

The Book as a Metaphoric Medium

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Abstract

My practice of art making begins with the perception of my surroundings. Through my installations and bookworks, I seek to draw attention to the quotidian moments in life and to illuminate the emotions associated with those moments.

Through the meditative and tactile process of working with paper pulp, I explore a spiritual connection with materials. Many traces of my hands on the finished work call attention to the process of making, both my touch and the slowness of forming the objects.

I investigate the book as a medium, focusing on its metaphoric potential. My research, influenced by the sculptural books and installations of Buzz Spector and Ann Hamilton, focuses on the qualities that the book possesses, both its physical and metaphysical nature.

Introduction

Through my books and installations, I want to suggest the metaphysical qualities of the quotidian moments in life, by illuminating the emotion associated with them. The sudden disappearance of shadows stirs ambiguous feelings of loss, the smell of laundry evokes the sense of home, and the light through dust on a window inspires the warm sense of touch. My working process begins with a perception of my surroundings. What I perceive in my everyday life becomes an important motif for my work. Through the meditative process of papermaking, I explore a spiritual connection to the materials, which evokes for the viewers their own metaphysical associations. I develop books and installations that draw people's attention to the tactility of the paper, suggesting the sense of touch and the beauty of slowing down. My work calls attention to things normally not considered and gives them a presence.

Although I create books and installation works, the abstract painter Agnes Martin has significantly influenced my practice of art making. Briony Fer maintains that Martin was always concerning with "something that took vision beyond itself as well as beyond the literal" (Fer 185). Her work does not convey any political or social concern, but rather reflects her "wordless and silent experience," which offers an "ineffable" sense to the viewers (Rifkin 25). Such a concern echoes my own.

There is an evidence of soft human touch in Martin's paintings and drawings, though her work looks minimal and simple from a distance. "*Untitled#2*" (Fig. 1), says Stonyer, "needs to be looked at 'slowly' so that one can see how the thin graphite lines, that appear at first sight to be even, are the result of an almost infinite variety of uneven gradations of graphite. Through the varied pressure of the hand, at one time they become dense, at another almost transparent and

sometimes even broken” (Stonyer). Her work consists of repetitive hand drawn lines and the color palette is neutral and silent. Her aesthetic and meditative working process resonates with my work. I want to infuse the evidence of the human hand into my books and installation works, like Martin, whose painting reveals subtle layers of human touch. My work often begins with a piece I can hold in my hands. Then I move on to create more, the whole work eventually consisting of many modular pieces. Working itself is a meditative process for me and I hope my sense of the contemplative is communicated to viewers. Most of my works have neutral hues, so that viewers can be provided with more quiet time to contemplate.

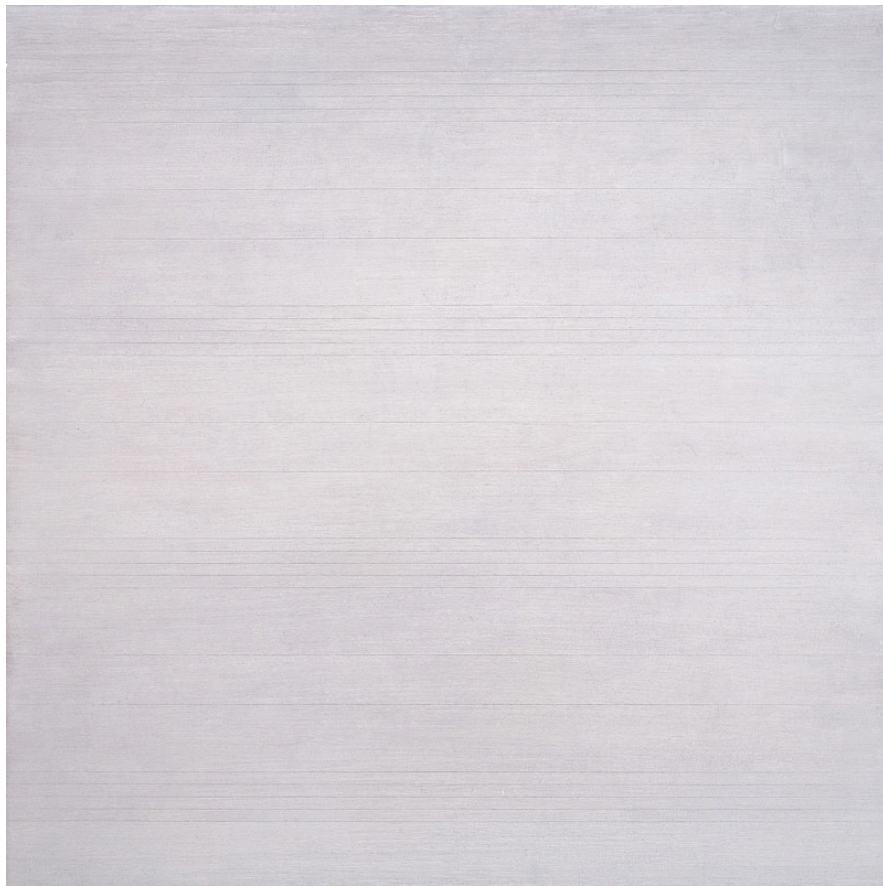


Fig. 1 Agnes Martin, *Untitled #2*, 1977; India ink, graphite, and gesso on canvas; 72 x 72 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Barry Lowen Collection.

In spite of my spiritual and expressive working process, I am often influenced by conceptual artists. The contemporary book artist Buzz Spector and Ann Hamilton, a conceptual artist who often deconstructs books, are important artists for me. I will discuss my thesis work, which consist of three different artist's books - *Reading Library*, *White Silence*, and *Street Shadows* - and explore how they resonate with the work of these artists.

1. *Reading Library*

1.1 The process of reading a book

Through *Reading Library*, I explore how we perceive the process of reading. I have been fascinated by my experience of how the book, a highly tactile and interactive medium, suddenly loses its physicality, once I start to read and internalize its story.

We cannot read a book by just looking at it. We touch the book cover first, hold its body, put it over our laps sometimes, open the pages, look at the letters, turn the pages, hear the turning sounds, even smell it. When we begin to absorb the narrative, however, its physicality recedes and our focus now is on the immaterial. In the essay “When a Book is Not a Book,” Thomas A. Vogler mentions Georges Poulet’s description of the experience of the “phenomenological disappearance of the book” at the moment we engage the text. He defines this nature of the book as “no longer a material reality” (Vogler 461). What remains is the metaphysical, which can be an emotion, idea or knowledge. Although we do not label or categorize each idea from the book in our mind, we may already internalize its intangible contents as part of our spirit.

I am drawn to the paradoxical qualities a book possesses, the physical and metaphysical, and try to find the most sensory way of conveying this idea. My concern is how to represent the transformation of this highly physical object into its spiritual meaning. I first tried to eliminate the physicality of my material – a book – by cutting, sanding, and gluing its pages. Although what I was trying was deconstructing books literally, I wanted to infuse the book objects with abstract, suggestive elements beyond the literal. I ended up tearing the whole text block into small pieces in approximately 1 x 1 inch size and grinding them with water using a kitchen blender. They eventually became paper pulp that I could compress into small pieces of condensed and irregular forms. (Fig.2) I worked with a small unit, allowing a tactile intimacy with the materials, and each

time repeated that process. The only additional material, water, evaporated over time and the pieces became solid forms that unexpectedly looked like stones.



Fig. 2 Kunyong Chang, *Ineffable* (detail), 2012.

The process of transforming books was a metaphor for my reading process. It was not only a meditative process but also an experience connecting me to the author. The process of distilling the book is a metaphor for my actual reading process. However, the output, books/stones, did not convey the metaphysical being that I wanted to present. Rather, the absence of its original form ironically intensified its physicality. I thought I needed another step to transform them into spiritual objects.



Fig. 3 Kunyoung Chang, Wishing stone piles in Boriam Buddhist Temple, Namhae island, South Korea, 2011.

I then was reminded of the piles of wishing stones,(Fig. 3) common not only in my own country, South Korea, but also around the world. It was not only because the books/stones seem like stones, but also because the ritual itself is a transformational process moving towards the spiritual. By the human act of stacking, a common object – a stone – becomes a metaphysical being. One tries not to take apart someone else's pile of stones, because each pile is considered a symbol of his/her spirit. I think this piling-up action can correspond to the physical action of reading. And the pile of stones, one's spiritual symbol in the ritual, can also suggest a metaphor for one's spiritual state formed through reading books. If the distilled books are touched and piled up by the viewer in the exhibition space, as if they were wishing stones, the pile of books takes on that metaphor. The book can be seen as a metaphor for the physical object first, and the spiritual object later.



Fig. 4 Kunyong Chang, *Ineffable*, 2012; 7 found books. installation view.

I created an interactive installation, *Ineffable* (Fig. 4), with the books/stones from seven found books. I left a sign “Please feel free to handle and stack” on the side, but I removed the sign after a couple of days. Most viewers from American culture had no knowledge of the ritual and considered my work just as a game. The critical problems I realized from the show included the pedestal installation, unclear title and instruction. The piece was more about “my reading as meditation” in terms of my working process, than an exploration of the experience of reading a book.

1.2 Book as material

Since I used only a part of books, book pages, as material for *Ineffable*, the units were closer to arbitrary textual material than books conceptually. In addition, the notion that one book could be

transformed into a random number of stones often confused viewers. Some of the viewers who knew that I am not a native English speaker even talked about the fragments of letters suggesting a broken language or language barrier.

I needed to adjust the degree of distillation to create the reference of “book.” For *Reading Library*, I decided to make just one book/stone out of each book rather than making the random number of books/stones per original book. I transformed a whole book, including its cover, spine, and thread into a book/stone. The original book remains, although the literal book form, such as a cover, spine, and text, is only hinted at in the fragments of letters and colors. When we experience the absence of something, we tend to recall it intuitively. The loss of its original physical form ironically intensifies its physicality when the audience interacts with the altered forms.



Fig. 5 Buzz Spector, *Library of Paracelsus*, 1984; wood, stones, collaged book pages; 11 x 62 x 13 in. Collection of Howard and Donna Stone, Highland Park, Illinois.

Book artist Buzz Spector installed *Library of Paracelsus* (Fig. 5) applying books as “raw material” (Vogler 462). The installation consists of two-story bookshelves with books on the upper shelf and stones on the lower one. Spector removed each book’s identity by partially tearing out pages. According to Neal Benezra, this installation work implies that “stone, the most valuable to

the Alchemist Paracelsus, might yield an object of greater value and power in the form of a book.” (Benezra) Spector emphasizes the value of a book through the metaphoric use of books and stones. What fascinated me was how he processed the books as material. I focused on his removal of each book’s identity. By doing so, the work was able to present the book in the space in a general sense without any interruption caused by the specific texts or titles of the books. The torn book pages intrigue the viewers, reminding them of their sense of touch, recalling the turning of pages when they read.



Fig. 6 Ann Hamilton, *Lineament*, 1994; plywood walls, suspended seat and table, film projector light, seated figure lifting and winding cut text in continuous line from a prepared book. Ruth Bloom Gallery, California.

Ann Hamilton is another artist who often uses a book as a material. For *Lineament* (Fig. 6), according to Joan Simon, “an attendant sat on a suspended plywood swing at the similarly suspended plywood table, pulling continuous lines of texts from books that had been pre-cut and wrapping the lengths of text into balls. She then pushed them through a screen before her, so that the balls rested on the table like the ‘planets’ of the Wallace Stevens’s poem *The Planet on the Table*, from which the installation derived its title.” (Simon 123) The sculptural form that the cut pages take reflects the content of the poem. However, Hamilton does not specify the name of the cut books. Viewers can assume that she uses the book as generic material and the content of each book is not critical.

My altered books in *Reading Library* are generic objects as well, since I wanted to reveal the reference of book, rather than focusing on specific contents of books. What matters to me is showing the reference of the book, rather than the specific contents of each book. Although I am interested in Spector and Hamilton’s use of the book as material for metaphors, their reliance on the book as book is still too literal for me. Similar to Martin’s, my visual language is less direct, so that I can share my experience through the actual perception of my work. I printed a bibliography of the 512 books I altered to accompany the installation, giving the context of the “library” and identifying the stones as books. Although the list documents specific titles, authors, publishers, and years, it does not specify which book matches which stone, in order to dilute their identities. The variety of the books from academic textbooks to fashion magazines, suggests the randomness of the collection.

1.3 Metaphoric Transformation

Similar to the subject matter of *Reading Library*, Hamilton investigates, again according to Simon, “reading as absorption” through another work, *Tropos* (Fig. 7). In a room with a floor covered with horsehair, an attendant burnt lines of text with an hand held electric burner, causing the air to fill with smoke, while reading each line of text silently. The smoke is the transformation of the text, from printed word to smoke, reabsorbed as smell by the horsehair of the floor covering; thus word is again materialized (Simon 113). Without identifying the content and title of each



Fig. 7 Ann Hamilton, *Tropos*, 1993-1994; translucent industrial glass windows, gravel topped with concrete, horsehair, table, chair, electric burner, books, recorded voice, audiotape, audiotape player, speakers. Dia Center for the Arts New York, NY.

book, the viewer could observe the act of reading as opposed to the particular text. Although the physical text ends up being materialized again on the horsehair, the metaphoric transformation in *Tropos* resonates with the one in my *Reading Library*. In *Reading Library*, the altered books – books/stones – transform again, into a metaphor for the metaphysical by the viewer's act of stacking. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8 Kunyong Chang, *Reading Library*, 2013; installation of 512 found books. Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photo by Elena Bouvier.

Buzz Spector's *Library of Babel* (Fig. 9) is another example of using a book as a metaphoric object. The installation consists of books piled without showing each title by turning the spine side towards the back. Babel recalls an attempt to build a tower toward heaven that failed because of the

variation in human language created by God. Today, the traditional purpose of the book as a conveyor of culture and knowledge is threatened by electronic media. “Rather than focusing on a nostalgic sense,” writes Benezra, “Spector renders the book’s text anonymous and its information unobtainable ironically, by which the book transforms from an object of communication into an object of imagination.” (Benezra)



Fig. 9 Buzz Spector, *Library of Babel*, 1988; installation of 2,000 found books, Art Institute of Chicago.

A difference between my metaphor and these two artists' is that it is the viewer's participation that enables the movement to metaphoric meaning. Spector, the artist, is the subject who suggests the new perspective to the viewer in *Library of Babel* and an attendant performed the transformation of books in front of the viewer in *Tropos*. In contrast, *Reading Library* invites the viewer to be the agent of the transformation. I believe the viewer's physical interaction with the books is essential to creating the context of reading in my bookwork.

Reading a book is a private process. However, unlike a letter for a certain person or a face-to-face conversation, most books are meant to be published for the public. What the reader is doing, then, is translating the words on the pages into his or her own private, imaginary lexicon, according to his or her interests and needs and levels of comprehension (Cunningham). Each viewer of *Reading Library* will build a unique pile of books/stones reflecting something unique about each person's being. Experiencing the work may inspire people in different ways be it meditational, playful, patient, contemplative or even competitive, suggesting that reading the same book can create different experiences depending on the readers.

Betty Bright sees sculptural books as both the emotions and the intellect (Bright 244). Bright argues that sculptural bookworks remind viewers of what we need and what we lose with and without books. *Reading Library* seeks to remind the viewers about the physical and metaphysical relationship of the reader and the book.

2. *White Silence*

2.1 Perception of time

When I was in Norway last summer I experienced a night that never got dark. During one night in the Fiords, I suddenly became aware that the sky was still bright and an unusual sensory experience replaced the typical sentiment of night, with its reassuring ordering of time. I kept looking outside the window of my small cottage. (Fig. 10) The white snow on top of the mountains looked as if the sky were melting, erasing all noise. The silent universe gave me the surreal feeling of another world beyond time. Darkness never came that night and I came back to reality the next morning. It was a totally ineffable experience.



Fig. 10 Kunyong Chang, White night in Geiranger, Norway, 2012.

White Silence is an irregular shaped sculptural book, consisting of almost blank pages. It suggests the surreal passage of that white summer night through the sequence of expressive traces of pulp on the handmade paper. The material quality of a book medium objectifies time as a tactile object, while the turnable pages of book enable the reader to experience that encapsulated time. To translate this spiritual and silent subject matter, I limited the text to a minimum, narrative is mainly created by a sequence of different textures and weights of pages. (Fig. 11) Pages, including the cover, are white and each line of the text, a short poem (below), is printed blind on the front pages of the book, a letterpress printing that leaves embossed marks of letters without ink. The following pages after the last page with the word, erasing, are blank without any text.

white summer night
white sky
melting over the snow
erasing



Fig. 11 Kunyong Chang, *White Silence* (detail), 2013.

2.2. Silence in a book form

Buzz Spector's *Silence: a synopsis* (Fig. 12), says Vogler, has "no text with nothing left to say." (Vogler 462) The book reminds a reader of John Cage's silent music, *4'33"*, suggesting that music, too, is a noise. The book is, in fact, "an homage to John Cage in the form of an altered copy of silence." (Vogler 463) Although *White Silence* draws its inspiration from my own perception of the world, my use of blank pages resonates with Spector's in terms of reminding the reader of silent moments. In addition, the emptiness of the blank pages leads the reader to search for something else on the page. While involved in the moments of searching, the reader experiences the expressive but delicate texture made from hand papermaking with New Zealand flax and cotton fiber. The pages get thinner towards the end and the book ends in a silence.



Fig. 12 Buzz Spector, *Silence: a synopsis*, 1992; Blank book with black case binding. Title printed on white on front and spine. Signed and numbered on first page. Frosted glass casting of human tongue accompanies book and is meant to be displayed with it; 21 x 29 x 3 cm. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Libraries.Kohler Art Library.

White Silence has an organic shape instead of a conventional rectangular codex book form. In addition to being inspired by the scene that looked as if the sky were melting over the snow on the mountains, I wanted to express a sense of the surreal. I thought of the melting watch in Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). I transformed each page shape into an organic

form by a meditative tearing process with a needle and water brush. I made a crease line with a needle on each handmade paper drawing the shape I wanted for each page. I then drew another line with a water brush along the crease line. After I tore the paper along the wet crease line, I moved to the next page and repeated the process with the needle drawing. As I moved on, each drawing became larger than the previous one, from the top cover to the end page, so that the pile of torn pages suggests a melting process. The pages then were bound with a hidden application of glue. The pages can be turned but the book is simultaneously sculptural. My treatment of paper including the binding method, enabled the book to evoke a sensual and surreal quality beyond the literal book form. The irregular shape, minimum text, soft torn edges, and the increasing size and decreasing weight of the pages express how I perceived the passage of the night. (Fig. 13)



Fig. 13 Kunyong Chang, *White Silence*, 2013; handmade New Zealand flax and cotton paper, blind print; 8 x 6 x 1 in.

Although the book is to be handled and read, I hope *White Silence* is also seen as an expressive sculptural work. Johanna Drucker points out that “even in its most conventional format, the book is a sculptural object because of its spatial dimensions, material qualities and a complex structure.” (Vogler 457) In contrast to the metaphoric transformation of the physical to the spiritual in *Reading Library*, *White Silence* turns the metaphysical, time, into the physical through its “material quality.”

3. *Street Shadows*

3.1 Unsettled beauty of shadow

Living far away from where I was born and raised, I have often associated emotionally with shadows cast on the street. Their unsettled beauty reminds me of memories which constantly shift over time. To explore the ephemeral quality of memory, I started to collect the shadows in my surroundings by documenting them in my journal or photographing them. The idea of collection was borrowed from the scientific method of insect collection. Using insect pins, I anchored handmade paper shadow pieces inside a box with tags indicating the time and place I found them.

In my first *Work in Progress* show (2012), I installed two 30x30 inch shadow collection frames on the wall. The shadow paper was handmade with abaca and cotton fiber, which were also hand dyed with black pigments. While I pulled the paper out of pulp, I used a stencil on top of the mould screen where I could manipulate the flow of pulp to create the shapes I wanted. The dark colored handmade paper had subtly vibrating edges and unique textures. I also named each shadow and provided the information about the place and time each were found on the legends next to the frames. Each shadow piece, anchored with pins, cast another shadow on the surface of the frame. One of the problems with the work was caused by text that I was supplying. Observing viewers in the gallery, I realized the informational legends distracted them from appreciating the work itself.

Over time, I became aware that my memories were getting even blurrier. I began to forget when and where I found some of the shadow shapes. Reminding myself of the information about place and time was useless, because the important element was the ephemeral quality itself. I decided to create a gradation by a varied grayscale color range. The decolorized shadows were meant to depict the elusive nature of memories, although they were frozen in time. In the *Work in*

Progress show the next semester, I installed *Evaporation* (Fig. 14) by pinning the shadows in a gradational order directly onto a pedestal. Without the frame and legends, the shadows seemed



Fig. 14 Kunyong Chang, *Evaporation*, 2012; found shadows, handmade abaca and cotton paper, hand dyed, pins; installation view detail. Photo by Sean Whener.

more ephemeral and were able to stand by themselves. The most crucial realization was that the decolorized, white pieces of handmade paper cast shadows with more visual presence than the physical forms themselves, suggesting the elusive nature of memory, which was the essential idea I would develop in the next stage.

3.2 Additional layer of meaning

Meanwhile, I began to explore the qualities a book can possess. While I was working on *Reading Library*, I was pursuing the idea of the book beyond its being a physical container of knowledge. One day, I suddenly came to think of the word, container. The reason that a book is often thought of as a container, although the general shape of a book does not look like a container, was related to its structure, its needing to be opened and closed. I was motivated to use the simple open/close book structure to capture shadows, exaggerating the meaning of a container. I selected a small number of white shadows among my collection and laid them with pins in a 12x8x2.5 inch



Fig. 15 Kunyong Chang, *Street Shadows*, 2013; found shadows, handmade New Zealand flax and cotton paper with pins in handmade box; 12 x 8 x 2.25 in.

clamshell box. (Fig. 15) The individual shadow piece casts the shadow on the bottom of the box, only when the book is open. The small scale of the collection also intensifies the idea of “collection” and the work provides a more intimate experience to the viewer than an installation would.

Street Shadows needs the reader to open and close it to convey my idea of ephemeral nature of memory. When the book is closed, memory falls beneath our consciousness. When the book is opened, the memory projects a different shadow. Beyond the context of collection, the work creates further layers of meaning by the simple book structure.

Conclusion

My work begins with my subjective association with the found elements in my surroundings. In exploring the book medium, however, I develop my idea conceptually. *Reading Library* features the physical and metaphysical quality of a book by using the wishing stone pile-up ritual as a metaphoric motif. The book *White Silence* utilizes the material quality of the book medium in my translation of the metaphysical subject, time. *Street Shadows* presents the ephemeral nature of memory through the simple structure of book, both opened and closed. The medium of the book enables me to express my idea both emotionally and intellectually. I intend to keep exploring the artistic potential of the book, the artist's book, as a fine art piece.

Both the Sense of touch and the viewer's participation in my work are vital elements in my art making: *Reading Library*, created by a tactile working process, invites the viewer to touch and stack the altered books; *White Silence* narrates its story mainly through the texture and weight of handmade pages; and *Street Shadows* is my tactile poem evoking in the viewer the sense of touch. Just as the book is an ideal medium for developing my ideas, handmade paper is the most suitable material for my books.

I pursue conceptual bookwork through the craft-based working process, papermaking. The craft-based process does not mean I seek a technically perfect artwork. Rather, I use my craftsmanship and the trace of human touch as a tool for my ideas. The trace of the human hand reminds the viewer of touch and the importance of slowness, and most of my works are meant to be handled by the viewer. I hope the viewer can be intimately connected with my work through its rich tactility, experiencing the spirituality embedded within.

List of Images

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The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Barry Lowen Collection.

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