

Qi

Making Books In the Spirit Of Zen

The interpenetration of the textual and the visual
in the artists book

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The Interpenetration Of Textual and Visual In the Artists book

The Chinese ideograph which is the title of this paper is usually transliterated as *chi*, or in modern spelling, *qi*. It refers roughly to the active principle of a living thing and is cognate with the yogic concept of breath (prana, vital flow) or the original Latin meaning of spirit (spiritus, breathing). Originating with the human curiosity about life force, it was applied by zen masters to anything seeming to possess these qualities, notably art. Zen-inspired painting thus strove to capture the *chi* of its subject. By extension, one can then speak of the *chi* of the painting itself.

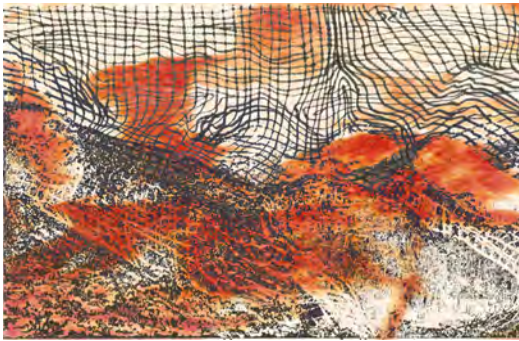
At the end of my earlier ruminations on the artists book, *Now the Artists Book Now*¹ I wrestled unsuccessfully with the question of how to make an artists book in the spirit of zen. I failed to grasp the nature of *qi* because it seemed transcendental and mystical, contradictory with hard materialism. Pondering this problem I saw how two concepts: complexity, and the interpenetration of the textual and the visual, could resolve it.

1 Downloadable from the website [http://ocotilloarts.com / NtABN.pdf](http://ocotilloarts.com/NtABN.pdf) or in more extended form in *The Contemporary Artists Book: Four Traditions* (FourTraditions.pdf).

Systems theory, fields, and complexity

A full explanation of these ideas is easily found by consulting the work of Eco, structuralists and post-structuralists, and other postmodern writing as well as work in communications theory, linguistics, mathematics, anthropology, social theory, and other disciplines. I will satisfy myself with an outline of the issues and elaborate them later in the context of the artists book. Here is my very reductive understanding of systems thinking, the field, and complex systems.

Cartesian and systems thinking



Cartesian co-ordinates were invented by the mathematician for which they are named for the purpose of unambiguously locating a point in two or three-dimensional space. Longitude and latitude are a familiar manifestation of Cartesian space. Cartesian thinking tries to locate objects in a system of classification. A dictionary is a good example of this. The Cartesian system is a closed one. This is not to say it is static or finite: the problem of continuous change, when two points get closer and closer but never converge, was mastered by calculus, by which we are able to say just where this imaginary convergence is to be found, which is at the junction of somewhere and infinity.

Unfortunately, some things do not have a precise location. Wittgenstein pointed out that words are like this. This is why dictionary definitions are circular, and why the classificatory urge will never be satisfied except in the simplest of cases.

Systems thinking does not concern itself with objects, entities, or anything of the sort but rather the relationships between them. This relieves us of the significant burden of trying to define these entities before we can proceed. We recognize the approximate nature of such definitions and can satisfy ourselves by pointing at them. The recipient of the message will need to decode it, that is to say, interpret the approximate meanings in terms significant to himself. It is sometimes possible to negotiate these decodings with the sender of the message and approach (but unlike calculus, not determine) an agreed-upon message content. Such negotiation is an example of systems thinking.

The field



A tensioned cultural space, a chunk of the universe dynamically structured by interacting forces. A traversal of such a space by an object carrying forces of its own will be unpredictable. Here lies the work of chaos theory, where small differences create large effects. It is the realm of relationships and vectors replacing the earlier Cartesian one of objects and positions. It is the realm of continuous and unpredictable transformation.

Simple and complex, open and closed systems



A complex system is one which cannot be completely described in its own terms. Mathematics is such a system, as Gödel demonstrated with his incompleteness theorem. Or, as the zen remark goes, mind cannot understand the mind. Complex systems are said to be open. They are dynamic, incompletely defined, fuzzy at the edges, always in flux. They are systems not of objects but of

fields. One of the main tasks of our time, which is at the root of the culture wars which plague us, is to discover ways of working in conditions where everything is relative, when, as is said, it's semiotics all the way down.

Features of complex (open) systems

(1) In a complex system there are no invariant organizing principles; that is, one can have no fixed experience of oneself and the world.

1.1 Hence, we have an unsatisfied hunger to organize the unfamiliar, an organization which is inevitably incomplete: everything belongs everywhere, selection endless.

1.2 Affect drives the selection.

1.3 Hence the interplay between sameness and difference (Derrida). It is the presence of anomalies which is the source of (causes us to notice) the unfamiliar. Organization gives rise to selection (the creation of context) which creates meaning.

(2) The origin and deployment of knowledge

2.1 Knowledge can only be local. (Clifford Geertz)²

2.1.1 Local knowledge implies the concept of the *frame*. In social theory this is a schema of interpretation which people rely on to understand and respond to experiences. As used in media studies, sociology, and psychology, framing refers to the social construction of a phenomenon. A frame defines the packaging of a rhetoric in such a way as to encourage or discourage certain interpretations.

2.2 Explanations are genealogical (Heidegger).

2.3 Meaning is a property not of individual objects or experiences. Meaning is created by the perception of family resemblance. (Wittgenstein)

2.4 Knowledge cannot be transmitted accurately. There is necessarily a negotiation between the sender and the recipient of the message. Hence, there can be no such thing as private knowledge.



2 *Local Knowledge: Essays In Interpretive Anthropology* (1983), Basic Books 2000 paperback:

OPEN AND CLOSED FORM

CLOSED	OPEN
Design	Avoidance of teleology (design) and a preference for rhizomic, genealogical, path-dependent structures. The primary difficulty here is that an attack on design seems to endanger the values of humanism and the Enlightenment. Explore what can be salvaged, and look at threats to open form from the storytelling notions of "plot" and "evil."
Closure	Avoidance of closure. Parse the concept of "unfinished," ask whether something can be made unfinished on purpose or only left that way, explore the simulated openness of very large or intricate writings, propose that the desire which people have to be done with things springs from a distaste for the messiness of life.
Totalizing	Seek local knowledge, avoid totalizing narratives. Encyclopedic aspirations are linked to the egotistic Romanticism which High Modernism was in reaction to, but which it accepted nevertheless. One difficulty here is that to attack individualism seems to deprive expertise.
Transcendental	Seek relativity. If all patterns are local (characterized as thick spots in the Tao), claims to objectivity are unwarranted. High Modernism followed two paths in the attempt to avoid the consequences of radical relativism. The heirs of James and Faulkner on the path of multiple truths ended by aestheticizing experience, while the minimalists (heirs of Hemingway and Beckett) simply abandoned ambitious speech for trivialities.
Certainty	Radical uncertainty, by introducing an arbitrariness which is fatal to patterning, undercuts drama and is thus fatal to storytelling. Is a locally patterned interconnected group of events anything but an arbitrary construction?

(3) Complexity

3.1 The mind cannot understand the mind. Complex systems cannot be proved to be self-consistent from within that system. (Gödel) Given the fact that there is no means of viewing the system in which one is embedded from outside (transcendence, elements 1 and 2) the possibility of a total view is precluded.

3.2 Each element of the system is ignorant of the system as a whole. Knowledge is solipsistic and embedded.

3.3 The illusion of a totalizing transcendence is the product of the mind's attempt to understand itself.



(4) Recursion

4.1 Complex systems are non-linear and self-organizing. There is an inevitable disparity between action and result.

4.2 The state of the system is at any time determined by the interaction between history, the current state, the system environment. Any action or perception, or change in



the environment, affects its history and results in a change in the state of the system. This is recursive feedback.

(5) Affect (experience)

5.1 Modes of patterning of experience give rise to the actual, unique, emergent experience at hand

5.2 Unformatted perceptions give rise to the feeling of wholeness. This feeling may be interpreted as an awareness of the Tao.

5.3 The distinction between action and expectation gives rise to the feeling of freedom from intent and purpose. This is the nothingness from which existential freedom springs.

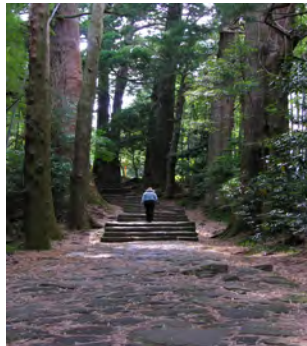
If one does not count on the harvest while plowing,
nor on the use of the ground while clearing it,
then it furthers one to undertake something.

L'art pour l'art.

Art is not *for* anything.

It merely *is*.

The same could be said of ourselves.





This schema follows that of an article by William J Coburn, "A World of Systems: The Role of Systematic Patterns of Experience in the Therapeutic Process" *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 21:656:677 (2002)



IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARTISTS BOOK

In the tradition in which I work, intermediate between fine printing and the constructed book,³ the central problem is to integrate the textual and visual tracks in such a way as to give the tracks equal importance. Without equal standing, one track or the other is dispensable and is nothing but mere ornamentation; equality demands that each track be incomplete without the other. The recipient of the message⁴ cannot decode it alone. The discussion above, on systems, fields, and complexity suggests some strategies.

I. In an open form there is no invariant organizing principle. The consequences of this are several.. Without any fixed experience of oneself and the world, the mind's hunger for a means to understand the unfamiliar will cause it to construct a meaning from any sequence of experiences. In theory, one could couple any image and text. In reality, some couplings are too obscure to be useable to the book artist. The most successful couplings tap a pool of resonant pre-verbal

³ For a discussion of some traditions in artists books see my on the subject (note 1).

⁴ I use communications terminology so as to avoid involvement with the messy and suspect concept of 'meaning' elaborated in section two.

constructs, evoking an unformed response which the mind will speedily organize for itself. Form arises spontaneously from the Tao. What is resonant, unfortunately, is a personal matter (see the second section on the origin of knowledge) and inaccessible to the artist. Fortunately, as meaning is a property of family resemblance rather than discrete experiences, often a gesture toward some commonly held cultural construct (meme) will be sufficient.

Derrida tells us that meanings are constructed at the nexus of two experiences; when these are not the same we are provoked to seek an explanation. This nexus he called *différance*. A complex experience produces a complex *différance* which cannot be understood without deconstructing it into its component parts. Unfortunately, this process of deconstruction is itself a complex *différance* which can reach multiple and conflicting conclusions. The book artist can thus rely on family resemblance to suggest to the reader personally meaningful deconstructions



The accompanying caution to the artist is not to attempt to select a preferred interpretation of the conjunction of text and image. This is hard to do. The artist will have a *différance* of her own which will govern the selection of images. It is in selecting the sequence of images so as to enlarge the possible constructions where the art in the book artist's practice⁵ lies.

II To summarize: The concept of open form leads inevitably to questions about meaning: how is it that we get knowledge, and having gotten it, what do we do with it? The most useful idea here is that of local knowledge.⁶ The necessary attention paid to local knowledge arises from the construction of a society from within using (necessarily) the experiences of its members. In order to be understood, the society can only be interpreted within the frame of (local) experience. Such interpretations are genealogical (the metaphor used by Heidegger) because that is how the society arose, each successive construction derived from its ancestors and elaborated by its progeny. The final complication is Wittgenstein's legacy of *family resemblance*, that meaning is not a property of individual words – more broadly, experiences – but of the interrelations among a family of experiences framed to be similar. Working backward, we can see that the development of families is genealogical, that multiple genealogies are inevitable, and again we arrive at the conclusion that meaning can be understood only locally.

Here lies, for the artist who wishes to combine textual and visual tracks in the way described in the first section, the rationale for the injunction not to favor a particular interpretation of the elements juxtaposed: the result will be a frame which limits the interpretation of the work. The

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic Of Practice*, tr Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 1990)..

6 As taken from Clifford Geertz's work mentioned above.

difficulty, as we see here, is that the artist is herself so limited.

The solution is procedural. It requires that images spring from the pre-analytical part of the mind. Here we see the first glimmers of a zen-inflected art. And here we see also a criticism of such aesthetic standards as ‘unity of conception,’ for *to conceive* is to work in the very analytical, front-brain mode that we are trying to avoid. This is not to say that the sequence of juxtapositions (for we are working here with a book composed of pages which must necessarily be experienced as a sequence) does not have a meaning, but extracting that meaning resembles more the understanding of a koan than an analytical (critical) process.

A formal aesthetics of a book constructed in this way is not possible, and the artist is justified in rejecting any specious criticisms obtained from it.



III Complexity. One learns from zen practice that the mind cannot understand itself. In Western thought this statement is a recent insight derived primarily from mathematicians such as Gödel who were striving to prove the consistency of mathematics. But it applies to all complex systems. Open form is by definition a system of such complexity, for if it were self-consistent it would be closed. Local knowledge tells us that in a complex system each element is ignorant of the whole system. From this point it is easy to conclude that



knowledge is embedded – that is, determined by its context, and that context is solipsistic.

This chain of thought lends additional weight to the injunction against the artist's attempt to understand her own work. But it has an additional consequence, which is the necessity of the visual track, the non-analytical component, to the whole work. The full experience of the analytical text requires the pre-analytical visual. Only the juxtaposition of these two can create the whole work. The presence of the visual track and its equal standing with the textual constrains a too-critical interpretation of the text: it encourages polysemous reading. The presence of the textual track in equal standing with the visual encourages the reader's search for a means to explain the felt urgency which is a product of the juxtaposition of the two but does not exist wholly in either.

This brings to the surface a practical problem: how is the interpenetration of text and visual to be achieved. *Mere* juxtaposition is weak because it suggests to the reader that the visual element is a subordinate illustration. This is the situation created by the *livre d'artiste* and rejected in *Now*

the Artists Book Now. A physical interpenetration which is truly insubordinate will result in a partially illegible text, one which is not *lisible*. Roland Barthes's contrast of this property with *scriptible* characterized 'readability'⁷ as a quality which does not challenge the reader, where as 'writerly' explodes literary codes and allows the reader to break out of her subject position. Equal standing requires a balance or negotiation between the two antagonists and the book will be neither one nor the other. This is a Kierkegaardian problem not solveable by reason.



The artist must know that his book will not be bedside reading. It will not encourage coffee-table browsing. Serious engagement will be required, and readers who are not prepared to engage with the work cannot be placated.

How to actually achieve such a negotiation is a technical problem. Shaped text which conforms itself to the blank areas of the visual is one solution. Separating the text and the visual onto overlays is another. Combining the overlays in PhotoShop so that one or the other recedes or comes forward in different areas of the page is a third. Repeating the page in a sequence which moves from the dominance of the visual to that of the textual, or vice versa, is

⁷ In *Le Plaisir du Texte* and later in *S/Z* (1975).

yet another. Sanctioning a text-only crib may be acceptable in some cases and not others; generally, long texts challenge the reader's engagement and the availability of a crib may relieve the challenge.



I predict that there are no perfect (closed) solutions to this problem, and that the search will be both necessary and unsuccessful. But artists are prepared for that.

IV Recursion. Complex systems are self-organizing, meaning in our case, as I have said, people will create meaning out of simple juxtaposition. The non-linear element in complex systems means that the consequences of this self-organizing behavior will not be proportional to anything like the “weight” of the organizational action. This is a familiar phenomenon in everyday life, when, for

example, a small experience, perception, decision, has surprising consequences, sometimes overturning all of our previous ideas concerning something or other perhaps only tangentially connected to the trigger event.

From my remarks on frames I conclude that events are not experienced directly, but constructed out of raw perceptions. Indeed, it is thought that, as the neural connections between our sensory organs and the brain have a bandwidth sufficient only to carry a tiny fraction of what we think we encounter, the fine grain of our experiences is actually supplied from memory.

Events will for us be formed, then, by an interaction among personal history, our own state at the time, and the state of the (local) system environment. Moreover, every event brings new information which will add to our history and modify our state, which may in turn have an effect on the system environment. When our already complex experience becomes recursive it is hardly surprising that the outcome of events is unpredictable.

This only marks what every artist knows already, that his best efforts to bring structure, color, line and so forth to bear on some central intent may or may not succeed and that success is not always due to analysis or adherence to rules but something much smaller, adventitious, even inadvertant. This will happen in any case, but the artist who divests himself of *intent* will be more present in the world, more



able to see. Here begins the solution to the koan of *qi*.

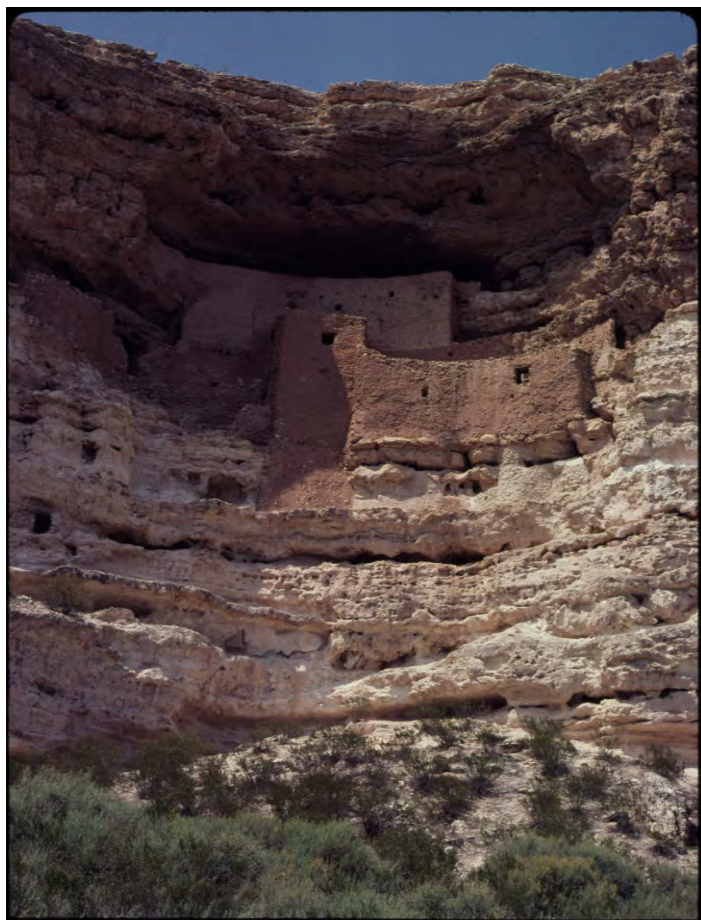
An undue effort to erase the mark of the maker, those little tremors of the hand which introduce imperfections and destroy the integrity of the work. There is a certain bravado in



the magic imitation of machine perfection, and it is true that collectors will often reject 'defective' artifacts. We should remember the Japanese respect for the lumpy tea bowl. One does not capture *qi* by perfect execution.

Once captured, qi is not tamed. It evaporates when given thought or voice. The mark of the maker has nothing to do with anyone's views on how a thing ought to be done and is unavailable to criticism. It is not a carrier of meaning. It, like are, simply *is*.

This does not mean I am advocating indiscipline, that we need pay no attention to craftsmanship or to the disputed standard of how a thing ought to be done. One does not become enlightened by sitting still, nor learn to play the



violin by listening. We all know that the enormous difference between competent work and the best exists in very tiny refinements which only practice and many competent failures can produce. What should I do if I meet the Buddha? the student asks, and the master replies “Kill him!” The path to qi does not pass through the scriptures.

V Affect. Unformatted experience is the origin of the feeling of wholeness which is the Tao. We act, and the result is never what we expect; this is the origin of existential freedom. A freedom which throws off the yoke of past and future, which are only excuses to escape the responsibility of our own choices. I repeat that art is not for anything. It simply *is*.

The origin of great art is in simple experiences. The path from simple experience to great art is unknown.



Now where have we gotten?

The zen experience of myself is as a thick spot in the Tao, a temporary glop of experience. We do not have this experience of others, who are beings, because we do not know their experiences. They can tell us about

their experiences but that's all. We presume that other people have them. Rocks don't. Trees may. Animals probably do. These all are beings. Only one's self is not.

What holds this glop together? Tapioca.

Or, qi. Some experiences with family resemblances which we experience as memories but are in fact the same as that memory which supplies most of our experience in the first place, on the basis of sensory hints from outside. It is the task of zen to dissolve the tapioca and let us feel the release of becoming a pudding.

The task of the novelist is not to create beings (characters) but a nothing. Being is a property of other people. Only the absence of being can recreate our own experience of ourselves. Likewise, a novel consists of a surrogate of ourselves amidst a crowd of beings. This is a nauseating condition in real life but tolerable in novels.

To capture the qi of a being – a rock, a tree, another person – is to create a thing which appears to possess its own qi, hypothetically possesses, and to then persuade us that this manufactured being is a simulacrum of something we experience as not ourselves. Something *out there*. We accede to this because we like the experience and we admire the skill of the artist.

Art such as mine claims not to make simulacra but to create qi itself – a new glop of tapioca which actually *is* yourself. That is, you experience the artwork serially as a family of experiences which you are obliged to integrate just as you would any other experience. A *self* portrait, by contrast, attempts to reproduce the experience of others toward yourself as a being. The idea is to create a simulacrum of yourself as a being with qi and then *hide* the qi.

It is, actually, hubris to claim that I am the one who creates the qi. What I do is to make something like a live-animal trap or a Potemkin village. You are invited in. Once inside, the truth of your situation becomes clear and

you are obliged to make sense of it. You do this all the time in the ordinary world. By making sense of it, it becomes part of the world. *You* create the qi. No one captures qi. It is your own, and it was always there, a birthright.

I make artists books. To ask me what they are about, or what they mean, or what I intend them to mean, or why I made them, is futile. You have missed the qi, just as the traveller failed to notice Joshu's stone bridge.

To solve this koan is to make a book in the spirit of Zen.

