Buzz Spector
The Library of Babel and Other Works

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In 1983 Buzz Spector poured plaster over an upright book. Although the title History of Europe (cover) remains legible on the spine, the book and its contents are forever sealed shut. For Spector, who had been subtly altering and transforming printed texts since 1980, this rhetorical sculpture suggested a radically new direction in his work. A well-read and well-published art critic and editor as well as an artist, Spector now announced his ambitions as a sculptor. Through the ironic and self-conscious act of embalming a book—simultaneously paying homage to the book while denying its function—Spector framed the terms of an ongoing debate between his literary and visual interests which continues to characterize his work.

This balance between the literary and the visual can be traced to Spector’s earliest efforts as an artist. Initially, his work with books evolved as a writer, editor, designer, and publisher. While an art major at Southern Illinois University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Spector wrote poetry and published a student opinion journal that he transformed into an arts and literature magazine. Following graduation, he worked as a book designer during the mid-1970s. While producing literature textbooks for high-school students, Spector imaginatively incorporated reproductions of works by important modern artists into the text, thereby enhancing its suggestiveness. His notion of the book as a vehicle for artists as well as writers evolved still further when in 1974-75 he designed an issue of Northwestern University’s arts journal TriQuarterly. Guest-edited by art critic John Perreault, the issue was devoted to conceptual art, and in designing it Spector gained first-hand knowledge of the work of Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner, all of whom have taken words and ideas as the content of their art.1

In the fall of 1976, Spector entered the graduate program in art at the University of Chicago. Influenced by his instructors Vera Klement, Thomas Mapp, and Robert C. Peters, Spector developed a body of graphic work in which he incorporated shards of paper, first as templates for his drawn lines, and later as relief elements that cast shadows on the sheet. During this time, Spector, still guided by a strong literary impulse, began to publish exhibition reviews, and in 1977 he founded WhiteWalls, a publication devoted to writings by artists.

The five-year period following the award of his M.F.A. degree in 1978 proved crucial to Spector. His graphic work continued to evolve; in addition to his drawings, Spector began to apply torn paper to postcards, enhancing the breadth of reference and adding a refined formal sensibility to his work. And, befitting his literary interests, Spector began to work with published texts for the first time, carefully tearing the printed pages and thereby creating abstract and purposely illegible formal patterns.

In 1981, Spector created his first “altered book.” The title of that work, Evolution of a Life, is borrowed from the spine of an existing book, the drawings of which Spector tore successively so that, when open, the book assumes the form of a wedge (fig. 1). Although the book remains open, the pages are not to be turned, nor are the words to be read. Through Spector’s alteration of the existing found object, the book is transformed from a traditional medium of communication into a poetic object, and the open cover and incomprehensible text refer with seeming wistfulness to a more literate age.

This first altered book was of great consequence for the artist. With the relative success of his critical and publishing efforts, Spector had become torn between his literary and his aesthetic endeavors. The private problem was exacerbated by the public perception of him as a critic first and an artist second. With Evolution of a Life, Spector recognized a turning point in his work, one which allowed him to integrate the previously disparate elements of his creative life. In order to concentrate completely on art and to explore the medium of the book more extensively, in 1981 Spector decided to abandon critical writing, a resolution he followed for five years.

The tradition of modern artists working with books is a long and esteemed one.2 In the early nineteenth century, the English artist and poet William Blake authored, illustrated, and published his own texts. Later in the century, the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé enhanced the visual character of his poem A Throw of the Dice Will Never Eliminate Chance through the innovative use of typography. In this century, artists of strong literary orientation—particularly those associated with or influenced by Surrealism, among them Joseph Cornell—have treated the book as an evocative sculptural object, to be read symbolically but not literally.

Although Spector recognized a heritage in this tradition, he found a more immediate and compelling model in the work of the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976). Initially a poet, Broodthaers sought the means to a more concrete expression of his words. He dis-

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covered just that in his first sculpture, *Pense Bête* (1964), in which he encased in plaster what proved to be his last volume of poetry. In so doing, Broodthaers distinguished between a book's contents and its exterior appearance, for one cannot read the book without literally destroying the sculpture. This attempt to render thought visible—an approach to art that derives ultimately from Marcel Duchamp—had a strong appeal for Spector. He patterned his own book covered with plaster, *History of Europe* (1983) on *Pense Bête*, and Broodthaers's example remains a model for Spector. Although he has continued to alter the pages of open books, in Spector's most ambitious recent works he has left the books closed. In this way the book serves as a ready-made object and its implications are extended beyond the traditional function as a vehicle for texts.

Following his discovery of Broodthaers and the making of *History of Europe*, Spector has employed books in a variety of ways. *Library of Paracelsus* (fig.2) consists of a pair of wooden shelves that bear eleven stones below and an equal number of wedge-shaped, coverless torn texts above. The title refers to an obscure sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist and the work itself suggests the alchemist's dream of transforming base materials. The implication is that, through the intercession of the artist, each stone might yield an object of greater value and power in the form of a book. Spector enriches the mystery of such speculation, both by selecting stones that bear visible fossils and by rendering each text generic through the act of page tearing. In the process, Spector, who is something of an amateur geologist, endows the stones with an allusiveness equal to that of the texts.

In other instances, Spector has deployed books and their covers for strictly formal purposes. *Constructed Fiction* (fig.3) consists of eight books that have been framed and placed under glass. This is done in order to disguise the identity of the books and to transform the grouping into a constructivist composition of red, white, and black. Spector searched diligently for book covers bearing these specific hues, and he subsequently painted a small wooden panel based on the composition he achieved with the books.

This formal approach to the book-as-object is characterized—and superseded—in *Double Readings* (fig.4), a complex installation mounted at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago in 1987. For this project, Spector borrowed some 4,500 used books and composed them in the form of a wedge-shaped stairway or ramp measuring five feet in height and width and sixteen feet in length. Surrounding the stairway were eight of Spector's own white-laminate bookcases covered with plexiglas; these contained every book in the artist's personal collection. Spector described the overall installation:

The stairway form was made up of books rescued—for the purposes of art—from library and used book discards. Headed for the junk heap, these books remain lost as texts, but gain a new identity as elements in a constructed form. My library, on the other hand, is preserved as a personal selection of texts, although rendered inaccessible by the intervention of the plexiglas.

The crucial element in *Double Readings* is the contrast between the anonymity of the books in the stairway and the highly personal character of those housed in the bookcases. Although sheltered behind plexiglas, the character of the books in the library—and, by extension, the mind of the artist—is revealed. On the other hand, the title-bearing spines of the books comprising the ramp face inward and only those constituting the rear facade of the sculpture are identifiable. In this, Spector's most ambitious work to date, the artist succeeds in bridging the gap between his parallel artistic (now clearly sculptural) and literary interests.

Although incomplete at the time of this writing, the principle work in this exhibition, *The Library of Babel*, is conceived as a large sculptural installation, similar in concept to the stairway in...
Double Readings. Spector’s reference to Babel recalls the Biblical account of an attempt to construct a tower to heaven, a vain endeavor that failed through a confusion of language. The Library of Babel is also the title of a story by Jorge Luis Borges. In this tale, Borges describes the universe as a vast library in which all forms of human knowledge are possessed, yet are paradoxically unavailable. As a symbol of failed communication, Babel is an extraordinary metaphor for Spector. As he is well aware, the traditional purpose of the book as a conveyer of culture is today under assault at the hands of the electronic media. Rather than focusing in a nostalgic or moralizing way on this situation, rather than conveying a sense of loss, Spector has created a body of work grounded in irony, rendering the book’s text anonymous and its information unobtainable. By transforming the book from an object of communication into an object of the imagination, he metaphorically encourages a “memory of reading,” a suggestiveness and an allusiveness that remains within the power of art.

NEAL BENEZRA
Curator, Department of Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture

NOTES
1. The issue designed by Spector was TriQuarterly 32 (Winter 1975).
2. “My altered books are all variations on a procedural theme: pages torn out in sequence — either from beginning to end in systematically decreasing portion, or outwards from the middle — leaving a cross section of the original text. The field of torn edges of pages reveals a residue of word fragments still taking the form of a standard page of text. This plane of randomized letter forms is suggestively readable, but in the end, incomprehensible.” Statement by the artist, courtesy Roy Boyd Gallery.

The author is indebted to Buzz Spector for time spent in conversation on December 23 and 27, 1987. The books employed in Double Readings (fig 4), and The Library of Babel are courtesy of Brandeis University Used Book Sale.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Library of Paracelsus, 1984
Wood, stones, collaged book pages
11 x 62 x 13 inches
Collection of Howard and Donna Stone, Highland Park, Illinois (fig 2)

Constructed Fiction, 1985
Framed books and acrylic on panel (two parts)
35 1/4 x 12 1/2, 14 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches
Courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago (fig 3)

Constructed Fiction 2, 1986
Framed books and acrylic on panel
30 x 18 inches
Collection of Michael Cotter, Winnetka, Illinois

Library of Paracelsus 2, 1987-88
Wood, stones, collaged book pages
36 x 62 x 13 inches
Collection of the artist

Philosopher’s Stone, 1987-88
Wooden mantelpiece, books, and ostrich egg
64 1/2 x 62 x 10 inches
Collection of the artist

Mallarmé, 1987-88
Wooden curio cabinet, shell, book, and gold leaf
56 x 26 x 14 1/2 inches
Collection of the artist

The Library of Babel, 1987-88
Installation of stacked books
variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1988
Field Gallery of Contemporary Art, Spertus Museum of Judaica, Chicago
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

1987
Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Ralphord Street Gallery, Chicago

1986
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

1985
Bookworks, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1984
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago and Los Angeles

1982
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

1981
Carol Shapiro Gallery, Saint Louis, Missouri

1979
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

1978
Midway Studios, University of Chicago

1975
The Art School, Carrboro, North Carolina

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1988

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


