark, you could extend James Bond's torture for another couple of pages. Although these are, without doubt, brilliant works that have been beautifully executed, manufacturing a dust-jacket or a bookmark remains a rather cost-effective exercise. Who would take this move further, reproducing an entire 301-page book, just to make an intervention in a single 12-page chapter? Note that in British copyright law, in academia, you are allowed to copy 5 percent of a text so long as you leave 95 percent of the text alone. Who would be crazy enough to purposefully reverse this equation, and make an exacting
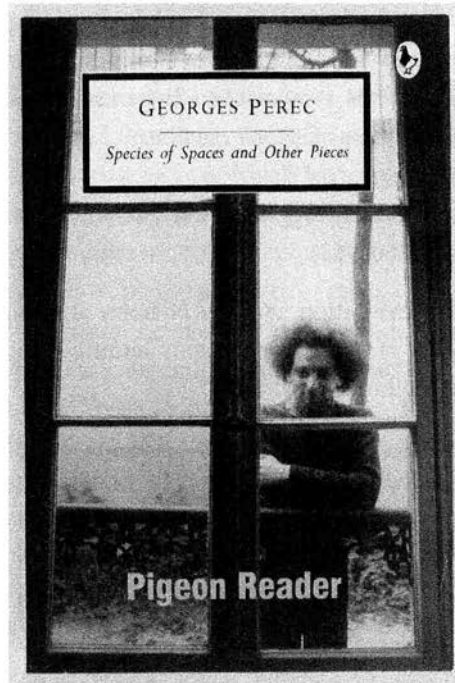
Figure 10.18 Simon Morris, *Pigeon Reader* (York: Information as Material, 2012).

copy of 95 percent of someone else's novel just to alter 5 percent (one chapter)? Well, that would be me.

Georges Perec was commissioned by an architect to write the *Species of Spaces* essay, as the table of contents suggests: The Page, The Bed, The Bedroom, The Apartment, The Apartment Building, The Street, The Neighbourhood, The Town, The Countryside, The Country, Europe, The World, Space. It's a bit like when you were a child and would write a letter to a friend, addressing it to So and So on Something Street, Planet Earth, Outer Space. But John Sturrock, the editor who put this English collection together, threw in some superb further pieces too, including "Reading: A Socio-physiological Outline." I happened to be reading this particular text by Perec on the activity of reading when I tripped over the following sentence: "Reading is like a pigeon pecking at the ground in search of breadcrumbs." And, once again, I was stuck, stuck like a stuck record.

In an interview with Willoughby Sharp made in 1973, Ed Ruscha said (in reference to the artist's books he published in the 1960s) that all his work aimed for producing "a kind of a 'Huh?'":

ER: I realized that for the first time this book had an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of a "Huh?" That's what I've always worked around. All it is, is a device to disarm somebody with my particular message. Lots of artists use that.

WS: *Give me some examples of "Huh?"*

ER: I don't know, somebody digging a hole out in the desert and calling it sculpture. (Sharp 2002, 65)

In a statement for an exhibition at Les Abbatoirs art museum in Toulouse, France, entitled, *A kind of "huh"?* the curators Jérôme Dupeyrat and Maïwenn Walter further analyzed the "huh" effect:

"Huh?": this onomatopoeia stands for "What is it?", "Why?", "What does it mean?", etc. These questions, which seem to express incomprehension or misunderstanding, which seem to testify a loss of criterion, can be paradoxically positive and constructive, because through doubt and questioning, the "huh?" effect is in fact a driving force of the process of aesthetic reception. Any artwork can provoke a "huh?" effect and anybody can feel this effect in various degrees when looking, reading or hearing an artwork.

The "huh?" effect is particularly active in artworks which are defined by oscillations between the obvious and the indecipherable, the trivial or the commonplace and the strange and the unexpected, between sense and non-sense, logic and absurdity, between what the artwork shows and what it says. (Dupeyrat and Walter 2012)

The power of this effect was enough, according to Ruscha, "to knock you on your ass" (Sharp 2002, 66). I think the contemporary version of this expression is WTF (what the fuck?). And, that, I believe is the effect you should be trying to elicit from your readers when they engage with this expanded form of literature.

Note the proportions the "huh?" effect can take: in March, 2013 I was giving a talk on experimental literature in Prague in the Czech Republic. I spoke about how, to date, I've published ten books, but not a single word of them is my own. How I'm involved in the conceptual writing movement that blurs the boundaries between art and literature. How I use the existing words of others (extant material)—how I select them and reframe them to generate new meanings—and, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things. After my talk, my host George (a beautiful man who is the spitting image of the Italian filmmaker Nanni Moretti; Moretti's face breaking into a smile in *Dear Diary* is probably the most joyful cinematic image I've ever seen) seemed concerned. He asked me the same

question repeatedly: "Do you ever get extreme reactions to your talk?" I shrug him off: "Not really—it's only words after all!" Later, after a few beers at Hotel Akropolis, George told me what was on his mind. He said, "I didn't want to tell you earlier in case I offended you, but now, after a few beers, I don't really care." George went on to explain what had transpired at the end of my lecture: a student had approached George in a very agitated state. He was bright red in the face and his chest was heaving, he was so furious. He spluttered, "How . . . could . . . you . . . invite . . . a . . . professional . . . plagiarist . . . to . . . talk . . . to . . . us?" George tried to explain the work of Sherrie Levine and the methodologies of appropriation art to the student, which only made the student even angrier. George then tried a different tack and said, "Why didn't you ask Simon a question in the Q&A, tell him what was on your mind?" The student replied, "I couldn't . . . I was too upset . . . I couldn't talk to him . . . I would have punched him in the face."

The strategies I use—rewriting, copying, or the cut-up—are not about disrespect, however. On the contrary, I love literature. It is out of love that I want to find out what is possible to do with the medium: to read it differently, to experiment with every possible permutation of what a work of literature can possibly be in order to squeeze as much meaning as I can from it. This, in my opinion, presents a justification for testing the boundaries of language in order to take possession, more certainly, of language itself. In the current information age, the digital postliterate age, the function of poetry is no longer one of collective memory or the projection of the individual voice (the emphasis now is on "shareware"), but can now, instead, focus on the malleability of language: its temporality; its ephemeral nature; its physicality; its dynamism; its fluidity; and its structures. In the digital age, poetry's function is to examine the means of transmission, exposing the frame of language, the container that creates meaning—how language is stored, viewed, and moved from one context to another. In considering this, the digital age sees a renewed engagement between speech, reading, and writing.

The cover of my new edition of *Species of Spaces* looks exactly the same as the existing version except for the Penguin logo, which has transformed into a pigeon, and that emblazoned across the cover in bright yellow are the words: "Pigeon Reader."

The content of the book repeats the Penguin edition exactly, except for the chapter on reading. When you get to page 174, you will find his text is being read by a pigeon.
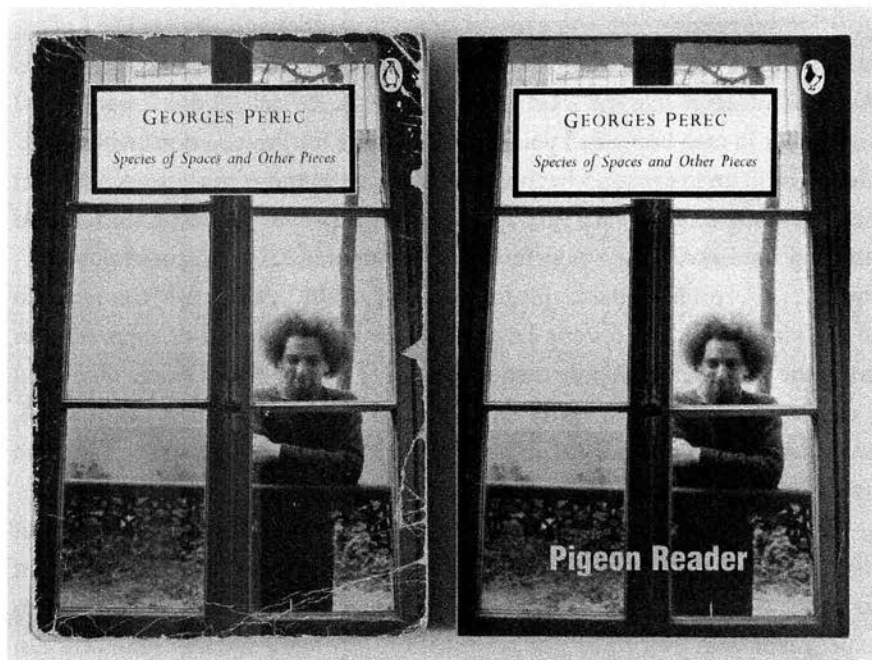
Figure 10.19 Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, 1997 and Simon Morris's *Pigeon Reader*, 2012.
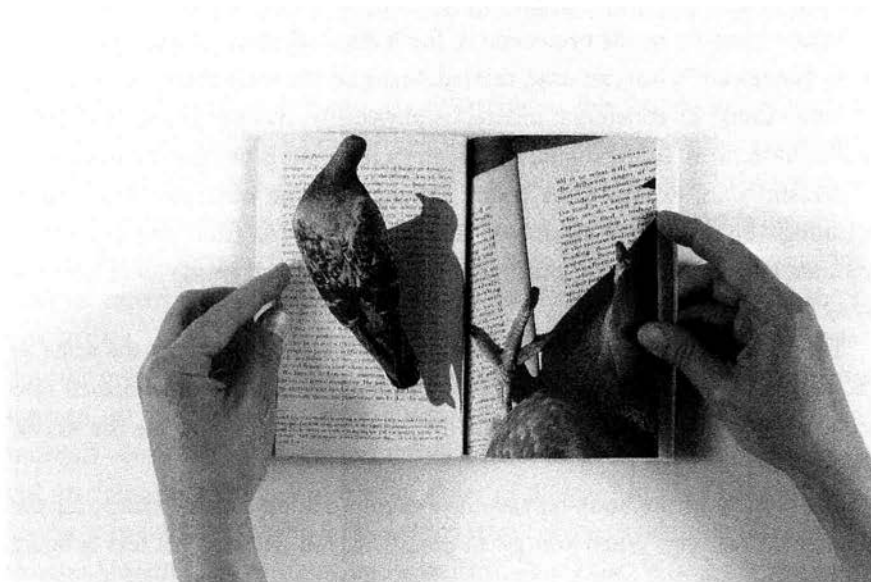

Figure 10.20 Double-page spread from Simon Morris's *Pigeon Reader*, pp. 176–77.
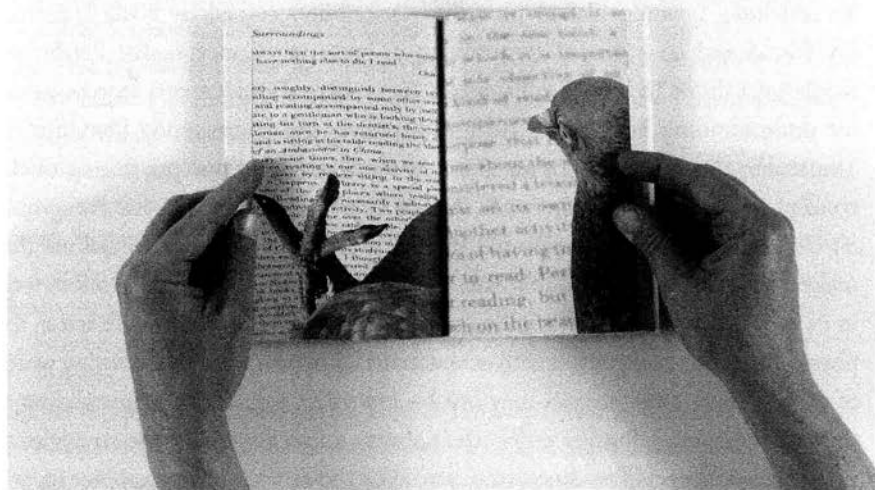
Figure 10.21 Double-page spread from Simon Morris's *Pigeon Reader*, pp. 180–81.

And then, twelve pages and pigeons later, the text resumes as normal. Professor Anne Moeglin-Delcroix told me that translated from English (*Pigeon Reader*) into French (*Lecteur Pigeon*), my title means (±) that the reader has been had (has been conned).

What games are being enacted in this edition of Perec's work and for what purpose? In reprinting the entire book, I wanted to move beyond the established tradition of the artist's insert. Through staging this intervention in the work of another, my aim was put pressure on all of the terms in Perec's title: to ask what it means to engage with a text physically—looking at print, flipping pages, processing language, vocalizing, responding—without any of the social practices or semantics we usually associate with "reading." Or, to put it as Ludwig Wittgenstein might: to ask what activities might still perform a grammar of reading even in the absence of what would seem to be its defining features. But perhaps the simplest answer would be to appropriate and recontextualize Perec's closing words in "Reading: A Socio-physiological Outline": "These are questions that I ask, and I think there is some point in a writer asking them."

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to turn to a description coined by Nick Thurston, my friend and co-editor of information as material: Conceptualist Performed Readings. I think Thurston's collaging of these three distinct terms may be useful for understanding how artists such as ourselves are approaching literature. In Thurston's compound descriptor, the first term relates to our privileging of the concept in the making of the work. As Sol LeWitt maintained in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, which appeared in 1967: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (1992a, 834). This extends to the engagement with the work as well: in its subsequent reading or thinking about. The performance is manifested in the physicality of our engagement with extant material, in how we use the existing words of others. These engagements may involve rewriting, rereading, or misreading of the source material. But the emphasis is always on reading: on these strategies as extensions of the act of reading, which we take to be an aesthetic experience in, and of itself. Reading is usually a private act, but our performed readings are always intended as public works. They are consciously made to be shared. It is important to understand that the work's reproducibility and performativity are built into its mode of production. The explicit intention is to make a reading act, on the understanding that what we are going to present will be an artwork, and where the works we produce ask questions about what kind of reading has gone on and what kind of reading they are now inviting, permitting or demanding.

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"BOOK PRESENCE IN A DIGITAL AGE is that rare volume that reads as both the culmination and anticipation of a field. It reflexively brings together some of the most compelling critics and artists thinking about 'the book' as medium and cultural artifact—and the individual conversations, explorations, and interventions that result would have alone made for a worthy volume. But the cumulative effect is much more than this, for collectively they articulate the questions that will inform scholarship and artistic practice for some years to come."
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Associate Professor of English, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

"Operating in the force field between literary theory, comparative media studies, and new materialism, BOOK PRESENCE IN A DIGITAL AGE brims over with fresh, insightful, and nuanced explorations of the shifting contours of bookishness in the information age. By means of richly variegated points of entry, it demonstrates how print artifacts, far from hovering at the margins of the digital media ecology, have emerged as some of the defining laboratories for the elaboration of contemporary cultural forms."
JEFFREY SCHNAPP
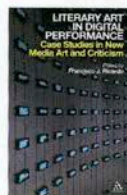Faculty Director of metaLAB, Harvard University, USA

Contrary to the apocalyptic pronouncements of paper media's imminent demise in the digital age, there has been a veritable surge of creative reimaginings of books as bearers of the literary. From typographic experiments (Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*) to accordion books (Anne Carson's *Nox*), from cut-ups (Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*) to collages (Graham Rawle's *Woman's World*), from erasures (Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow*) to mix-ups (Simon Morris's *The Interpretation of Dreams*), print literature has gone through anything but a slow, inevitable death. Bringing together leading scholars, artists, and publishers, BOOK PRESENCE IN A DIGITAL AGE offers a variety of perspectives on the past, present, and future of the book as medium and on the complex relationship of materiality to virtuality and of the analog to the digital.

KIENE BRILLENBURG WURTH is Professor of Literature and Comparative Media at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. KÁRI DRISCOLL is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. JESSICA PRESSMAN is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature a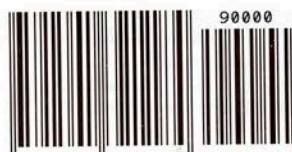t San Diego State University, USA.