

verso

1

A magazine for the Book as a Work of Art

Edited by Alan Loney / October 2015

ISSN 2205-4405 (PRINT)

Alchemy in 26 parts

Alex Selenitsch

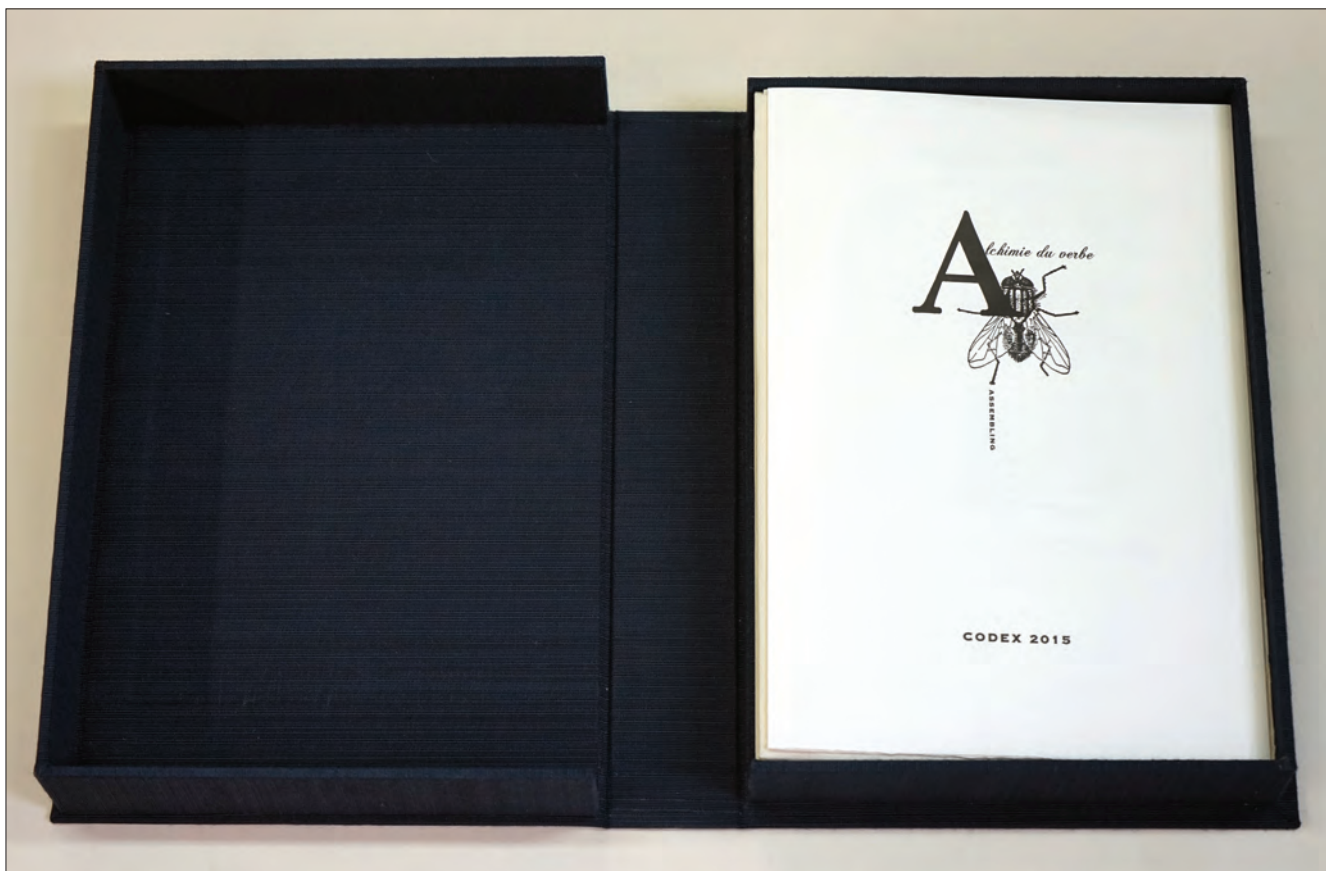
Alan hands me a box, marked Arete Books, AbeBooks, and Australia Post. I open it and it contains another box, dark blue, with on its spine or back, a rectangle of paper naming the contents: *Alchimie du Verbe, assembling*. The As have it.

The blue box is covered in fabric with thickened horizontal lines in the weave, lines of texture in the textile. The box opens to reveal a wad of folios and an introductory brochure listing the participating artists and an editorial by Peter Rutledge Koch, noting the project's genealogy in archaic alphabets and avant-garde practices of assembled publications.

The book celebrates the 5th CODEX Symposium, the 10th anniversary of the Codex Foundation, and the 500th anniversary of the death of Aldus Manutius (1449–1515). Here, the numerics mix with pragmatics. There are 30 participating artists, with four pairs, giving 26 works. The artists are listed alphabetically, but there are slips in the structure. Some letters are unrepresented, others overrepresented. There are 26 lettered copies of the book: I am looking at copy O. And this is Alan's copy – Alpha and Omega all over again. Once more, pragmatics hang around the perfection. There are 40 numbered copies for sale, and four *hors de commerce*.

For the record, the participating artists are Walter Bachinski and Janis Butler, Victoria Bean, Karen Bleitz, Carolee Campbell, Aaron Cohick, Crispin & Jan Elsted, Nacho Gallardo, Martha Hellion, Sarah Horowitz, Mikhail Karasik, Peter Rutledge Koch, Patricia Lagarde, Clemens-Tobias Lange, Alan Loney, Peter Malutski & Ines von Ketelhardt, Russell Maret, Rick Myers, Didier Mutel, Robin Price, Harry Reese & Sandra Liddell Reese, Dmitry Sayenko, Veronika Schapers, Gaylord Schanilec, Johannes Strugalla & Francoise Despalles, Richard Wagener, and Sam Winston.

Someone has opened this box before me because the folios are not in alphabetical order – or maybe that's the way they were packed. Here is the first bookish thing about this publication: there is a linear order, numerical or letter-based assembled order. Also, a reading order: I take out five of the folders (because there are five vowels, I have five fingers, there are five Chinese elements and because four doesn't seem like enough of a sample). I note the similarity to looking into a book, where there is a fixed sequence of text and pages, but where the book can be opened anywhere, and read in any order, to any amount.





Work by Johannes Strugalla and Francoise Despalles, Germany. Digital prints made of work in mixed media.

Victoria Bean's is the first contribution I look at. It's a folded grey card with a seven-line text in caps, letterpress in transparent ink and dusted with fingerprint powder, shiny silver on the grey. The text describes the 'selfies' taken by young car thieves, the theft of Bean's car initiating the print. But not just the theft: a visit to the Police included a demonstration of their forensic techniques. Fingerprints are a cliché of our forensic infrastructure, and here they are shown to be Print Family.

Karen Bleitz is next. (Q: how did I get two successive Bs in a random pick? A: the chance of coincidence is there as much as un-coincidence.) There is a warning on the back of the folder/wrapper: *Small Magnets Inside*. At my second sample, non-paper/ink objects are already in the mix. Bleitz's work consists of two double page spreads in card, each with a grid on the left side and a small metal object on a string reaching out from the other page when the spread is opened. It's an image of stitching, as if the stitching were the text, not just the binding.

Then, Martha Hellion. Hellion prints the poem that *Alchimie du Verbe*

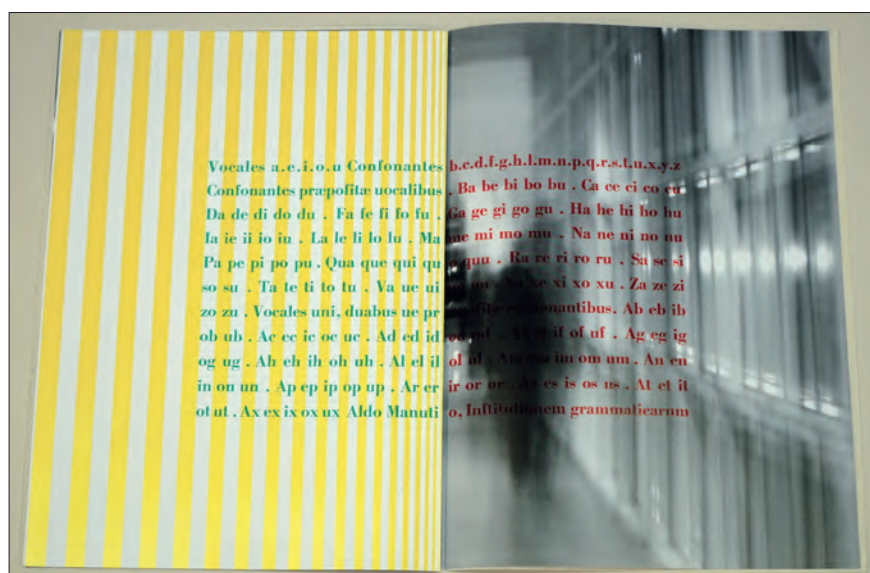
comes from on a transparent folio, on a page adjacent to a faded image of an arched doorway. This is held inside a stiffer folio of silver background with blackish overhead foliage, and a horizontal scatter of capital letter vowels in Arthur Rimbaud's famous five colours. The poem and the arched door are entrances to the constellation of vowels: letters against leaves, which in some traditions are the source of written signs.

Rick Myers' piece is simple and direct. It is a trace of a real event which

describes itself: sound / of a / pencil / writing - handwritten in pencil, page by page. Of course, for me, there is also the sound of the paper being turned. The Zen-ish touch continues when I note that a pencil is held in one hand. Myers notes that 'text, medium and resistance of the page may be poetically unified by the reader'.

Peter Rutledge Koch's work is a folio of eight pages, each with a page-filling red capital X. On six of the pages, the Xs are packed with tiny words, 'over 4,100 words that contain the letter X, extracted from a dictionary of over 235,000 words', as the colophon puts it. The colophon also lists nineteen possible meanings for the letter X: these range from the purely alphabetical to the semiotic and visual. The letter X is one of about eight or nine letters that easily slip from writing to drawing, and in Koch's piece it becomes a geometric container for objects which contain the same geometry in a tiny fragment: the unknown in macro and micro.

So, five folios have already extended my notions of print. I feel I must select another five, and wonder if the extensions will continue. Bachinski/Butler, Gallardo, Lange, Maret and Campbell come out of the stack.



Work by Peter Malutzki and Ines von Ketelhodt, Germany. Letterpress & offset lithography.

Walter Bachinski and Janis Butler are one of the four pairs of artists to produce a single folio. Their work is a double folio, one inside the other. The outer one has a torso profile with writing like body tattoos on each page, the inner one has two images of male (green) and female (red) head and hands with red hands making/touching the green head on the left side, and green hands making/touching the red head on the right side. Derived from D H Lawrence's poem 'Things men have made', the double folio merges concepts of touch and language through a reduction linocut.

Nacho Gallardo's folio is a setting of Ezra Pound's 'Ancient Music' (a satirical take on the traditional 'Sumer is Icumen in'), done in two pages, each time distributing the text through a fluid abstraction of a standing figure. The link to Apollinaire's calligrammes is obvious. One figure is in capitals which flesh out the body, the lettering reminiscent of Haight-Ashbury graphics of the 1960s. The other figure uses lines of text as outlines, as if the language was clothing the figure. There is a slip of paper in the folio to note a spelling error on the colophon wrapper, but no errata for the 'errors' of omission and spelling in the artist's setting of the text.

Clemens-Tobias Lange's work is a folio within a folio. A grey/silver somewhat wrinkly folded folio is presented with an image of Christ on the left and an image of Buddha on the right: these flaps open to reveal a view between two sphere-topped obelisks framing the sea across to the horizon. Some kind of absolute is being hinted at, and this is perhaps the theme of the Italian text by Domenico Brancale. This work demands a knowledge of Italian to be fully taken in. For illiterates like me, the piece appears to separate word and image in a very traditional manner.



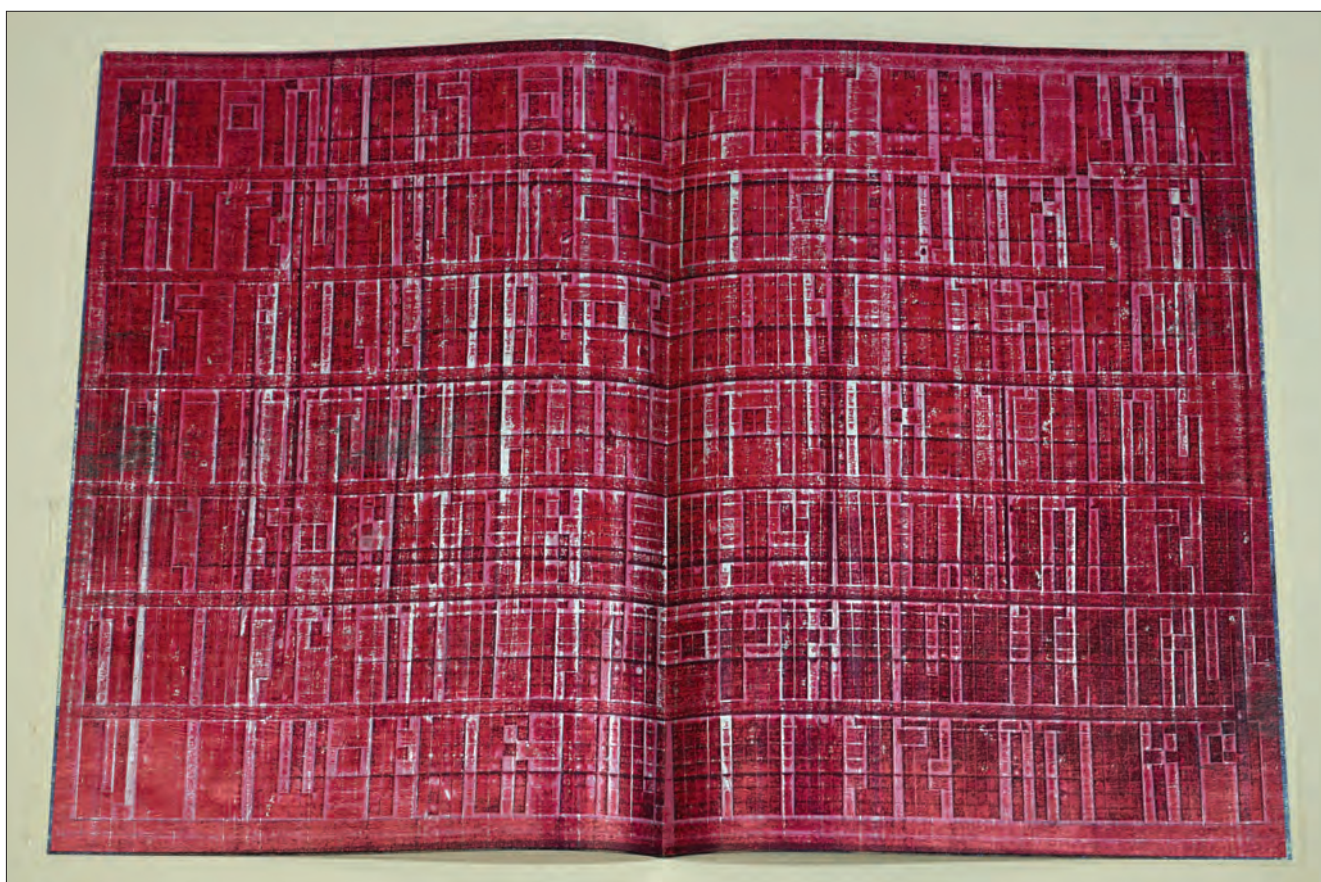
Work by Mikhail Karasik, Russia. Silkscreen print.

Russell Maret's work, by contrast, is totally concerned with image, or rather, with the emergence of such from an optical matrix – with the further provocation that what emerges is not imagery, but language itself. A three by five grid of separated squares is evenly spread over a background using the same parallel line hatching as that within the squares. The hatching of the squares and the background are displaced in various ways to produce an optical shimmer, in which the squares sometimes continue the background hatching and other times break from it. On the fourth page, the individual squares change the hatching directions inside themselves, and capital letters begin to appear, some very obvious, others not so. In the spirit of the shimmer and difficult focus, these don't appear to have a simple order or word structure: I do my best but cannot close all of the patterns into letters. This is an image of pre-language, incomplete, setting out its future realisation.

In contrast to Maret's geometric and perceptual work, Carolee Campbell's piece is blatantly old-fashioned in every way. She has set an encyclopaedia entry on the world-tree Yggdrasil in Wilhelm Klingspor Schrift type

(designed by Rudolf Koch in the early 1920s), but which I know colloquially as 'gothic'. A couple of faux-Celtic woodcuts of the world-tree are integrated into the lettering. As I look at this work, I am puzzled by it, not by the ancient motif of the Great Ash Tree, but by its presentation as a near perfect post-medieval manuscript. Yet in this company, it's a useful provocation. Maret's work copies Op Art from the 1960s, Gallardo's points to the Cubist start of the 20th century in France, the X in Koch's work goes back to the Suprematists, also a century ago. All of these, it seems to me, conduct a conversation with their forebears, that is, engage in meta-commentary that places the now against what came before. Does a reproduction or simulacrum do this? Making a perfect Ming vase, or painting a Botticelli, or writing another Handel Concerto Grosso might be a useful way of learning how it was done, but this is a gain for the artist, and has nothing for the rest of the social ecology that constitutes art.

A quick shuffle through the other folios in *Alchimie du Verbe* brings out another pair of works that illustrate this issue. Jan and Crispin Elsted's setting of Elinor Wylie's poems as a



Work by Aaron Cohick, United States. Letterpress.

simple (!) book is like many other well-printed books – but it is just a book, a continuation of the idea that print and words (and poems, and books) should be invisible vehicles for the writer’s ideas. Against this, Mikhail Karasik’s silkscreen folio is a tribute to Ilya Zdanevich’s remarkable work, in which language is always getting in the way. But Karasik’s work is not a copy: Zdanevich never produced such powerful figure/ground pages: here the tribute leads you back to Zdanevich’s work, but also allows you to ponder on the issue put forward by Karasik: where does the letter dwell? White print on black paper gives letters which look like white paper showing through – foreground and background together, utterance and its time/place fused.

Without listing and describing all the folios, I can sense one of the main qualities of this collection, which sits at one edge of the concept of anthology.

This is clearly described by the word ‘assembling’. In contrast to the content-driven noun of a traditional anthology, which usually is historical, geographic, thematic or formal, ‘assembling’ is a verb, to paraphrase Buckminster Fuller, whose heyday was concurrent with assemblage’s acceptance as a cultural practice. Assemblage is a method of putting a diverse range of works together with a minimum (if any) of restrictions. Mostly these have been restrictions of format: size of paper, number of pages, edition. In fact, apart from the *Alchimie* title, this has been the case for this publication. What the method produces is an edition of identical copies which have a heterogeneous texture, a kind of crazy quilt in the American tradition, where an enabling structure allows individual difference to blossom.

This brings me back to the alphabet and its curious number, which is 26,

and its curious order, which we know by heart. It is one of the perfect ways of assembling a heterogeneous cohort, being without an internal structure, but giving the impression of being a whole, because there are no more letters than those in the alphabet. Everything can be classified and listed, and then found again, through its standardised sequence of letters. In a data-obsessed culture it is a fundamental. But its arbitrary sequence is a kind of residual skeleton of what was once a shaman’s companion of symbols and glyphs, or the traces of minerals and fluids of an alchemist’s laboratory. Because the artists in this assembling have all printed their own folios, in their own ways, the interaction with matter and process seems to have ensured that a materialist magic comes through, able to renew language, and print, in profound and delightful ways.