

PP. 239-
242

IDEAS & CONCEPTS

A woman came into my class with a basket of books she had made in other workshops. She took them out one by one, and the other students and I exclaimed at how beautiful and unusual the books were. But she didn't feel satisfied; the books were pretty, but they were all blank. She wanted to put words or images inside but didn't know where to start.

The previous chapters focus on techniques, tools, and materials for physically creating a book or box. After you feel comfortable with your acquired skills and accumulated book models you, too, may begin to wonder what to do next. Many people ask where they can take a class on "content." A teacher can help you begin, but the content comes from you. It may take the form of an overheard conversation, a family story, a series of photographs, but whatever content you work with, you should choose something that has emotional value to you, or you will lose interest in it.

Love it, hate it, think it's hilarious, grieve over it—all of these and more are good starting points. "It" could be anything from formal concepts like colors or textures that you love to a personal story—and all that fills the chasm between them.

Experiment with words as you would with art materials. When writing, your primary goal is to get thoughts onto paper. Edit and revise only after you are satisfied you have said everything you need to say. You may find that figuring out your conclusion first will make beginning easier. Or just start, and let the piece evolve as you write freely. For more inspiration, read Natalie Goldberg's *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life* (Bantam, 1990) or *A Life in Hand: Creating the Illuminated Journal* (Peregrine Smith Books, 1991) by Hannah Hinchman.

You can take any random thing, usually something in which you are interested, then connect it to something else about you. Examine two things. Weave them together. Sometimes you can take two things that seem to have absolutely no

connection and then make one up. Take a *potato* and *chair*, for example. The only obvious connection may be that they are both brown. What about a *hot potato* and *sitting in the hot seat*? Now *hot* is the connector. The unifying emotion can be things to avoid or discomfort. As a quick exercise, pick two random objects and try the same connection practice. See the books *Poem Crazy: Freeing Your Life with Words* (Three Rivers Press, 1997) by Susan Goldsmith Woodridge or *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2008) by Lynda Barry for more ideas.

You can bind a blank book first if you prefer, but if you compile loose pages first, you can edit or redo the pages before they are permanently attached to one another. I find gluing things or writing in blank books much more intimidating than creating the book one page at a time. It's hard to put that first mark on the paper: I'm afraid I won't like it later. Creating the pages separately gives you extra time for thinking, exploring, and repositioning.

PHYSICAL LAYERS

A book that has a punch line may be discarded or ignored once the punch line is reached. But if the book also has many layers, whether physical layers or multiple texts, it is more likely that readers will be intrigued and come back again to see what else they can find.

You may have a text but wish to add layers via images. The images in your book don't always have to be literal illustrations of the words. In a papermaking class at California College of Arts and Crafts, Don Farnsworth suggested that showing only part of something was much more interesting and mysterious than revealing everything at one time. Part of the beauty of bookmaking is that because you have multiple pages, you have the opportunity to reveal and conceal the subject in different places and at different paces.

One example of layers appears in the work of the Japanese artist Hon'ami Koetsu, who worked in the 1600s. He wrote on top of scrolls painted by other artists. Sometimes the poems he calligraphed seemed to have no connection to the paintings beneath them. Each of his pieces takes on new meaning as the viewer strives to understand the relationship of the words to the image. Even though the layers seem very different, the viewer still tries to connect them.

A very old layered book was rediscovered in 1998: a 10th-century manuscript called the *Archimedes Palimpsest*. Archimedes's text about mathematical physics was scraped off the parchment, leaving very faint writing. Then the text of a

12th-century prayer book was written over and perpendicular to Archimedes's original text. Although *palimpsest* (Greek for "rubbed again") used to refer only to parchment or vellum, it is now used to refer to other kinds of layers as well.

I first heard the word in reference to 20th-century poetry by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). You can make a book with a palimpsest theme: a life that changes, one story with different endings, how a house or an object or article of clothing gets passed from one owner to the next; palimpsest can refer to anything that has semi-visible layers of history. Layers can be visual, such as the words erased and redrawn, or physical objects such as torn papers.

A travel journal is a good place to start with layers. When you travel, you may start to find yourself lining your pockets with ticket stubs, receipts, stickers, and wrappers. Maybe you don't have to travel past your own neighborhood; you collect ephemera naturally. Create a travel journal or household journal while you are still in transit or before you have an overwhelming pile on your desk. You may find it easy to do this every night before bed, while you can still remember little details of the day. Just let your hands assemble and write without trying to edit or worry how it will look. You will get more ideas as you keep your hands busy. Betsy Davids made a book with bags she collected in Greece and called it *Excess Baggage*.

Work a little at a time. Experiment.
There is no one right way.

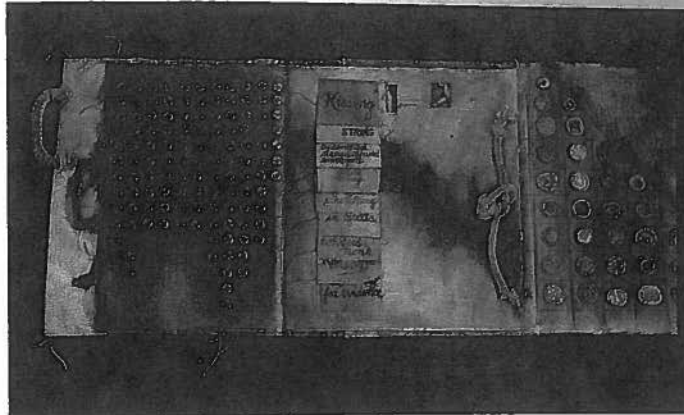


A CHILD'S INTERPRETATION

One day, I told my then five-year-old nephew Daniel that I was working on a book, not an ordinary book, but an artist's book about the earth. I was gluing pebbles to the covers and putting roots inside the book. We talked about how the stories in books could be told in many ways not only through words. He went outside and a while later came in with a collection of rocks and leaves and twigs and sat down at a table to work. He found heavy paper, glue, and tape. He experimented with how to place the materials and how to hold it all together. Hours later he showed me what he had made. He opened the heavy rock cover to reveal a page of twigs and a page covered in leaves, all layered and glued and taped together. He had made a book. Not an ordinary book, but his own artist's book.

KAREN SJOHOLM

CONCEPTUAL LAYERS



Sas Colby: *Obsessive Behavior*, 1991; acrylic on canvas, mixed media; three-panel format; 18 x 45 inches (45.7 x 114.3 cm) (photo by Sas Colby)

You have many pages to present your images and concepts, and you have plenty of time to go deeply and provide a rich experience for the reader/viewer. One way to use layers is with the materials, such as translucent pages. As you turn the pages, the information becomes revealed gradually. Think about planning physical layers to conceal, then reveal your ideas through the use of different types of papers, pockets, or flaps.

You can also layer the concepts, which can provide an even richer experience for the reader. The more successful you are with the layering, the more times the reader/viewer will want to come back to your book. Each layer in the following example assumes you have also used the layers previously listed. The book doesn't have to go like this; it could have two or three layers that aren't on this list, aren't consecutive, or begin somewhere other than with the first layer. We will work with one concept as an example.

First Layer (idea, collection). Say we take a magnifying glass and burn a hole in a piece of paper every day for two weeks. If it is raining or cloudy, we'll leave the page blank. The outcome is that we have a 14-page book with a variety of burn spots. It might be more interesting to make etchings or prints of the shapes or textures of the burns—this way we are interpreting them, transforming them, and showing that they are important or intriguing enough to make into art.

Second Layer (document). Same idea. Add the dates and times as documentation that these are our pages and that they took time to create.

Third Layer (meaning/context). Say we have used the magnifying glass that our grandmother used when she was a little girl, but no one knows this except us. We can make a note about this in the colophon or possibly on the title page. The outcome is the same as above, but we have just hinted that the magnifying glass has some value to us. We have put the pages into context.



LAYERING AND CANVAS BOOKS

The canvas books I make are layered paintings, bringing the viewer into close contact with paint and canvas. They are meant to be seen over time: turn an occasional page and experience a different relationship of color, form and space. I often cut holes as the first step and then fit the text around these voids. Seeing through layers is one of the devices unique to books, and I want my books to have this complexity. I see each painted spread as its own two-dimensional design, but it must also relate to the previous and following pages; I never sew a book together until all the painting is completed. In *Obsessive Behavior*, I combined obsessive habits, such as counting one's footsteps, with the labor-intensive textile processes, such as stitching. In addition I listed my own obsessive habits. I sold this book to a therapist. Fragility and decay are not concerns with canvas books: they are still holding up well after more than 10 years.

SAS COLBY

Fourth Layer (emotional content). Let's add a story about our grandmother and how she used her magnifying glass. In journalism, they say "put a face on it." Instead of an abstract object, we have created a character to relate to. We might understand the importance of a magnifying glass by imagining ourselves as the owner. Alternatively, we might add where we were when we burned the holes, what mood we were in, what we were thinking about, what was on the front page of the newspaper, etc. In that case, the face is our own.

Fifth Layer (research and nonfiction). We research magnifying glasses, discover who invented them and why, or write about arson or the sun, and add that to our book. This will connect our personal story to documented knowledge.

Sixth Layer (creativity/fiction). We create a mystery, write about a detective, refer to Sherlock Holmes somehow, or add a dream we have had about magnifying glasses.

Seventh Layer (surprise). We incorporate either a tactile surprise, such as a pop-up flame, or a twist to the written or visual material. We might use a dragon as a symbol. It might be that the holes portray the wrath of our grandmother because we have stolen her magnifying glass.

Eighth Layer (connection to materials and structure). By using materials that relate to our concept, we can reinforce our ideas. Our book might be round like the holes, the typeface may suddenly get very large like a flame, the book may be translucent like smoke or painted on glass or have a handle like the magnifier. It might be wrapped in our grandmother's handkerchief or placed in a matchbox-style box. If we do incorporate all of the previous layers, the book can be something to come back to over and over again.

Sheer Volume

Sometimes the number of things in a book is so impressive that it gives weight to the concept even if we don't have all of the layers. If the book in our example had 365 pages, it would certainly get more notice, no matter what anyone might think about holes burned in pieces of paper. It might inspire awe, but perhaps not a second look. We can see many examples of artists today painting a hundred views of something, or collecting a piece of paper every day, or keeping a dream journal for a year.

One example of a book that only works because of the huge number of some- things in it is *Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing, which contains 4000 characters that he carved and printed; they look like they might be Chinese, but they are all nonsense. Paraphrasing what he said at a lecture at California College of the Arts in 2007: "If it were only one sheet of paper, everyone would say it was a joke and then move on. Since there are so many characters, and it is bound in a traditional manner, it looks like a very important book, like a bible or something."

COLLABORATIONS, COMPILATIONS & EXCHANGES

Another way of adding layers is by working with other people through a collaboration, a compilation or an exchange. While each of these types of projects involve careful planning and more than one person, each project has its own advantages and limitations. You may meet your partners, or you may work independently and never meet. You may

get a copy of the final book, or it may be one-of-a-kind and given away. Choose a project appropriate to the particular occasion and to your temperament.

At least three situations can provide the catalyst for a collaborative book. In one instance, you may feel confident about your writing but don't feel comfortable making images. In the other, you like

your writing and your drawing, but you admire someone else's work and would like to incorporate this person's work in your book. Thirdly, you are interested in the experience of working with someone you admire. In all of these cases, you can make a book with the help of a partner or group of people.