

The Fruit of Knowledge: A 'Book' by Kelly Rankin

VIS403S Final Submission for George Hawken

To say that we read – the world, a book, the body – is not enough. The metaphor of reading solicits in turn another metaphor, demands to be explained in images that lie outside the reader's library and yet within the reader's body, so that the function of reading is associated with our other essential bodily functions.¹

~ Alberto Manguel

Project Overview

The initial proposal for this project included two rooms. The room presented here, the dining room, and a second room, a living room. However, as the project began to unfold it became clear that I would only be able to manage one room at a time, and I decided to set aside the 'living room' installation for later. I began to realize that each room would become a project unto itself, and quite possibly there were more projects, i.e., more rooms, to explore. I also recognize that these room installations are part of a larger project that will most likely culminate into a book project with each 'room' representing a chapter in the book.

The entire project is entitled, *The Fruit of Knowledge: A 'Book' by Kelly Rankin*, and is grounded in this quote about artist Anselm Kiefer. Michael Auping writes, "For Kiefer, books and architecture operate in parallel worlds; both are powerful containers that record the history of human aspirations."² In the case of this project, the architecture is a house. By exploring our daily activities as they are guided by the purposes of each room in a house, I hope to understand more about our everyday experiences.

By treating each room as a chapter to be read, I am creating containers that explore the architecture of meaning, and challenge our assumptions of a permanent and fixed reality. Each project will explore meaning by dismantling typical views of the world in order to look for, and expose, other possibilities.

Chapter One: "The Feast"

The project I present here *Chapter One: The Feast*, is the first installation of the larger project described above. It evokes the history of writing through the use of clay, Sumerian language, cuneiform writing, printed books and digital media. *The Feast* is a visual

¹ Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*. (Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 1996), 170.

² Anselm Kiefer, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth/organized by Michael Auping*. (Fort Worth, Tex.: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in association with Prestel, 2005), 40.

exploration of the birth of concepts and the mechanics of writing. From the first mark made in clay tablets, to the emails we send today, each mark gives rise to meaning, and is a sign or symbol of an intention. The word *character*, derived from the Greek *kharaktēr*, means, “instrument for marking, impress, distinctive nature.”³ *Character* is both the mark, and the thing that makes the mark. In other words, it is the writing, and what is left behind to be read, all at once. Thus, a concept is born at the instance of a mark. It emerges as a manifestation of a thought and is instantly made public by its appearance as a sign or symbol in clay, on paper, or whatever medium the writer chooses. Once the first mark appears, meaning begins to gather and assembles ‘things’ into coherent, cognitive objects. The mark then becomes something recognizable, and as such, classifiable.

The Feast features a table set for four, laden with food and other objects commonly associated with a feast. However, the food in this case is made mostly from clay and does not typically represent what we think of as food. At each of the four place settings there are the usual items, plates, cutlery, goblets, and a menu. All of the clay objects have their own identity as represented by the Sumerian signs and symbols carved into their surfaces.

By taking everyday things and presenting them differently I am exploring notions of meaning, and how concepts come to be. I am, by virtue of the dining room’s function, also exploring the notion of sustenance and nourishment. What else, besides food sustains us? What about words, family and friends, or activities, like reading and writing?

The menus at each place setting are entitled, “a La Carte.” The English translation for ‘carte,’ is ‘card.’ The word ‘card’ has two meanings; one meaning refers to a tool used for separating fibres for spinning. The second meaning, “... piece of pasteboard, map, chart.”⁴ Each menu acts as a kind of map, or together as a set of maps, that organizes and corresponds to the objects on the table, and the images in the room.

The images that accompany the installation also reference the objects on the table. The series is made up of photographs I have taken, and found images. They also question the structure of meaning by rearranging and combining some images to produce other possible meanings.

The dining table and the images are presented here as two spaces within the installation. By doing this, I am inviting the viewer to establish a conversation within the work. Taken together, the

³ Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology. C.T. Onions (ed.), 163.

⁴ Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 145.

food, menus and the images, demonstrate a variety of ways of representing common objects typically known as, *food, fruit, apples, blackberries, and pomegranates*. It also a micro-example of the complex classification system that mind is continually operating with, and constructing, as we go about our everyday activities. The installation also shows that much of what we encounter in our daily lives is taken for granted as always being ‘there’ as simple static objects.

At each place setting there is a plate marked with a different symbol. Each of these symbols represents an invited guest. While researching this project I came across some interesting people, and I found myself thinking wouldn't it be neat to meet this person. I was reminded of the question, “If you could have dinner with anyone (alive or dead) who would it be?” It occurred to me, that with this project I could realize the answer to that question and this is how I determined the guest list for *The Feast*. There are three guests at the table, plus a place for myself. They are:

Guest 1: Enheduanna

Enheduanna is a Mesopotamian princess and the first recorded author (4000 BCE). She wrote poetry and temple hymns dedicated to Inanna, a Sumerian goddess of fertility and war.

Enheduanna's plate is marked with the symbol:  It means: aĝarin [MATRIX], "matrix, mother-creator; beer mash, beer bread; crucible."⁵

Guest 2: Judy Chicago

Judy Chicago is an American artist. Her most recognizable, and controversial work, is *The Dinner Party*. The installation, first exhibited in 1979, is a history of women, and their accomplishments, from mythology to modern times. It is also the inspiration for the feast motive for this project.

Judy's plate is marked with the symbol:  It means: murub [MIDDLE], "middle; female genitals, vulva; buttocks, rump; knob; mouth; gate (of city or large building); space between, distance; link; hips."⁶

Guest 3: The guest ‘to-come.’

⁵ The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary, <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html>, (accessed throughout October, 2007 to April, 2008).

⁶ Ibid.

By naming the third guest the circle becomes closed. I want to leave this spot open for all the people I wanted to invite, but couldn't because choosing one of them meant excluding the others. I also want to leave a place for those I've yet to meet.

The guest 'to-come' is marked with the symbol:  It means: niĝin [TOTAL], "total, sum; (the) whole, entirety."⁷

Guest 4: me

As creator and host of *The Feast*, it only makes sense that I take a place at the table. Walter Benjamin suggested that the lessons of history are to be taken and learned from the everyday activities of ordinary people, "... the very detritus of history."⁸ Thus, it also makes sense that I take my place at the table in a larger sense, i.e., to take my place in 'the detritus of history', and in particular, the history of women.

My place is marked by the symbol:  It means: mud [CREATE], "to create."⁹

In addition to representing a participant in the feast, each of the symbols on these plates suggests fluidity, and openness, where change and possibility are acknowledged. By evoking this openness I am also suggesting that although concepts do contain meaning, they should not be regarded as closed systems.

In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes, "Concepts are drawers in which knowledge may be classified; they are also ready-made garments which do away with the individuality of knowledge that has been experienced."¹⁰ Here we see a reference to a container (the concept) of a similar sort to the one mentioned by Auping in his quote about Kiefer above. Although books, architecture and concepts do contain our aspirations, memories and knowledge, and enable us to store, retrieve and make these 'things' public they should not be regarded, as Bachelard says, like 'ready-made garments' that can be pulled out of a drawer and re-used without thought.

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⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. (H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (trans). Harvard University Press, 2002), 542.

⁹ The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary, <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html>, (accessed throughout October, 2007 to April, 2008).

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space*. (Maria Jolas (trans). Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 75.

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