

Redell Olsen

## Proceed with Feeling: On Recent Work by Susan Johanknecht

*Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words.*

**Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse***

*What do you feel?                      you see and feel                      nothing yet there is*  
*suspend your magnet*  
*to rotate freely                      it swings around                      and points.*

**Susan Johanknecht, *of science & desire***

These epigraphs might be descriptions of reading some of Johanknecht's recent bookworks which engage the reader in a negotiation of the unfolding relationship between apparently divergent discourses such as science and desire, violence and play, thermodynamics and subjectivity or between bodies and computers. The implications of the language of Johanknecht's poetics extend into the body of the book. The reader is invited to read through and across these overlapping linguistic territories and also to follow by touch their analogous mutations into the structure and materials of the books themselves. The role of the reader and the possibility of her interaction with the fold of the page, the tactility of surface or with the click of the mouse are dynamic and constant concerns of the work's construction and require that we proceed with feeling throughout.

In *of science and desire* the instructions for small scale domestic science experiments (which are designed to test for the surface tension of water, the force of a magnet or for the amount static electricity that can be produced from a nylon stocking in the dark) become metaphors for the measurement of desire and attraction. The metaphorical juxtaposition of the two contextual and linguistic registers presents the “pressure” from the outside as a tension which seems to hold *them* “ends together”. It “prevents them being pulled apart” even at the point at which all the “air’s squeezed out”.

The inaccuracy of measuring such a situation (“your barometer is not accurate”) through either science or desire is continually in play. Subjectivity is identifiable as a “line of force” that is “passing through” but which is simultaneously as unstable and yet as reliable as a homemade experiment with a magnet and iron filings.

To proceed with feeling across the surface of the text implies an ethics and also a possible erotics of reading. This might involve the loss (“nothing yet there is”) of one’s usual co-ordinates within the epistemological structures and hierarchies of the everyday. The reader is invited to “suspend” the usual “magnets” towards linear narrative and “to rotate freely” through a rich series of games which extend across material, syntactical and conceptual boundaries as the work “swings

around and points” us beyond itself and out into the world and the “pressure outside” which it exerts. The final experiment in the book describes the effect of static electricity on an object (“notice how it clings to the wall”) and this parallels the “charged” body of a lover and echoes that of the reader who holds in her hands the “charged” surface of a book bound in rubber. Johanknecht has described how she chose this material for the cover “because it had that combination of being sexual and sensual but also clinical. You could imagine rubber in a laboratory, being used in a scientific way; it had that dual reading” (Courtney, 175). Dual reading in Johanknecht involves considerations of how the book’s surface and structure of the book interact with the surfaces created by the linguistic debris that coalesce from page to page.

In many works, such as *of science and desire*’ (1995), *Who Will Be It?* (1996), *Visions In The Monitor* (1999), *subsequent drainage on folding rocks* (2004), this relationship between language and the book form is furthered by the presence of a digital version of the text. As the reader sits with the book on her lap, with what N. Katherine Hayles calls the “flickering signifiers” of the computer screen before her, the texts exceed their apparent physical boundaries to exist in spaces of slippage, doubling and flux between the body of the reader and the proliferating sites of the work. For Johanknecht the book and the CD-ROM are “related forms” both of which produce an “intimate experience” between the text and the reader, who is positioned “sitting almost the same distance monitor-to-

eye that would be hand-to-eye for a book” (Courtney, 174). Johanknecht’s description of digital reading and the experience of engaging simultaneously with a reading that is mobile and in flux between the page and the screen parallels Adalaide Morris’ account of what she calls a “distributed cognition” which since the 1980’s has “increasingly extended *beyond* the individual to focus on circuits or systems that link human beings with each other, with their material artefacts and tools, and, most important for our purposes, with their networks and programmable machines” (Morris, 3).

In Johanknecht’s work these circuits and systems inform a reading practice which roams between media. In her most recent work the book is only one node in a circulating trajectory of cognition across a range of interfaces. Her recent texts refuse a definition of language, the computer, or the book itself as a “natural” form. Instead these are sites to be investigated as part of the content of the work and mark a departure from previous works from the 1980s that often functioned more conventionally in their relationship between text and image. Another marked shift in the development of the work in the last fifteen years has been the growing importance of Johanknecht’s own writing in determining the relationship between the book form and its contents.

In *Who Will Be It?* (1996), she appropriates the children’s game, ‘Paper, Scissor, Rock’ as a structuring device. Winning or losing depends on the relationship

between the weapons chosen by the two players. Johanknecht's version comes as a box or cards and an accompanying CD. On the first of the cards are the following rules:

#### TO PLAY

scissor defeats paper

paper defeats rock

rock defeats scissor

one two three

In its design and layout the cards echo the clean aesthetics of concrete poetry but semantically they also imply the messy and sometimes potentially violent possibilities of play. In the digital game the participant presses on a moving icon of rock, scissors or paper and in reply the computer makes a random response from the same list of implements that triggers an animation. Also audible is a text that is sometimes spoken by a man and sometimes by a woman which consists of a series of poems that are based on the confrontations which the computer and the user generate together: rock to rock, rock to paper and so on.

The "player" or "reader" has the experience of looking into a hidden drawer whose contents are systematically uncovered and which move about on empty type cases and lead racks as if by magic. These objects have special

significance for Johanknecht who remembers them from her own childhood and who has inherited them from her grandmothers: “Haberdashery and kitchen objects have their own worlds and a kind of violence of their own as well, innate in what they do” (Courtney, 176). In the animations they also become potentially violent instruments of writing—floating as they do over boxes usually used to hold type for letterpress.

For Johanknecht: “the repetitive interaction of these ‘objects’ within the game becomes a metaphor for interactions between individuals” who are trapped in “cycles” of “fear” and “aggression” in ways that cannot escape the logic of a children’s game. The game, like the chance generated animations, offers an alternative framing device through which to read these tensions. The unsettling juxtaposition of images, text, animation and sound undermine the possibility that this might simply be a nostalgic reworking of a child’s game.

*Visions In The Monitor* (1999) is again a book and CD which function in relation to one another. The book is bound in a plastic mesh whose rectangular perforations echo the pixels on the screen of the computer and offer a gauze through which we see through to the book. The CD is embedded within the structure of the book and once activated in the computer it reveals animations of objects moving around inside a cardboard box. The image of this cardboard box gives depth to the flat screen and invites us to consider the space at the back of

the computer. By analogy the space opened up inside the cardboard box encourages us to consider the body of the computer and its inner workings that Johanknecht highlights as at once tangible and mysterious:

behind the screen –  
an adjoining  
space

the window does not reveal

The fold of the book falls after the word “behind” and “reveal” and links the division of the page to the boundaries between language and representation and between screen and image. The “window” is not a transparent opening onto reality but a surface of mediation that is itself a constructed entity that is subject to many cultural, historical and social influences. In relation to these “views” Johanknecht invites us to consider the box “beyond the retina” of our own “looping to memory forces”, in other words the substance and workings of our own vision.

The book and animations explore the physical immediacy of the “edges of cellotape”, the “entangled ball/of binding cord” which actually hold the magic of illusion together. The animations, like early Svenkmayer films, evoke the puppets of a child’s play. The magical possibilities of a simple cardboard box foreground the artifice of the technology and the way in which we have come to accept that the multiple windowed interface of the screen will *naturally* give way to visions beyond. This foregrounding does not depend on the revelation of a programmed source code but relies instead on a cardboard box, some string and a sheet of organza. In ways which echo the “pressure” felt from the outside in *of science and desire*, it is the limitations of technology that Johanknecht draws our attention to. She does this in order to make reference to the systems and rules of encounter in the everyday that are themselves limited and limiting. This is the stuff of visions even as it is only vision laid bare. *Visions of the Monitor* suggests that the potential of digital technologies is only as far reaching as the imagination of a child engaged in play.

Johanknecht’s own writing resists the trend in solipsistic confessionalism of mainstream lyric modes so prevalent in the 1980s and draws on research and fragments of found material from a variety of discourses. Like many recent poets, she does not always take up an obvious position of critique in relation to this wide ranging source material which is often drawn from the latest developments in technology and science. Didactic or prescriptive arguments are avoided and



instead the reader is left to take responsibility for her own interpretation of the analogies between language and materials which unfold before her as she negotiates the relationship between the sensuous tactile surfaces of the book and the animations on the screen. Importantly each is not an illustration of the other but a separate element of the work that produces a dialogue between screen and book rather than the effacement of one by the other. Johanknecht's texts suggest that a key part of the reading process is one that exceeds the page to take in the foregrounded relationship between body and screen that unfolds in process with the reading of the work. And it is as part of this exchange that the politics of the work become evident.

This stress on the processual interaction between the body of the reader, the book and the screen is similar to Hayles focus on the "eventilizing" nature of the digital poem (Hayles, 182). Hayles identifies a key characteristic of the digital poem as being a specific temporality that sets it apart from print. By virtue of being constructed in a digital context the digital poem is "made more of an event and less a discrete, self-contained object with clear boundaries in space and time" (182). Hayles distinguishes between "the time of *performance* for an electronic text" as opposed to "the time of *production* for print" (185). While the former is one which she regards as in flux and subject to change according to the hardware available she views the latter as something which fixes the book's structure and renders static any further variations to the object of the book. Many

bookartists and poets would clearly disagree with Hayles' binary division; for example, Johanknecht's collaboration with Katherine Meynell, *Emissions* (1992), is a book that purposefully explores the relationships between the unstable media of book and that of bodily production through a range of materialities. The fact that Johanknecht's most recent work is not even physically bounded by either the screen or the book format but instead is already situated in a series of mobile relationships between media extends Hayles' argument through a writing and making practice which places a number of temporalities, or unfoldings, in play. In *Who Will Be It* and *Visions in The Monitor* there is a dynamic tension between the length of the digital animations and the turning of the pages of the book. The relationship of these temporalities is not fixed but open and subject to change according to the modes of reading which the reader chooses to adopt.

*Modern (Laundry) Production* (2001) exists as both a book and as a gallery installation each of which imply a quite different relationship between the viewer and the reader. The book has a concertina format which fits into a slip case. It was initially shown as part of an installation at The Standpoint Gallery (London, 2002) where it was suspended from a high shelf. The text is collaged out of found fragments of writing and images from 1940's manuals on Laundry management. In the gallery setting it was accompanied by a video animation of laundry workers. These images were drawn from time and motion studies and are also reproduced from fold to fold across the book. In format they are partially cropped

so that the head in each still of the laundress is missing, only her arm is visible as it feeds the sheets into a calender. The laundresses are little more than the prosthetic extension of the machines in the laundry. They function as early incarnations of Donna Haraway's cyborg and are also a kind of ghostly mimic of the reader who similarly feeds Johanknecht's text through her hands in order to read it.

In a recent essay, Adelaide Morris has continued the debate sparked by Haraway's influential description of the cyborg. Morris notes how there has been a major shift in the way in which we view the relationship between our bodies and our subjectivities:

From a posthuman point of view we are not the bounded, autonomous, coherent, and fully self-conscious beings imagined by the Enlightenment thinkers but cybernetic organisms joined in feedback continuous feedback loops with media and information technologies (Morris, 4).

Johanknecht's work encourages us to investigate the implications of such a statement and to consider the ethical dilemmas inherent in the acceptance of our new cybernetic "nature". If the laundresses are early incarnations of the cyborg then how can the "feedback loops" and splicing of body and information technologies (in everyday life and in new media art) become productive sites of exchange which do not simply replicate the dehumanised enslavement of the laundress to industrial production? Johanknecht presents the systematisation of

the body of the laundress into a machine of productivity at the same time as she raises questions about the physical and mental systematisation of our own selves, subjectivities and reading practices. The work registers a distinct unease about the figure of the cyborg even as she continues to explore it both conceptually and formally throughout her bookworks.

Related to this is Johanknecht's own relationship to the systems and circuits of production involved in the making of her own work. Gefn Press was set up by Johanknecht in 1977 and Gefn is the Norse goddess of the earth and of procreation. Through the press she has been engaged in numerous exciting collaborations with other artists and writers but she has not relinquished control of her own processes of production and distribution. Unlike the laundresses she is not enslaved to a market model of industrial production and so she can take risks, challenge accepted practices and investigate the possibilities of materials and ideas on her own terms. The strength of the Johanknecht's practice comes from her willingness to adapt her knowledge and experience of the traditional processes and modes of production by placing them in relation to her exploration of the material possibilities and radical form of the book. In her most recent work she has begun to set this exploration in dialogue with the possibilities of digital media and this has challenged and extended our traditional expectations of the materiality of the book form and that of its potential on screen manifestations. Her current work invites a reader to negotiate the reciprocal relationship between page and screen as an ongoing process, to "see and feel" her way across these

dispersed sites of radical praxis and play.

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