

Joe Gilmore Bookwork

Library Display in the Sculpture Research Library Henry Moore Institute 15 February – 28 March 2025

This display presents work by graphic designer Joe Gilmore (b. 1968), alongside artists' books from the Sculpture Research Library collection.

"I kept asking myself how a book could be infinite. I could not imagine any other than a cyclic volume, circular. A volume whose last page would be the same as the first and so have the possibility of continuing indefinitely."
— Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*

In his manifesto, 'The New Art of Making Books' (*Kontexts 6–7*, Maastricht, 1975), the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión makes a series of provocative statements about books. Under the heading 'What A Book Is', he states, "a writer, contrary to the popular opinion, does not write books. A writer writes texts." In Carrión's 'new art' (which came to be known as the artist's book, or 'bookwork'), the artistic objective was the unification of form and content.

Through this body of work, Gilmore seeks to expand his practice as a graphic designer – through the medium of the artists' book – in order to investigate the material, formal and contextual systems and conditions of book design, production and publication.

The work is supplemented by a display of books from Henry Moore Institute's Research Library collection. These books were selected by Gilmore in order to frame and contextualise his work within a network of creative approaches. It includes books that have informed his practice, alongside others whose form, materiality or structure contribute to the ongoing exploration of the endless possibilities of the format of the book.

Joe Gilmore in conversation with Nick Thurston Leeds, February 2025

Nick Thurston

There are four components in your display here at the Henry Moore Institute. Three of them sample bodies of work by you, and the fourth is your selection of artists' books from the Institute's collection. I wonder if we could just start by talking our way through these four components, one by one. What can we see on the plinth?

Joe Gilmore

The plinth presents six artist's books from an ongoing series of mine called *ARS*. Each book is made from full-page gallery adverts that have been cut out of different issues of the Italian art magazine, *Mousse*. I gather a selection of those cut sheets by following my eye, then fold, collate and bind them to make each book in the series.

NT And that process of folding and rebinding with staples means that you effectively put two unconnected half pages together. So, you get this weird splicing of two half adverts.

JG Yes, exactly. I've always been interested in how books have different topologies of 'the page'. For example, in a folded 16-page book, page 2 is actually printed on the same sheet of paper as page 15. Pages are organised one way to be printed together on large sheets, called imposition sheets; then when they're cut and folded, they figure another order, the bound page order we're familiar with from reading, from page 1 to the end in paginated sequence.

NT So that jump from imposition to bound order are two topologies of 'the page', for you?

JG Exactly. It's kind of strange. There are these different spatial orders that overlap or transition into one another in the workflow of producing of a book. And I suppose the final book creates the illusion that the content has been printed continuously across the sheets, that it runs seamlessly and only has that one linear topological structure.

NT So the *ARS* series is like a bookmaker's montage. We're getting these two things that shouldn't be

together spliced together, in edit. On top of which, you also change the orientation of the found pages, from portrait to landscape. The adverts are all turned 90 degrees to fit your new topology – a third topology – the topology of the *ARS* series.

JG I think what interests me is the idea – I'm not sure if there's a proper word for this – but it's what I call 'book space': There's the space of the page, and then the physical structure of the book, and then the folding and binding. I'm fascinated by how these different topologies work together.

And in terms of graphic design, it's especially interesting because the topologies of 'book space' get hidden by the layout process. When you're designing a book, you work on pages as if they're completely discrete surface areas. You don't necessarily think about how the book is going to be folded and gathered. It's your job to prepare for that but not do it. What interests me in the *ARS* series is all of these topologies of the format, plus the fact that when you splice together different ads for galleries, you end up with hybrid gallery spaces, artworks and exhibitions, none of which exist anywhere but in these spreads. So, you create new fictional topologies for the imagination, too.

NT You're forcing two things together which shouldn't really be together through the process of folding and binding.

JG Yes.

NT The funny thing about the content of these books is that they're not padded with an introduction or anything that explains what's going on. We just get into these raw, commercial, very designed expressions. We move from one commercial space to another commercial space to another commercial space, but they're all imperfect because they've all been chopped. Each time, you're cutting short another designer's work. We go from one broken bit of real estate to another broken bit. And in the end, that's what printed ads are, right?

JG Yes, exactly, real estate. They're paid for spaces in the magazine. That's how the commerce of commercial periodical publishing works.

NT So, this conceptual space you call 'book space' is a hybrid space of all these spaces, organised by the book as a network of topologies, some of them intrinsic to the format, some of them connected through the content. I'm with you.

JG It's also related to my interest in James Joyce. He's a recurring obsession for me. For example, this idea of book space emerged from something I noticed about *Finnegans Wake* – essentially that the book forms a circle. The first sentence in the novel is the end of the last sentence. So, in

effect, the text of *Finnegans Wake* is circular even though the physical book isn't. It isn't bound as a circular object; it's a regular, linear book. There seems to be two sort of superimposed structures: a physical structure consisting of a cover and 632 rectangular pages moving in one direction, and also this kind of like textual or meta structure that forms a circle, moving another way at the same time. That doubling is an idea I explore in several of the projects in this show. I've always been interested in those spatial qualities of books that aren't necessarily obvious, you know?

NT That doubling is really important to the *Void ()* series, which is in the frames here, right?

JG Yes. I'm really interested in the relationship between websites and books – in part because I design both – and what happens if you print a website and present it in book form. The easiest way to export a website is to save it as PDF via the Print function of your browser. The switch between the vertical webpage, the landscape orientation of the screen it's intended for, and the portrait orientation of the outputted PDF, means the vertical scroll runs sideways in the PDF file, so you have to rotate the book to read it.

NT So, you reverse out of the fluid digital stream of images into the fixity of print. And the printed sheets get these web-exported images scrolling horizontally on their elbows. But your intervention anchors the re-orientation to portrait really simply: you add your own page numbers in the page footer. In a sculptural sense, you give the piece of paper a new footing. The numeral is the ballast holding up the defamiliarized image stream. It makes the reading experience really clear and really strange at the same time.

JG Yes, it's an anchor but also a reminder or indicator. The page numbers are an identifier of where that page functions within a whole lot of other pages – where it should be, in the bound page order.

NT There's also a third layer to these *Void ()*s. They're not here to be held as books. They're offered as framed pictures. They've each gone through this third process that I'll try and reconstruct in description: You export a webpage to PDF, which gives you the infinite scroll turned on its side, which you paginate so it could be experienced as a book. But then you've cut out some of your own book pages, you put splodges of wet paint on a glass plate, like an abandoned palette, then press the cut page on to the plate and move the paper slightly. It's a very minimal, painterly gesture. Then you lift the sheet, dry it, and that's what we see framed here in the show. These pictures are part webpage, part book page, part print, part painting, right?

JG I see them as paintings. To be honest, I'd like to

be a painter! Thinking about it, I guess these *Void* ()s are a kind of anti-painting. There's a gestural intention with mark, colour and paint, but there's no skill in terms of choosing what to paint or how to paint it. It's more like an incidental mark, like a mistake in a monoprint.

NT You mean you lay the page face down so you can't see what you're doing anyway. You're trusting a movement?

JG Exactly.

NT Putting the paper through that process, face down...that's a printer's move. You're trusting the process of transfer. It's a great example of one of things I love about the groups of work you've got on show here – it's like you're always being chased by your shadow. Your capacity to layout for print catches up with you every time.

We see that in the centrepiece of this show, your ongoing moving image work on the flatscreen, *Work in Progress*. It's a tough one to describe because it's doing obvious things but doing them in deceptively exciting and complicated ways. We watch it like a video, like a mute silent film, but it's not a film or one video. There's a lot going on behind the screen. Do you want to say a little bit about that?

JG You're watching a patched piece of software randomly select colour video clips from a database, in two frames that are overlaid. That software is also applying several filters: removing the colour and making each clip transparent. It's constantly selecting and playing clips in uncontrolled combinations, in real-time, on a computer that feeds the monitor.

Each clip is a recording of me constructing a book by adding and moving printed matter on my studio desk, with a fixed camera looking down from overhead. They're performances to camera that play with the process graphic designers call 'laying out' for a paste up. So, what you're seeing on screen are two discrete layers of me performatively making books from found material. Because the overlays are infinitely scrambling, these recordings from the past find a new kind of live-ness on screen – the layouts are always 'in progress'.

NT We're seeing progress re-processed, endlessly.

JG Yes, the probability of seeing the same juxtaposition of videos is very low. The clips are shuffled, and the software jumps to random points in the videos when they're loaded. Plus, I keep adding new clips after each showing of the work. You're watching something which is generative – the content you're seeing is being created in real time. And it's also generative in the sense that, as

readers, I think we project and infer, we generate or create our interpretations.

NT It looks to hold together, aesthetically, because of the printed matter you've chosen to lay out.

JG I chose a lot of material that I knew would be quite active on the eye, things that would create interesting visual meshes together, or geometries.

NT And this moving image work has a precedent in a series of artist's books you made on a photocopier, right?

JG Yes. A few years ago, I started using a photocopier to overprint pages for an edition of books titled *Alpha, Beta, Gamma...* etc. It's another ongoing series so I'm just working my way through the Greek alphabet. I've always been fascinated by this technology – the photocopier – its immediacy and the way you can use it as a tool.

NT I think that's the source of the strong photographic, filmic aesthetic that runs into *Work in Progress* – this sense of multiple exposures.

JG Well, in offset litho printing, you print four layers of ink: cyan, magenta, yellow and black. And it still kind of amazes me that a full colour image emerges from them. But by printing black only on a photocopier, and feeding the printed sheets back into the machine to print on again, you can open up the tonal range of black. You get all these lovely layers of texture and density. A lot of these earlier photocopy overlays are used in the video clips for *Work in Progress*. Colour, de-saturation, tonal density...these are all things the software is set up to manipulate. Various mathematical operators are used to re-mix the images.

NT The software is Max/MSP, right?

JG Yes. I started out using Max to make sounds for electronic music, but the way it works is well-suited to other things, like manipulating video and controlling AV channels in art installations. Max is interesting to me because it's a non-linear working environment. It encourages you to create work that is systems-oriented instead of linear, systems that are automated and generate diversity in multiple directions or operations simultaneously.

NT I think this is one of the reasons it's so great to see how these three bodies work together. The *ARS* series is so much about the logic of print and print-making and the linearity of the book, and your idea of the 'book space.' Then *Work in Progress* pulls the spatiality of 'book space' and its hybridisation into this multidirectional dimension. But you organise the two frames inside *Work in Progress* like a splayed book spread – there's even a suggested gutter line running vertically down the middle of the screen. This infinitely

scrambled, software-driven, moving image, is another 'book space' for you, I'm guessing?

JG Absolutely.

NT That sense of it being a paste-up board is brought home by your hands, which come in and out of frame quite often. They're the digits in 'the digital'.

JG And they're the evidence or agents of activity: placing, turning, folding, removing. They do the work named in the title. On an aside, my work's title is also a reference to *Finnegans Wake*, which, for the seventeen years it was being written, was known as 'Work in Progress.' I think Joyce's text can still be considered a work in progress, in that its meanings aren't fixed or even agreed upon. Its poetics are based on uncertainty and ambiguity. It's kind of generative in the sense that its meaning is to be completed by the reader. Plus, its circular form is also relevant to my work because of the way this deals with time. In both, there's no beginning or end.

NT It's funny. For me, there are three throughlines to the show: We've got these Joycean qualities, which echo in your compositional decisions. We've got your designerly feeling for process, layout, aesthetics, and source material. Then we've got this conceptualisation of what excites in your notion of 'book space', this hybridised space where all the spatialities we associate with book formats and print culture are spliced together with whatever the content calls up at both the symbolic and referential levels. I'm interested in how these three throughlines have affected your selections from the Henry Moore Institute's artist book collection. I wonder if there's anything you can say about the kind of selections you've made? It seems like they've come from your gut rather than from any logical curatorial framing.

JG The selections were based on my interests in the history of the artist's book and in creative approaches to book design and bookmaking. Some books were directly influential on my practice, such as the three Seth Siegelaub books. *The Xerox Book* is one of my favourites, and it's interesting that it links to the use of the photocopier as a means of production.

Some books were chosen due to their unusual format, content, or use of materials. For example, the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach catalogues with their cardboard box format. I love the materiality of the Carl Andre catalogue with its printed plastic cover and the fact that the catalogue itself is a tablecloth.

Lucy Lippard's *4,492,040* is a facsimile catalogue documenting her number shows – the pages are loose and can be rearranged by the reader. I'm currently working on a book design with Mathieu

Copeland on the artist Robert Barry so it was important for me to show his card from this exhibition.

Each issue of the *Wallpaper* journal is assembled in wraps made of different coloured and patterned wallpaper. I just loved this idea – elevating something that is purely decorative to the role of book cover, where it's also protecting and organising the inner pages. I like the way that some of these books challenge our notions of what a book can be. Several are self-referential, or about books. For example, the Peter Downsbrough book, *A Place*, which is displayed open in the exhibition, simply states, "here". It unites page and content and foregrounds our location and the moment of reading.

Sara MacKillop's *Faded Paper* reminded me of a book I made in 2016. It was called *The Zero Point of Sculpture* and to make it I 'printed' the shadows of books on sugar paper by bleaching the paper in the sun and masking areas with books. Printing became a way of recording absence since the books were no longer present.

NT Aside from MacKillop's book, the dates of all your other selections sit within a roughly twenty-five-year timeframe and exemplify a particular canon of conceptually minded artists. I'm guessing that canon was really influential when you were training and learning. I might be over-projecting here, but your selection looks like there are a set of aesthetic affinities there that have been really formative to you?

JG Yes, I would say so. I have always been interested in that period between the 1960s and 1970s. Fluxus was incredibly influential on me as a young artist working with sound. Later, as a graphic designer, I appreciated the presentation and aesthetics of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, particularly the way that the work often exists just as documentation. The 1960s were an exciting time where the book emerges as an artistic medium.

Now, more and more, I'm drawn to the possibility that a certain type of exhibition can be another kind of book space as well. And I just think the way that Conceptual Art was displayed demonstrates that.

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