The Unpresentable:
Artistic Biblioclasm and the Sublime

Raphael Vella

Abstract

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This study investigates the destruction of books carried out by artists during the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. It proposes the term 'artistic biblioclasm' as a general category that groups these processes together, and distinguishes this category from works of art that also deal with the theme of the book but make use of other media (rather than real books). In my own practice, various biblioclastic processes are applied, documented and then discussed in the thesis. I analyse the aesthetic, political, religious and other implications of artistic biblioclasm in my work, with particular emphasis on the cultural (and Catholic) context in which the work was shown: the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Gozo.

'Part One' opens with a review of the literature related to the theoretical perspectives that inform the thesis. This is followed by the 'Practice Methodology', which identifies the methods used in my work and offers some preliminary reflections about the theoretical dimensions of these methods.

'Part Two' explores the historical background of artistic erasure in the twentieth century and develops a descriptive and contextual typology of biblioclastic practices, classifying them into four groups: book alterations, biblioclastic book-objects, formless books and dematerialised books. 'Part Three' advances Jean-François Lyotard's work about the sublime in aesthetics as a viable theoretical framework that firmly defines artistic biblioclasm as a postmodern (rather than modern) artistic phenomenon. This connection with Lyotard's work is made possible by comparing the formlessness of the sublime to the loss of the book's 'form' in biblioclastic processes and also by linking some relatively little-known essays by Lyotard that focus on biblioclasm or the book to other, better-known areas such as the sublime and postmodernism.

'Part Four' focuses on the political and religious dimensions of biblioclasm and the problem of representation. It distinguishes between politically repressive or fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm and artistic biblioclasm. Lyotard's notion of the 'unpresentable' – influenced by his reflections on Judaism and the Holocaust – is examined and linked to earlier discussions about the sublime and to the work of some artists described in 'Part Two'. Analogously, in my practice the Catholic idea of the book as an authoritative figure ('Magisterium') is elaborated and 'deconstructed' in the actual processes that make use of doctrinal texts.

The research concludes by interpreting artistic biblioclasm as an attack on the closure of the book (with Jewish undertones) and a form of resistance to totalising political or religious forces. In my work, dogmatic interpretations of books and their 'truth' are related to the threatening possibility of violence in contemporary societies, and are ultimately shown to be self-destructive.

Acknowledgements

Author Declaration

I declare that I was not registered for any other academic award or qualification during the period of registered study in which the research was carried out. None of the material contained herein has been submitted wholly or partially for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Raphael Vella
April 2006

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Figures

This is a comprehensive list of images found throughout the thesis. Each figure number below (on the left) is followed by the artist's name (where applicable), title of work (or other details), year of production, medium, dimensions, provenance, and page number in bold type. Details related to many of my works can be found in the Documentation section at the end. Figures in the Documentation section are marked with the letter 'D' followed by a number.

Documentation

Introduction

This introduction defines the central terms used in the thesis, describes the research questions and internal divisions of the thesis, and explains how the research was conducted and is being presented.

Definition of Terms: The term that is most frequently used throughout this thesis is undoubtedly 'artistic biblioclasm'. 'Biblioclasm' refers to the partial or complete destruction of books (from *biblion* and *klaô* in Greek, literally the breaking of books), while the word 'artistic' specifies that this destructiveness has artistic goals. 'Artistic biblioclasm' is therefore being defined here as an artistic process in which books are manipulated, 'sculpted', erased or used as elements in assemblages and subsequently presented as altered books, book-objects, installations, and so on. Although the idea of destroying books for artistic purposes may seem rather strange to some, it has been carried out by some of the most important artists of the twentieth century: from Marcel Duchamp to Dieter Roth and Rebecca Horn. As this thesis will show, the processes of artistic biblioclasm that have been applied by artists are very diverse and have different meanings in different contexts.

In the context of this thesis, the term 'artistic biblioclasm' is being distinguished from 'biblioclasm', which refers to the destruction of book collections and libraries by totalitarian or theocratic regimes. From the word 'biblioclasm', I have also extracted a noun and an adjective, 'biblioclast' and 'biblioclastic': these three words bear an obvious resemblance to the more commonly used words 'iconoclasm', 'iconoclast' and 'iconoclastic' (the relationship between 'biblioclasm' and 'iconoclasm' is discussed in Part Four).

Other terms that are used in the field were found to be inappropriate. The term 'altered books' is too narrow in the context of my research. While some altered books have been included in this study of 'artistic biblioclasm', other larger installations and sculptural works described here cannot be classified as altered books. Different terms like "book-like objects, sculptural book works, and books transformed to the point where they lose their identity" (Drucker 1995: 361-62) used by Joanna Drucker are not specific enough because they do not point directly at the destructive process, while "misobibliotic activities" (Phillpot 1975: 100) coined by Clive Phillpot implies that the artists in question hate books, which is usually not the case.

I even considered another term – 'erasure' – which I eventually dropped because I found it to be too wide-ranging in its usage: derived from *radere* in Latin, the word 'erasure' literally refers to a rubbing out or scraping of existing signs from a surface, but it has also been used metaphorically to describe changing paradigms in twentieth-century art (I used both senses of the word in Part Two). While I continued to use the term 'artistic erasure' in describing works that targeted preconceptions about art itself, the term 'artistic biblioclasm' came to stand for a more focused 'attack' on the book and its different roles in cultures.

In order to define more precisely the different parameters of these terms, we can distinguish between three kinds of erasure in art. One kind of erasure is only *implied*, such as the erasure of representation in Malevich's suprematist paintings (Fig. 1). Then, in direct opposition to the first type, a second type of erasure is only *represented* in works of art, such as Dutch still-life paintings that depict deteriorating food and even books (Fig. 33), symbolizing the vanities of life. Finally, there is *actual* erasure, where the destroyed or deteriorating object *is* the work of art, often showing evident signs of the process of destruction in the final piece. This last category can be further sub-divided into ephemeral works, auto-destructive works, and virtually all
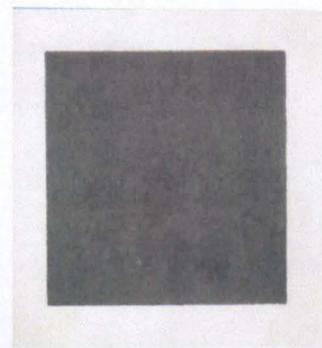
1
Kasimir Malevich
Black Square
1914-15

other works in which a pre-existent object is obliterated. Artistic biblioclasm also belongs to this category, because in all its forms, books are always present as a medium, not simply as a 'theme'.

The use of actual books also distinguishes artistic biblioclasm from the implied erasure of books in digital or computer-based media, where the book is generally absent by implication (more about this in Part Two). Artistic biblioclasm is therefore a subset of the larger class of works in which actual erasure occurs. In a world without books, biblioclasm would not exist. This simultaneous presence and absence of the book in biblioclastic works of art is its distinguishing feature, and will be analysed in greater depth throughout the thesis.

Research Questions and Summary: The main goals of this thesis are to describe and classify different manifestations of artistic biblioclasm, and to theorize about the artistic, philosophical and political implications of biblioclastic processes used by artists. By showing that the destruction of books in art is related to a post-Auschwitz crisis of representation, the thesis develops an interpretation of artistic biblioclasm that stresses the context-specific nature of the process and distinguishes it from similar processes adopted by totalitarian or fundamentalist regimes. My own practical research explores this interpretation by relating the book to sites of installation, its confrontational relationship with the public, and the wider cultural, religious and political contexts of Malta. This interpretation is built up gradually in each Part and is summed up in the Conclusion.

The Parts develop the goals of the research in a trajectory that starts from wider areas of discussion and moves into more focused discussions toward the end. Thus, Part One presents a wide spectrum of bibliographic material that deals with different areas of relevance in the thesis, such as artistic biblioclasm and the sublime. It

also gives a general introduction to technical and other practical concerns in my work.

Part Two studies a wide range of historical examples that can be contained within the term 'artistic erasure' (like abstraction, iconoclasm, vandalism, and so on) and then goes on to describe and develop a typology of artistic biblioclasm: book alterations (transformations of pre-existent books), biblioclastic book-objects (sculptural objects in which books are obliterated), formless books (books that have been destroyed to such an extent that they no longer resemble a codex volume) and dematerialised books (works of art in which books have 'disappeared'). The analysis of the work of artists like John Latham, Dieter Roth, Rachel Whiteread, Huang Yong Ping, and others is crucial at this stage of the thesis because it helps me to evaluate relationships between my own work and that of other artists at the end of Part Two.

Part Three then looks at a very specific area of aesthetic theory (the sublime) and defines the sublime and postmodern character of artistic biblioclasm, making use of the work of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. Some lesser known work by Lyotard related to the book is analysed here, too.

Part Four finally compares artistic biblioclasm to other types of biblioclasm occurring in politically repressive systems (particularly Nazi Germany) and shows how artistic biblioclasm can be related to the crisis of representation evident in art and critical theory 'after Auschwitz'. It shows that political or fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm generally aim to construct a new ideology on the 'ruins' of the old, while artistic biblioclasm is more radically negative. The site-specific nature of artistic biblioclasm is discussed here and in the Conclusion, in order to locate my practical work in the wider context of contemporary art practice.

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Hence, *practice* (Part One) is followed by *history* (Part Two), *theory* (Part Three), and finally *politics* (Part Four). In the Conclusion, I explain how this development is analogous to a similar development in my own practice during the years of research, and I interpret the 'place' of the book in contemporary art.

I believe that original contributions in this thesis can be discerned in the usage of a new term (artistic biblioclasm), its precise definition, description (especially in Part Two), and interpretation in my own practice; in the contextualisation of these artistic practices within the aesthetic of the sublime and Lyotard's notion of the 'unpresentable' (especially in Part Three); and in my analysis of Lyotard's contributions to discussions about the book in art and culture.

Presentation of Research: My own practical work with books started to develop gradually around 1997, i.e. five years before commencing my doctoral studies in London. This helped me to get to grips with the more technical aspects of the 'medium' before I started to work on a theoretical framework in 2002, the year when I commenced my doctoral research. Some of these early works are described briefly in the Practice Methodology section of Part One to show how my research developed.

The year 2002 was also significant because it also represented a period of increased artistic activity in Malta, in which I was involved as a founder-member of a new artists' group called START. When one considers the fact that Malta had not had artists' groups for decades before 2002 (see Vella 2003b), the significance of this development becomes more obvious. A number of my works that are presented in this thesis were shown in site-specific exhibitions curated either by myself or by the whole group between 2002 and 2005. Others were shown on a more personal initiative in other Maltese settings and in a personal exhibition in 2003 which was accompanied by a limited
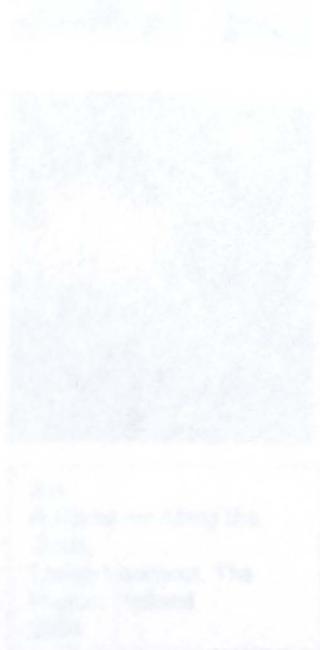
2
BOOK
Limited edition book
2003

edition book I produced (Fig. 2; Vella 2003a). One of the works discussed in Part Four (*God is on our Side*) was completed and shown during a residency at an artists' community in Sweden in 2004.

A work I showed in *Den Haag Sculptuur* in Holland in 2004 – a large-scale exhibition in which I represented my country with a four-metre tall, wooden and metal clothes-horse with steel books hanging out to 'dry' (Figs. 3 and 4; Den Haag Sculptuur 2004) – was omitted from this thesis because I decided that it cannot be defined as an example of artistic biblioclasm (actual books were not used in the sculpture). Nevertheless, although the political and religious issues it tackled (the omission of the word 'God' from the EU constitution) did not find their way into other works I produced, the discussions it provoked both in Holland and in Malta contributed to my own understanding of my biblioclastic research and my written work.

The system I adopted to help me link my practical research with theory was to alternate regularly between periods of writing and practice. Some of the visual research and creative work was produced in the same context as my written work (the digital imagery used in some pieces was manipulated and printed in my study); this arrangement was convenient and helped me to view and compare both areas on the same screen. My larger installations involved a more physical approach and were produced either in my artistic studio or on site (generally a combination of both). I usually reflected about these works in writing soon after completing a piece.

These writings were eventually woven into the more theoretical context of the thesis. Analyses of my own works are included in each Part: specifically, in 1.2.2, 1.2.3, 1.2.4, 2.2.5, 3.3.2, 4.3.1, 4.3.2, and the Conclusion. In this thesis, images of my works are being shown within the text and in the margins, alongside works by other artists. This combination of 'discourse' and 'figure' should help one to make

3-4
A Horse for Airing the Gods
Lange Voorhout, The Hague, Holland
2004

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comparisons between the visual and the theoretical or historical aspects of the thesis.

In the 'Documentation' section at the end, the works I produced as part of the research are presented chronologically, with details of media, dimensions, exhibitions, and images of processes used in the production of many of the works.

Part One

Literature Review and

Practice Methodology

1.1 Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to put the theoretical and art historical aspects of this thesis into perspective and to identify 'gaps' in the quoted sources. The literature review needs to be distinguished from the practice review: the latter surveys modern and contemporary works of art in which books are destroyed or disappear, and is dealt with in Part Two. Instead, the literature review describes and evaluates publications that refer to the key theoretical or historical areas of this research. More specifically, these areas are the destruction or alteration of books in twentieth and twenty-first century art, Lyotard and the book, and Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime.

In order to understand the necessity and full scope of the literature review, it is also essential to note that this thesis explores areas of scholarship and practice that are either completely unmapped or are only partially covered by the literature in the field. One can identify three areas in which this thesis pushes the boundaries of the discipline in question. Firstly, most works that describe the alteration or destruction of books in art refer only to a single genre or process (for instance, book art). This research fills the 'gaps' in this relatively minor area of art history by studying, comparing, and distinguishing between works belonging to different categories, including sculpture and public art. Instead of focusing on a single genre or category, this study incorporates examples of erased books that belong to a wide spectrum of artistic forms. This study also analyses the different aims

of artistic biblioclasm and political or fundamentalist biblioclasm and offers a specific interpretation of artists' works and intentions.

Secondly, Lyotard's writings about the book have never been brought together in a single study, probably because they are few in number and not very well-known. Compared to more 'popular' areas of Lyotard scholarship such as postmodernism, his references to the book have been largely overlooked by commentators. This research not only describes and compares the central arguments of these works but also links them to wider issues in politics, religion and art and analyses their relevance in the context of the practical aspect of the thesis.

The third area where this thesis contributes to a new interpretation of biblioclastic artistic practices is the contextualisation of these practices in recent philosophical discussions about the sublime. Works that deal with the destruction of books or more general artistic forms of erasure have occasionally made use of Freudian psychoanalysis or the deconstructive thought of Jacques Derrida as 'models' of interpretation[1]. Here, the destruction of the book is seen as an attempt to come to terms with the limits of the aesthetical, the political, or the theological. This research establishes a connection between the erasure of the book's form and the formlessness of the sublime.

1.1.1 Biblioclasm

The book in art is an area that started to be surveyed and discussed during the last few decades of the twentieth century. The first tentative essays and articles from the 1960s and 1970s were followed by more authoritative anthologies and publications in the mid-1980s and particularly in the 1990s. Most of these studies deal with artists' books, an area that is much wider in scope than the aim of this thesis. In any case, the literature of artists' books has already been analysed

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well by others, particularly Stefan W. Klima in *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (Klima 1998).

References to the destruction or alteration of books by artists can be traced to a fairly early stage of this literature. Writing about the dematerialisation of the art object from 1966 to 1972, Lucy R. Lippard described books by artists such as Ed Ruscha and Hanne Darboven and even the notorious chewing of a book by John Latham in 1966 (Lippard 1997). Exhibitions and essays that summed up some of the major trends in artistic transformations of books started to analyse the parameters of the expanding field in the 1970s. One of the most visible events of the decade was *Documenta 6* in Kassel, Germany (1977), in which a whole exhibition was dedicated to the 'medium' of the book. The exhibition was divided in two parts: *Metamorphosen des Buches* (Metamorphosis of the Book), featuring works by artists such as George Brecht, Marcel Broodthaers, Hubertus Gojowczyk, Anselm Kiefer, John Latham and Dieter Roth, and *Konzept-Bücher* (Concept-Books), with works by Daniel Buren, Hanne Darboven, Lawrence Weiner, and others (Documenta 6 catalogue 1977). Writing about the exhibition, Theodore Heinrich stated that "the common thread…is sadistic destruction…anything to make the book both unreadable and unhandsome" (quoted in Vogler 2000: 457). Several artists' works that will be discussed especially in Part Two and even my own practice (like the burnt diaries in *Oubliette*; Fig. 5) can also be defined as "unreadable" book-objects. Indeed, this unreadable quality will be seen as an essential component of several works being studied here.

5
Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time), detail
2003

During the 1970s and 1980s, writer and librarian Clive Phillpot became one of the more prominent champions of the artist's book and helped to establish artists' books as works of art. His numerous essays, including one he wrote for an anthology of artists' books (Lyons 1985), served to distinguish between the artist's book and the book-object, though it must also be noted that Phillpot believed that

the contribution of the book-object to the world of art was rather minimal. However, there were several other events and happenings taking place at the time that were more sympathetic toward the integration of the book in the field of sculpture. The *1er Manifeste du Livre d'Artiste/Livre-Objet* (1st Manifesto of the Artist's Book/Book-Object), organised at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in December 1981, helped to free the book from its static existence on a shelf by presenting it as a performance, with some participants wearing 'body-books' made from book pages. The manifesto was followed by an exhibition in Paris and catalogue entitled *Livres d'Artistes/Livres-Objets* (1985), presenting over a hundred works, including some scroll works and many transformed books. Italian Mirella Bentivoglio, one of the central figures in the Parisian 1981 happening, continued to pursue the transformation of the book in the 1980s and 1990s, both in her artistic practice and in her critical work (for instance, Bentivoglio 1983). Another work that discusses book-objects produced by Italian artists during this period is Francesca Cataldi's *Libri-Oggetto: Proposte per opere d'arte nella tematica del libro* (Cataldi 1992)[2].

Unlike Clive Phillpot, critic Thomas A. Vogler also focused on book-objects, i.e. sculptural productions that are about the book but cannot be read like a book. Vogler's writings (Vogler 1993, and a later revised version, Vogler 2000) analyse different processes used to make book-objects, from destructive or palimpsestic book alterations (Marcel Broodthaers, John Latham, Dieter Roth, Tom Phillips) to large-scale book installations (Buzz Spector). Vogler's work contributed greatly to the definition of the book-object and its establishment as a valid area of artistic research. He distinguished between 'writing' and 'text' (writing can be found in some book-objects, but text is usually found in books), linked the altered book to the notion of "*détournement*" proclaimed by the French Situationists, and showed how the artistic transformation of books obliterates some functions of the books (their sequence of pages, for example) while

changing them into works of art. In one important respect, however, my research is narrower in scope: for Vogler, book-objects "do not have to be made literally out of books" (Vogler 2000: 457), while in the context of this research, the erased or destroyed book is distinguished from *representations* of erasure (in media other than books or printed matter). The presence of the actual book in some form (used as a found object or as raw matter) is deemed to be essential to the definition of artistic biblioclasm in this thesis, especially in discussions about my own practice.

Also in the 1990s, Johanna Drucker wrote a historical survey of the artist's book in the twentieth century (Drucker 1995a), referencing several works that alter or destroy books or parts of books. In this seminal work (called *The Century of Artists' Books*), she also draws attention to the virtual erasure or transformation of books in electronic media, a subject she took up again in her essay on Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese's *Corona Palimpsest*. This was an installation that included two monitors and two book-objects that represented "as much a sign of the book's demise and negation as they are a living example of its continuity into contemporary time" (Drucker 1995b: 1). No book-objects, however, were included in *The Century of Artists' Books*, because, according to Drucker, they "belong more to the world of sculpture or installation art" and do not "provide an experience associated with books themselves" (Drucker 1995a: 14).

Other books published at the same time or in the next few years were books about individual artists like *John Latham: The incidental person – his art and ideas* (Walker 1995) and other works by Stephen Bury (Bury 1995), Stefan W. Klima (Klima 1998), and Cathy Courtney's *Speaking of Book Art: Interviews with British and American Book Artists* (Courtney 1999). Even though some reference is made in the last three works to artists who transform or destroy books and other printed matter, the main focus in all three is the artist's book. Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert's *The Cutting Edge of Reading:*

Artists' Books (Hubert and Hubert 1999), on the other hand, goes into some more detail about palimpsestic practices and processes of erasure used in the production of artists' books. Especially relevant is Chapter 5 in the latter publication, dealing with altered books that

> display creative and destructive acts simultaneously, by erasing part of an existing text, by introducing damage caused by fire, by including torn pieces of paper, by tearing out sections of pages, by subordinating certain book techniques, or simply by radical reduction.
> (Hubert and Hubert 1999: 72)

Although biblioclastic acts such as the ones quoted above are not as central to *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing* (Rothenberg and Clay 2000), this work is also important because it brings together some very different artists who worked with the medium or metaphor of the book (such as Dieter Roth, Tom Phillips, Alison Knowles, Xu Bing, and Barbara Fahrner), and relates their work to wider philosophical and poetical discussions about the book. Among the non-visual artists whose work contributes to the rich contents of this publication are figures like Jacques Derrida, Edmond Jabès, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, and Jorge Luis Borges (but not Lyotard). This combination of theoretical essays and artistic practices provides a suitable backdrop for anyone interested in researching the material, artistic as well as literary, anthropological and philosophical dimensions of the book.

Biblioclastic practices were given more prominence in an issue of the journal *engage* dedicated to Book Art, with essays about book burning, boiling, and destructive processes involving pupils in schools (Raney 2002), while Craig Dworkin (2003) focuses on the manipulations of text in literature and art. In her editorial, Raney offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of aggression toward books, explaining that the Freudian primary process of thinking (the anarchic, unconscious mind) comes to dominate the secondary process (the conscious, rational mind) during acts of hostility committed on books (Raney 2000: 7). This explanation is congruent with some of Jean-

François Lyotard's earlier reflections about art, particularly those associated with his so-called 'libidinal' phase. Lyotard's interest in the primary process as a transgression of rules and representations – evident in works like *Libidinal Economy* (Lyotard 1993a) and *Discours, Figure* (Lyotard 1971) – is reinterpreted later in his career as a sublime force, formless and unpresentable. The relevance of the formless in art is also analysed in great detail in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss' *Formless: A User's Guide* (Bois and Krauss 1997), a book that also delves briefly into Lyotard's early (Freudian) fascination with the transgression of form.

Similarly reliant on Freudian psychoanalysis are the earlier, French-language texts of psychoanalyst Gérard Haddad, like *Manger Le Livre: Rites alimentaires et fonction paternelle* (Haddad 1984) and particularly *Les Biblioclastes: Le Messie et l'autodafé* (Haddad 1990). However, neither of these books refers to artistic biblioclasm; *Les Biblioclastes*, for instance, focuses instead on totalitarian, fundamentalist and racist variants of book burning. Haddad traces a rather idiosyncratic relationship between historical examples of biblioclasm, monotheism, religious mysticism and the Freudian notion of patricide, or Oedipus complex. Other texts that contribute to the discussion about political or fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm in Part Four are *Library: An Unquiet History* by Matthew Battles (Battles 2004), Rebecca Knuth's *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Knuth 2003) and some essays in a collection called *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation* (Rose 2001).

Also grounded in theory is Rich J. Galpin's online essay entitled "Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest" (Galpin 1998). This essay deals with different forms of artistic erasure, ranging from Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* to John Latham's burning towers of books in the 'Destruction in Art Symposium' held in London in 1966. As the title of the essay

indicates, Galpin uses deconstructive (Derridean) theory (together with some references to Freud and Barthes) to explore the field of erasure in art. While such a Derridean interpretation of artistic erasure – employing the French philosopher's idea of placing certain concepts or words 'under erasure' – is potentially rewarding, it does not refer explicitly to the political or aesthetic aspects of biblioclasm, nor does it offer a critique of 'grand narratives' and proclaim the need to celebrate their demise in postmodern times. For such an explicit defence of postmodern resistance, we must turn to the work of Jean-François Lyotard.

1.1.2 Lyotard and the book

This thesis does not aim to show that the subject of the book dominated the thought of Jean-François Lyotard throughout his career. Compared with other areas that are rightfully considered by many to be the dominant themes in Lyotard's work (such as the sublime, the postmodern, the political, and the inhuman), the theme of the book may seem rather peripheral. Yet, in the context of a thesis that surveys and analyses reductive and destructive processes in art that transform the book or its text into, respectively, a formless or illegible entity, this less known area of Lyotardean scholarship acquires a new dimension. The theme of the book's limits (highlighted by the processes of erasure) also allows us to contextualise these peripheral works in the wider realm of aesthetics, particularly Lyotard's revival of the sublime as a major area of concern amongst art theoreticians and philosophers.

Lyotard's first important work was *Discours, Figure*, a book that – in the words of Bill Readings – "explores the nature of the distinction between discursive signification (meaning) and rhetoricity (figure)" (Readings 1991: 3). Even though this work does not deal directly with the subject of the book, Lyotard's complex arguments about the

overlapping of the acts of 'seeing' and 'reading' in *Discours, Figure* prepare us for his brief fascination with the world of artists' books, as exposed in his essay "False Flights in Literature" (in Lyotard 1993b). The idea that words in a discursive relation are agitated by the figural/visual (for example, the play of language and space in Mallarmé's poetics) is one that easily brings to mind the alteration of books and book pages by artists. Relevant literature on *Discours, Figure* and its aesthetic dimensions includes *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* by Bill Readings (quoted above), David Carroll's *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (Carroll 1987), Geoffrey Bennington's *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Bennington 1988), Christine Buci-Glucksmann's essay "Le différend de l'art" (Buci-Glucksmann 2001) and Mary Lydon's essay "Veduta on *Discours, Figure*" (Lydon 2001).

A much more specific reference to the subject of the book and artists' books appears in "False Flights in Literature", a translation of "La Confession coupée" (Lyotard 1974b). A slightly shorter version of this essay was included in an issue of *L'Art Vivant* that same year, alongside images of work by Humbertus Gojowczyk (one of the participating artists in *Documenta 6* three years later) and Christophe Leuterbreuver's "La Confession coupée", an eighteenth-century experimental book discussed by Lyotard in his essay. The title of the essay in *L'Art Vivant* was "Biblioclastes" (referring to the work of Dieter Roth, Humbertus Gojowczyk, John Cage, and others). The title as well as the central arguments of this essay provide the present thesis with two of its key concepts (biblioclasm, the "perversion" of the book's functions). These arguments surface at various points throughout the thesis.

Another relevant text in which the book is discussed in relation to the field of art is "Parce que la couleur est un cas de la poussière" (Lyotard 2000a), prepared for the vernissage of an exhibition of artist Pierre Skira's still-life paintings, held in 1997. Unlike the book-objects

of Roth and Gojowczyk (or my own work), Skira's work represents erasure by presenting us with painted books with blank pages. This is not actual perversion but a depiction of perversion. Nonetheless, this essay – written only months before Lyotard's death – establishes an important link between an early work like "False Flights in Literature" and the concluding part of his career.
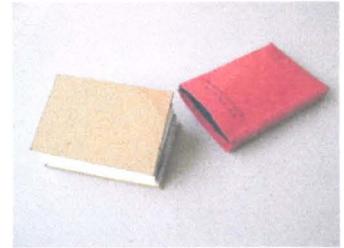
The political dimensions of the book are much more evident in two works published in the 1990s. In a short essay entitled "L'Europe, les juifs et le livre" published in the French journal *Esprit* in 1990, Lyotard confronts the contemporary problem of anti-Semitism in France and links the racist phenomenon to a wider, European distrust or hatred of the Jewish 'Book' (Lyotard 1990). This essay elicited a rather negative response from Jean-Claude Eslin, but the latter's disagreements with Lyotard were related to wider religious and political issues rather than the philosopher's references to the Judaic 'Book' (Eslin 1990). Lyotard again engages with the religious and political dimensions of the 'Book' in a later essay entitled "The Wall, the Gulf, the System" (Lyotard 1997: 67-82), where he considers the Gulf War to be a political analogy of the differences between Jewish and Islamic interpretations of religious texts. When read in conjunction with "L'Europe, les juifs et le livre", Lyotard's analogy in this essay becomes clearer. In Islam, the Law that is embodied in the Koran is manifested in politics (the political system must follow the 'Book'), while in Judaism, the Law is made manifest in the voice of an invisible, unknown God and thus remains beyond politics, legal systems and constitutions. These political implications contribute greatly to discussions about the anti-authoritarian foundations of biblioclastic processes in my practice, especially in works like *Catholic Pillow Book* (Figs. 6 and 7) or *God is on our side* (Figs. 8 and 9) that focus on the relationship between religious doctrine (as embodied in some textbooks) and the notion of a holy war.
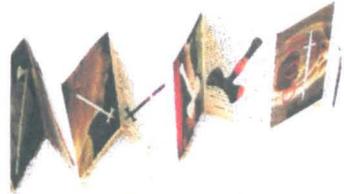
6-7
Catholic Pillow Book
Book with case; accordion fold
2004
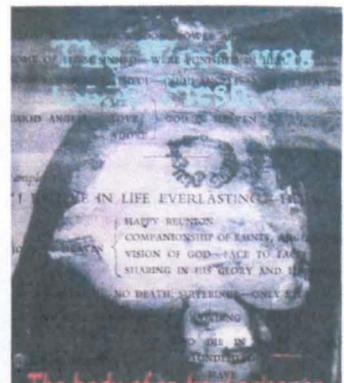
8-9
God is on our Side, details
2004

Other brief references to the book in Lyotard's work include his assessment of the status of books in postmodern times in his interview with Bernard Blistène for *Flash Art* (Blistène 1985), and a rather playful interpretation of fragments from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in his final book, *The Confession of Augustine* (Lyotard 2000b). Left in an unfinished state due to his untimely death, Lyotard's thoughts about God's immortal 'book' in *The Confession of Augustine* remain suspended between mysticism and irony, a 'sublime' mixture of spirituality and postmodern scepticism. Literature on this last book is scarce; an essay that cites the book and comments on its phenomenological analysis of time is Geoffrey Bennington's "Avant" (Bennington 2001).

1.1.3 The Sublime

Literature on the sublime is vast and this is not the place to map out the whole terrain of the subject. This category will focus instead on those works that were instrumental in dealing with the subject in this thesis, particularly works by or about Lyotard that permit conceptual connections to be made with the previous two categories in the literature review. Practically all these works were published during the last two decades of the twentieth century: this period, in fact, corresponds to a revival of interest in the sublime in philosophical and artistic circles.

However, there is one much older work that cannot be ignored in any discussion about the sublime. This is Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgement*, first published in 1790 (one of the most widely-used translations is the one by J.C. Meredith: Kant 1952). Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" (especially *§§23-29*) in *The Critique of Judgement* became one of the most discussed texts in philosophical aesthetics in the early 1980s, especially in France.

18

One of the first important poststructuralist interpretations of the sublime can be found in Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987) – originally published in French in 1978 – in which the author focuses on different aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory. In 1982, Lyotard's famous essay called "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" (Lyotard 1984: 71-82) distinguished between the modern sublime and the postmodern sublime, and introduced arguments about the contemporary relevance of some key arguments in Kant's "Analytic" (such as "negative presentation", the "formless") that would be further developed in later works. Lyotard's analysis of the works of French artist Jacques Monory in *The Assassination of Experience by Painting – Monory* (Lyotard 1998) applies Kant's sublime aesthetic to the presence of a contract killer in many of Monory's paintings. In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Lyotard 1991), he turns to the feeling of the sublime generated by the utter simplicity in the abstract paintings of Barnett Newman, while *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Lyotard 1994) is his most sustained, philosophical reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. These are the main works that are referenced in the sections of this thesis that deal with the sublime. In these works, Lyotard's unique combination of philosophical rigour and fascination with the world of art provides a very suitable conceptual backdrop against which to study biblioclastic practices in art. Lyotard's insistence on the imagination's inability to present forms when confronted by the feeling of the sublime is linked in this thesis to earlier notions about the "perversion of the book" and to the formlessness of the erased book in my own work.

Another important book about the subject originally published in French in the 1980s is *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (Courtine et al. 1993). This collection brings together several essays by French thinkers, including Jean-François Courtine, Louis Marin, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Lyotard. Most of these essays are concerned with the Kantian sublime; others reflect about the sublime as interpreted by different philosophers, like

Schelling or Heidegger. A more historical overview of the sublime can be found in Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (Shaw 2006), where Lyotard's ideas are located in the wider context of discussions about Longinus, Burke, Kant, Derrida and others.

Some essays in Paul Crowther's *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Crowther 1993) also deal with Lyotard and the sublime. In his book, Crowther also assesses somewhat critically Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in 1985 in Paris. Literature that is more sympathetic with Lyotard's postmodern interpretation of the Kantian sublime includes an essay entitled "The Sublime, Ontologically Speaking" by Rodolphe Gasché (Gasché 2001) and Hugh J. Silverman's "Lyotard and the Events of the Postmodern Sublime" (Silverman 2002). The latter essay reflects on Lyotard's question "Is it happening?" in relation to Newman's paintings. The question refers to the chromatic void that remains after the removal of representation in Newman's work; this void is analogous to the blank paper-pulp that replaces the linguistic contents of destroyed books in some of my works discussed in this thesis. Another book that significantly presents "blankness as a signifier" is Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999), a work that draws on the writings of Kant, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard. The relationship between art, the sublime and historical trauma is studied in great critical depth in Gene Ray's collection of essays called *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (Ray 2005); some of Ray's ideas are discussed in Part Four.

Finally, in a completely different vein, Clayton Crockett's *A Theology of the Sublime* (Crockett 2001) addresses theological issues and argues for a contemporary negative theology based on the Kantian sublime as interpreted by Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Crockett himself. Although art and aesthetics are very secondary areas in this book, some of Crockett's insights are relevant to my research and can

be compared to some of James Elkins' conclusions about negative theology and contemporary art in *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (Elkins 2004). Crockett's quasi-iconoclastic refusal to represent God finds an artistic counterpart in biblioclastic works that dismantle or pulp religious textbooks. Indeed, the religious significance of the sublime is older than Crockett's book: Kant, Barnett Newman and Lyotard have all explored some of these religious aspects, particularly the Judaic prohibition of images that represent God. In this thesis, this prohibition is compared to the erasure of the contents of books in art.

1.2 Practice Methodology

1.2.1 General aims of art practice

Two of the general aims of the written thesis are to *describe* different categories of biblioclasm in postwar art and to *theorize* about the wider aesthetic, political and religious implications inherent in the artistic processes used by 'biblioclasts'. The descriptive parts analyse the work of other artists as well as my own and help to pave the way for a more theoretical synthesis of ideas at a later stage. These theoretical discussions investigate the postmodern and sublime character of artistic biblioclasm, and distinguish it from processes of erasure that characterise modernism in the visual arts and from totalitarian and fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm. My own practice explores the latter political and religious dimensions and – together with the written part of the thesis – proposes an interpretation of artistic biblioclasm that clearly separates the destruction of books in art from its more totalitarian counterparts. In fact, artistic biblioclasm is proposed here as an antidote to totalitarian and fundamentalist practices. The 'destructive' methods described and analysed below will later be shown to present ways of opening up and breaking down

monolithic and authoritarian structures, providing us in the process with a postmodern form of resistance characterised by a fascination with the unpresentable and a Lyotardean "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv).

My research is initiated in practice, where contextual issues, problems and research parameters are identified, explored and reflected upon. Then these practical considerations are brought into contact with the work of other artists and a conceptual framework that permits me to reach my conclusions about artistic biblioclasm. My own work can be seen as a kind of case study that helps me to demonstrate the site-specific significance of biblioclastic processes in art and to contribute to an interpretation of the field and methodologies that are interdisciplinary in nature, bringing together art history, aesthetics, contemporary art practice, politics and religion.

1.2.2 Artistic Biblioclasm in practical work

This general introductory overview of my practice serves to describe the overall development of my work and different processes employed. Each practical project will be analysed in greater detail in Parts Two, Three, and Four.

In the context of my practice, artistic biblioclasm refers to the partial or complete destruction of books or book pages. The book is visibly altered, and the alterations are carried out in ways that remove or hide traces of the book's outer form and/or its text. This means that even when some element is added to the book during the process of alteration (for example, paint or polyester resin), this increase is accompanied by a relative reduction in one or more qualities of the book. In particular, what is lost is the book's identity: the altered book is no longer identical to its previous state or to other copies of the same book. Erasure thus renders the book unique.

In a few of my works (especially those produced between 2002 and 2003), the book is a generic object: it is (or was) a book but its title, author and genre are less important than the fact that it is a book. In these works, the book's text or outer form may be entirely erased or hidden, to the extent that the result may not look very much like a book superficially. Yet, in spite of its being hidden, the book continues to exist as the very material of the work. Other works (especially 2003-2006) highlight the specific nature of the books or texts that were obliterated. In these works, the books that are used are mainly religious or political texts. The cultural significance of these texts gives the process of erasure another dimension: biblioclasm here does not only obliterate the book but also what or who the book represents.

It has already been noted that artistic biblioclasm in the context of this research entails the use (and 'abuse') of actual books. In this study, the traditional form of the book is representative of a whole set of political, pedagogical and religious functions that stay in sight despite being erased, reminding the viewer of the book's persistent presence in our cultural memories. In an analogous way, the word 'iconoclasm' refers to real icon-paintings in churches that were destroyed mainly for religious reasons (many medieval iconoclasts believed that paintings were idolatrous objects). Like the word 'iconoclasm', biblioclasm has a Greek etymology that links the various biblioclastic processes used by artists to the thing itself, i.e. the book.

1.2.3 Analysis of methods employed

The various biblioclastic processes that are used in my work all make use of pre-existent books and printed matter that are destroyed either partially or completely. Below, these processes are described and exemplified by specific works, while the conceptual dimensions of

each process are analysed in order to assess the characteristics that distinguish them from each other.

Altered Books

All the books used as material in my work are altered in some way during the working process; what differs is the *extent* of alteration/erasure. The works that are described here are those in which book pages and printed text survive in a form that permits part of the text or book format to remain legible. The objective is to create a relationship with the book. Here, erasure has the dual function of making viewers/readers aware of the book and its limits by veiling segments of it. The parts that are memorialised (transformed from ordinary sheets of paper into artistic 'memorials') affirm the important role that the book's identity plays in the relationship formed between it and the additional marks and images that are superimposed on it. This partial legibility forms an alliance with the deconstructive process because it allows the viewer/reader to recognise the book that is being altered. This awareness of the specific nature of the book and its text became more important in my work when I started to focus on themes like religious indoctrination and violence (2004). Alteration is

10
Weapon of Mass Destruction
Detail
2004
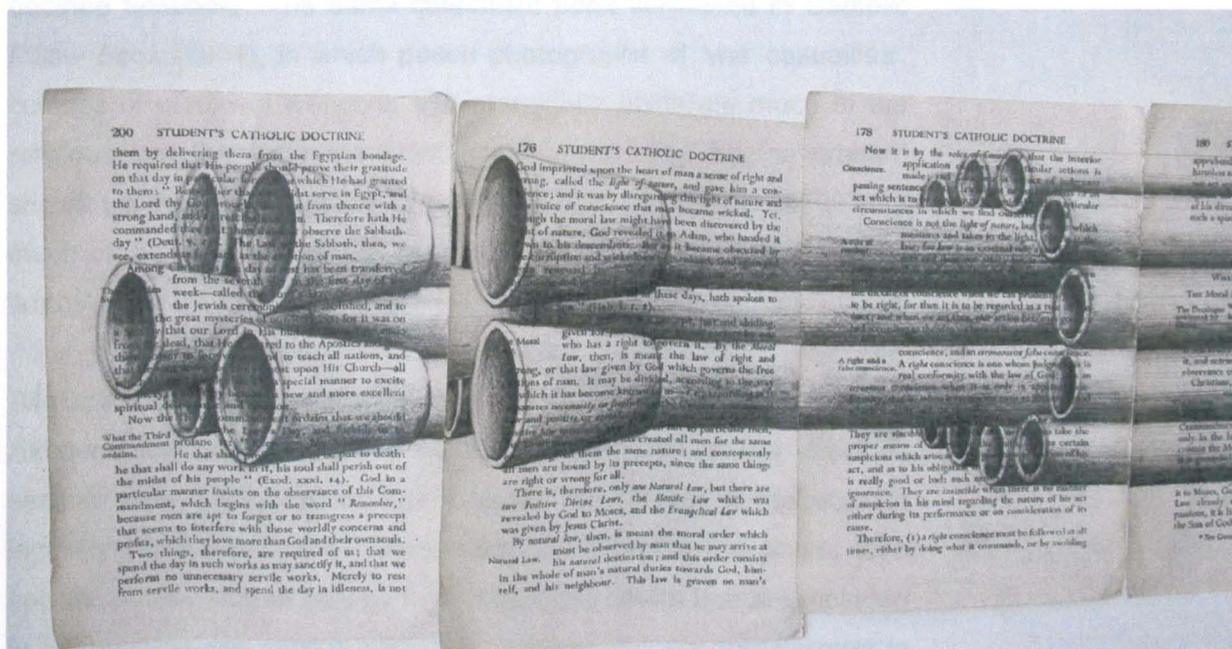
therefore a creative/destructive process that is directed at a specific 'target'.

The books that were altered in this way were all doctrinal texts, mainly English-language Catholic textbooks used in Maltese secondary schools in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The old-fashioned pedagogical style evident in many of the chapters in these books leaves very little space for classroom discussion and thus indirectly contradicts those very chapters that are supposed to teach the virtues of tolerance, respect and so on[3]. This emphasis on the book-as-dogma is expressed in the notion of a 'correct' understanding of religious matters (the idea that a question can only be answered correctly in one way). The relationship between indoctrination and violence is explored in works like *God is on our side* (2004), which exhibits pages from Catholic and Islamic texts that were overprinted in an ink jet printer with images that refer to the war in Iraq, terrorism and torture. Weapons were also drawn or screen-printed over these pages and onto the paper support on which they are pasted. In *Weapon of Mass Destruction* (2004), an elongated comic-like machine-gun was drawn over a series of pages taken from a Catholic doctrine textbook. The same catechism book was used in *Catholic Pillow Book* (2004), in which posed photographs of 'war casualties', cuttings of medieval weapons and marginalia obliterate much of the religious text that supports them. In these altered books, erasure shows up the contradictions of the book and simultaneously covers much of the book's 'lessons', resisting the hegemony of fundamental 'truths'.

11
Catholic Pillow Book, detail
2004

Biblioclastic Book-Objects

Although the books used in the works described in the previous section were disfigured in many ways, they retain a measure of legibility that permits the viewer/reader to attribute the pages to a specific author, title or genre. In contrast, the books that are included in this section are almost invariably illegible and are transformed to

such an extent that they become more like sculptural objects than books. These works fall within the artistic category of book-objects analysed by Thomas A. Vogler in "When a Book is not a Book" (Vogler 2000: 448-466). Vogler's category, however, is somewhat wider because the author includes works made in unconventional sculptural media like soap (Byron Clercx's *Purification*, 1993) and even architectural edifices (Dominique's Perrault's design for the new Bibliothèque de France), while a biblioclastic book-object is always a real book that has been defaced or destroyed in the process of making an artistic work.

Various methods were used to produce these book-objects. All these methods, however, share two factors:

1) The biblioclastic process transforms the book from a readable thing to a sculptural entity, wiping out most traces of language and removing any form of sequentiality (pages, chapters, and so on) from the book.

2) In spite of the changes described in (1) above, the external appearance of the book-object still resembles a codex volume. However rudimentary, the object's form visibly displays its origins.

A simple method of transforming books in this way is to glue the pages of codex volumes together. This method was used in an early work like *Theology* (1998), a wall-piece that combines twenty-four open and sealed books, with their front pages painted over in acrylic paint and then stencilled with the word 'God' (Figs. 12 and 13). The same method was later applied to a single catechism book that was first sealed and subsequently nailed to the wall in a site-specific installation called *Deus Absconditus* (2002). This installation (Fig. 14) also included a large book-object (more than four metres long) made from hundreds of pages pulled out of several cheap, romantic novels.
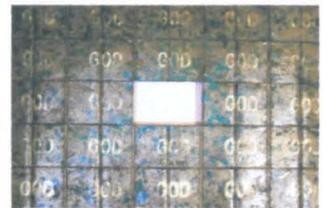
12-13
Theology
1998

14
Deus Absconditus, detail
2002

Another method I often used to seal books in my early works was that of embalming them in polyester resin. The transparency of the resin allows the viewer to see the book but not to open it. A work in which I used this method is *The Book of ConSealment* (1999). During my doctoral research, resin was still used occasionally, but paper increasingly gained importance as a medium from 2002 onward.
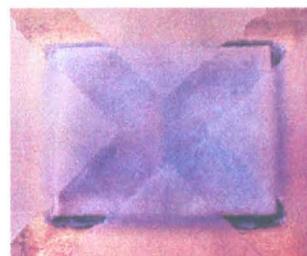
15
The Book of ConSealment
1999

Yet another process used to create biblioclastic book-objects is burning (Fig. 16), used in *Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)*, a site-specific work installed in an old prison cell in Gozo (Malta) in 2003. Here, twelve diaries representing Time and the months of the year were burned for different lengths of time. The installation showed a series of fragile, ephemeral books on thin, wooden stands forming a progressive gradation of brown and black ashes (Fig. 5). The diaries that were burned for a short period of time (for around one minute or less) still present a few hand-written notes and squiggles on their pages while those burned for longer periods were utterly erased.

16
Burning a diary

Formless Books
In this section, books are completely destroyed and turned into an artistic medium. While the burned diaries in *Oubliette* still resemble books, the works in this section render books totally unrecognizable. For example, part of the installation called *Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barra (Either In or Out)* – shown in Valletta in 2003 – was made of hundreds of shredded political articles dealing with the issue of Malta's EU referendum (Fig. 17). Most of the works that fall within this category, however, were made by using a pulping process in which pages from several books are torn to pieces, kept in water overnight (or longer) and then mashed to a pulp in a large vat[4]. This process of changing a book into pulp does not only unmake the physical structure of the book. It is also relevant to analyse the material and conceptual qualities of book pulp in relation to common paper pulp. In other words, what makes a pulped book different and

17
Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barrra (Either In or Out), detail
2003

more significant than any other combination of wet, mashed scraps of paper?

18
Book covered in pulp

1) Books that are recycled to produce pulp are no longer legible, and this process is irreversible. Blank sheets that are turned to pulp do not suffer this loss of language. Students and others who have seen me at work have sometimes been taken aback by this sculptural metamorphosis: from written thoughts to raw matter.

2) All sorts of paper pulp are immeasurable. Book pulp, however, is more significant because we do not only lose track of the types of paper (tissue paper, cardboard, etc.) that went into its making; we also lose track of the number of books, their titles, ISBN, authors, narratives, and so on. Essentially, what is lost is the specificity of the book. Book pulp brings together cheap and expensive publications, different authors and histories, images and text. It does not discriminate between books by different authors, nor does it evaluate works on moral or aesthetic grounds or produce literary hierarchies. Due to the fact that no quantification is possible, book pulp is neither complete nor incomplete.
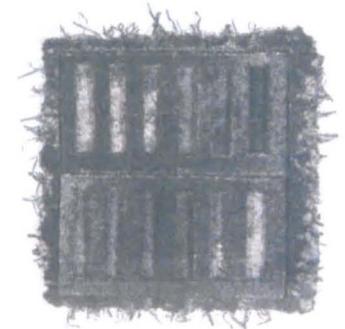
19
Twelve Non-Books
2001

3) It is definitely not adequate to describe book pulp merely as recycled paper. Books that are destroyed in this way become *non-books*. This negativity is a perpetual reminder of the book's absence and the presence of what is no longer a book. It reverses the traditional distinction between matter and form; with pulp, it is the sophisticated form of a book that is unmade to reach the crudeness of matter. In some works (like *Twelve Non-Books*, 2001), the simultaneous material presence and dematerialisation of the book is accentuated by pressing a book into wet pulp and extracting it again, leaving the hollow imprint of the book's spine in the pulp (Fig. 19).
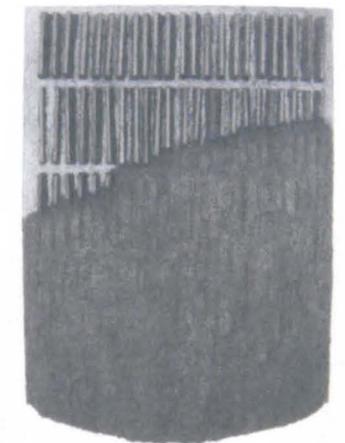
20
Melting Library
2002

28

During my research, I continued experimenting with book pulp, producing works like *Melting Library* (2002), a wall-hung piece that shows rows of books 'melting' into a black flow of pulp, and *Memorial* (2002), a red wreath formed out of several pulped history books.

1.2.4 Theoretical Dimensions of Practice Methodology

Rather than being directly influenced from the start by theory, most of my works draw on contemporary events and my own cultural upbringing in Malta. The latter is especially true of those works that make use of Catholic doctrinal texts. The philosophical background provided by the works of Lyotard does not guide the development of the practical work but serves to deepen and widen my investigation of the biblioclastic processes employed in my work. The processes relate to the theoretical part of my research in three, important ways.

1) All forms of artistic biblioclasm elaborate Lyotard's notion of "the perversion of the book", exemplified by the work of "biblioclasts like Dieter Roth" (Lyotard 1995: 125). Writing in 1974, Lyotard stated that the various surgical interventions carried out on books by hundreds of artists in the 1960s and 1970s wipe out the "thickness" of the book (its inner space, narratives, content) and transform the book's support (its sheets of paper and cover) into a skin on which the artist works like a tattoo-artist or plastic surgeon. The intentions of the book's author are sacrificed and replaced by other marks, even blankness. In 1997, Lyotard once again turned to the disappearance of language in books, this time in the still-life paintings of French artist Pierre Skira (Fig. 56). Here again, Lyotard refers to the disordered, blank books in Skira's works as "a case of dust" (Lyotard 2000: 301-307), a bare surface that substitutes any 'sublime' message that the books might have contained.

29

Several of the artists mentioned in Part Two, particularly artists like Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Tom Phillips and Elisabeth Broel, have transformed books in works that are variations on Lyotard's notion of the book's "perversion". In a number of my works, too, the book is 'perverted' in various ways. At times, photographs or words camouflage printed text in religious textbooks. Alternatively, polyester resin is used to seal the book permanently, reducing all its pages to the single surface of an open codex. Another type of 'perversion' is that carried out on a limited edition book I designed and produced in 2003 to accompany an exhibition of my work at Vilhena Palace, Mdina, Malta. Entitled *BOOK* (Vella 2003a), the book block is literally cut into two separate halves that allow the reader to compare different combinations of pages in the upper and lower sections (Fig. 22). In this case, it was not a pre-existent book that was altered but the traditional format of the codex[5].
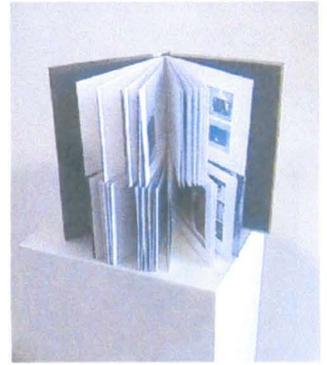
22
BOOK
2003

2) The significance of the sublime in Lyotard's thought from the early 1980s onwards is discussed in detail in Part Three. Here, the relationship between Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime and my practice methodology will be introduced.

For Lyotard, the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of powerlessness; it represents our inability to present to our senses a 'form' of our idea of totality. Reason and imagination are torn apart; reason conceives the absolute but imaginative thought cannot capture the absolute in a physical form. The ideas of reason are therefore unpresentable, while the feeling of the sublime can be described as an uneasy awareness of the formlessness of things. Graham Gussin's *Ghost*, described in Part Two, can serve as an example. Gussin took copies of *The Cambridge Atlas of the Stars*, pulped them, and used the white remains of the atlases to produce an edition of thin paper discs.

23
Deus Absconditus
2002

The unpresentable limitlessness of space is reduced to a ghostly circle.

Rather than address the infinity of the cosmos, several of my works focus on religious absolutes or other examples of infinity like Time. In *Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)*, for instance, fire erases the notes that mark time in a prisoner's diaries. In *Deus Absconditus*, the little catechism book on the wall is open at a page offering sublime 'proof' of the existence of God, while the large 'book' lying on the ground remains mute, except for the pages from cheap novels that form its decrepit cover. In *The Unpronounceable Name* (2003), the surface of the catechism book is torn open to reveal the formlessness of the book's 'guts' within (Fig. 24).
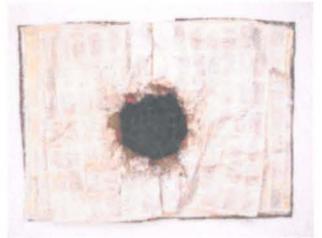
24
The Unpronounceable Name
2003

3) The aesthetic of the sublime does not restrict itself to the aesthetic; even Lyotard (in his writings on Barnett Newman and elsewhere) links the feeling of the sublime to Judaism (referring, for instance, to the Mosaic prohibition of 'graven images', i.e. representations of the Absolute) or to political issues. These religious and political issues are dealt with in detail in Part Four; here, it will suffice to show that artists who use biblioclastic processes often bring the negativity of the sublime to bear on historical traumas and power struggles.

In the second half of the twentieth century, some philosophers and artists found themselves in the position of having to bear witness to indescribable events like the Holocaust. In Part Two, I describe some works by artists like Anselm Kiefer, Micha Ullman and Rachel Whiteread, all of whom reacted to events like this by making use of deteriorated or dematerialised books in their work. In some of my works, especially *Catholic Pillow Book*, the relationship between religious doctrine, indoctrination, political power and violence is elaborated visually on the overprinted

surfaces of book pages. In *God is on our side*, the fanaticism of some individuals belonging to monotheistic religions is deliberately mixed with images of the Iraq war and texts taken from doctrinal books. These works reflect my own cultural (Catholic) roots, but they also represent all political conflicts that are 'justified' by religious narratives. The doctrinal book is perceived as a tool that can be turned into a monster of oppression that controls the minds of the masses, but its tremendous force recoils upon itself as the images of war and destruction deface its own contents. Artistic biblioclasm therefore wipes out old idols but resists their replacement with new ones. This interpretation of Lyotardean resistance is what constitutes, according to Robin Usher and

25
Study Table
2003

Richard Edwards, "the postmodern moment"; in their words, resistance "is a war without end, a constant refusal of mastery and of being mastered" (Usher and Edwards 1994: 224). In many works I describe in this thesis, it is the hegemony of a single political, artistic or religious truth that is resisted.

Finally, the political dimension of the pulping process I referred to earlier is evident in a work like *Study Table* (2003). A table with a central partition is loaded with white books on one side and black books on the other. All the books on both sides are in a state of decay. The books and the table are turning to pulp, becoming a hard crust of paper that flows down the table legs onto the floor below, mixing black and white to form a more neutral grey (Fig. 25).

Therefore, artistic biblioclasm is not being interpreted as a purely destructive process but as a process that keeps the search for the (political, religious, or other) 'truth' in perpetual suspense.

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[1] A good example of Derridean deconstruction applied to the destruction of books is an essay by R.J. Galpin (1998), 'Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest'.

[2] Cataldi's work brings together some of the most important book-works (in a variety of media, ranging from pulp to installation) produced in Italy at the time, including work by Bruno Munari and Cataldi herself.

[3] My interest in school textbooks was also related to the fact that I work within the field of education in Malta (lecturer in art and art education within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta)

[4] The word 'pulp' is Latin in origin. *Pulpa* referred to the fleshy substance of an animal's body and the fleshy parts of fruit.

[5] The book was hand-bound in a padded, hardbound cover, and produced in a limited edition of 300. It was launched during a personal exhibition called *BOOK* held at Vilhena Palace in Mdina, Malta in April-May, 2003.

Part Two

Artistic Erasure

The first half of Part Two deals with notions of negation, reduction and destruction in 20th century art, while the second deals more specifically with biblioclasm in art. The first is further sub-divided into six loosely chronological sections, each of which plots different manifestations of erasure in general, conceptual groupings like 'Abstraction' and 'Ephemerality'. The second classifies the destruction or alteration of books in art into four sections that focus mainly on various processes used to erase or destroy books, starting with the alteration of the codex volume and ending with the complete disappearance of the book. Similarities and differences between the two parts will also be discussed. The second half will conclude with an analysis of artistic biblioclasm in my own practice, in order to locate my work in a historical context.

2.1 Erasure in 20th century art

The following categories are being described here because they share a significant quality with various forms of artistic biblioclasm and their relationship with the aesthetic of the sublime. We can describe this quality as 'erasure', i.e. the elimination of an aspect of art or object that existed previously. Philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto describes the art of the twentieth century as a series of "erasures" leading up to the ultimate elimination: that of the distinction between art and the ordinary world experienced in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (Danto 1992). Erasure is also understood here as a process that is used to simplify the actual 'content' of a work. The reductive quality of artistic developments like abstraction or minimalism is also present in several works of art in which biblioclastic processes are employed. While a work by Barnett Newman reduces the 'content' of a painting to a few vertical bands of colour, a sculptural book-object typically

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translates the complexity of language into a simpler yet undecipherable work. In Lyotardean terms, what 'happens' in Newman's work is paint itself, while in an erased book-object what 'happens' is paper itself. In both cases, the 'content' is inexpressible, and this is what constitutes the aesthetic of the sublime. This does not mean that artistic biblioclasm is identical to abstraction or other twentieth-century avant-garde movements, but it does mean that the different (and often, unique) processes used in biblioclastic art cannot be divorced entirely from the artistic developments of the twentieth century.

2.1.1 Abstraction

The shift towards abstraction was in many ways the first significant example of erasure in twentieth-century art. What was being erased was a centuries-old tradition of representation in two-dimensional art. Implicitly within abstraction, there is always some negation, something that is not there (but could have been) that beckons us by its very absence. This negation was already implied in Kandinsky's explorations of colour as a pictorial element that could 'speak' to the soul and delve into areas beyond the reach of recognizable forms or words. However, the most thorough negation of material reality in abstract painting in the early part of the twentieth century can be found in the non-objective "zero form" of the square in the work Malevich began around 1913. In 1914, Malevich's Cubist painting and collage *Darkness in Parts, composition with Mona Lisa* (Fig. 26) showed a reproduction of Leonardo's painting symbolically 'erased' by two red crosses painted over her face and chest (this work actually preceded Marcel Duchamp's notorious reproduction of the Mona Lisa with a moustache). Soon, Malevich would reject even Cubism, replacing it with Suprematism and claiming that a new age had dawned for artists, an age when they would be asked to "reject love, reject aestheticism, reject the trunks of wisdom, ... (r)emove ... the hardened skin of centuries" (Malevich 1992: 176). Malevich's white-on-white paintings were the culmination of his Suprematist philosophy. Here, the paintings' sense of boundlessness was

26
Kasimir Malevich
Darkness in Parts, composition with Mona Lisa
1914

achieved by removing all allusions to "the hardened skin" of objective reality (including colour). With Malevich, negation became liberation and purification.

In Malevich's anti-naturalism, we can also experience an artistic paradox. His work *advances* by *withdrawing*; his art is avant-garde because it cancels all possible links to nature and relinquishes representational and narrative traditions in painting. Russian abstract art removed most traces of figuration, sometimes (as in the case of Rodchenko's *The Last Painting*) reducing the art of painting to a set of monochromes – the bare minimum of painting.

Even after the Second World War, artists continued to explore the "zero degree" of painting. A few years after the war, Yves Klein started his first experiments in monochrome painting. Around a decade later, he would write:

> The philistines often ask me: "But what does it represent?" I could answer back, as I did in the beginning, that it simply represents blue in itself, or red in itself, or that it's the landscape of the world of the color yellow, for example, which is not inexact; but what matters most in my opinion is that by painting a single color for itself, I leave behind the "spectacle" phenomenon of the conventional, ordinary, classical easel painting. (Klein 2000: 75)

On both sides of the Atlantic, painting continued to empty itself of the traditional, mimetic urge to copy nature. Barnett Newman produced his groundbreaking *Onement 1* in 1948. Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, begun in the early 1950s, were later described by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth as a "negation" or "denial" of painting and colour, where "(p)ainting itself had to be erased, eclipsed, painted out in order to make art" (Kosuth 1993: 191). During the same period in Europe, Lucio Fontana was already piercing his monochromes, Sam Francis (who lived in Paris between 1950 and 1958) produced "floating" monochromes in white and grey, and Piero Manzoni used "pure materials" to develop his *Achrome* works (Lucie-Smith: 1995).

David Morgan has referred to this process of negation as a kenotic process (process of self-emptying or self-effacement). Morgan

compared it to "the mystic's path to illumination"; in his words, avant-garde artists "strip away the accretions and conventions of culture" in order to move forward along a "path of negation" (Morgan 1996: 43). This path leads us to the basic ingredients of painting – the ingredients without which painting becomes impossible. However, unlike the mystic's illumination, these ingredients do not transport us elsewhere. What do we 'see' in Daniel Buren's vertical bands of colour and non-colour? As Lyotard notes, works like these indicate the "presence" of painting without resorting to "presentation" (Lyotard 1987: 25). An abstract painting by Newman, for example, only presents the fact that colour *is*. This is essentially the feeling of the sublime as expressed by Newman and commentators like Lyotard or Jeremy Lewison. To the question "What does it represent?", the artist can only answer (with Yves Klein) that it represents colour "in itself". The reductionism of erased books in art is similarly anti-teleological: it does not lead the reader to the completion of the book's narrative but leaves him or her in suspense.
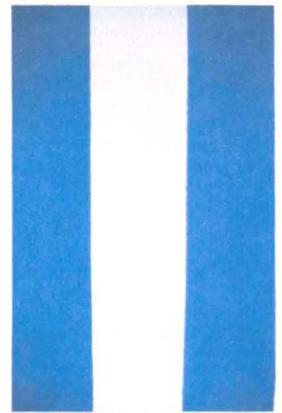
27
Barnett Newman
Profile of Light
1967

At best, this negation of representation can only 'represent' absence "in itself". Lewison has even compared the blankness of Newman's paintings to psychoanalytical interpretations of death, possibly the most inexpressible manifestation of this absence.

> For Freud, as for Kristeva, death is not representable in the unconscious. 'It is imprinted there...by spacings, blanks, discontinuities, or destruction of representation', a description appropriate to the paintings of Newman. (Lewison 2002: 25)

The destruction or negation of representation is therefore a way of coming to terms with what the mind cannot fathom. Like death, colour in abstraction presents us with the fact that there is something absolutely absent, absolutely beyond our grasp.

2.1.2 Iconoclasm

Some kinds of negation and destruction play a distinctively iconoclastic role in art. With Malevich, this iconoclasm was quite

literal; his Suprematist revolution came to replace the Russian orthodox tradition of icon-painting that he had been drawn to earlier on in his career. Many other artists have thought of their work as a complete abandonment of the past and its values. Luciano Berio refers to the work of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage in this way; according to him, "what they refused to do often became as significant as what they did" (Berio 1993: 22). An even better example of iconoclasm is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), in which the artist erased a work by Willem de Kooning. Over a period of one month, Rauschenberg rubbed out de Kooning's work, leaving barely visible traces of ink and crayon on the paper. Also in 1953, Rauschenberg performed an act of self-effacement by discarding in the Arno river the works that remained unsold after an exhibition in Florence (Ardenne 1997: 113).

28
Robert Rauschenberg
Erased de Kooning Drawing
1953

Calvin Tomkins has referred to the erasure of de Kooning's drawing as a blatant case of Freudian "patricide" (Tomkins 1980: 96), de Kooning being the older and more established artist at the time. This murder of a symbolic father is also expressed in some forms of artistic biblioclasm: John Latham's destruction of a book by the famous critic Clement Greenberg, for instance, was similarly iconoclastic and patricidal (a more detailed study of Latham's work will follow in the second half of Part Two and again in Part Four). The significance of Malevich's or Duchamp's ironic treatment of the Mona Lisa also depended on the cultural status of Leonardo's painting (Berio 1992: 22). However, while Malevich and Duchamp could only react to the Mona Lisa in symbolic acts of disparagement (by ruining *reproductions* of the original painting), Rauschenberg rubbed off an original de Kooning, thus transforming his gesture into a literal erasure of a pre-existent work (similarly, Latham's *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* is dependent on the pre-existence of Greenberg's work). By doing this, Rauschenberg also changed erasure into an artistic 'technique', one that functions by subtracting from rather than adding to art. Rauschenberg produced art by destroying art.

2.1.3 Vandalism

In the 1950s, *décollagistes* (or *affichistes*) like Mimmo Rotella in Italy, and Jacques de la Villeglé, Raymond Hains and François Dufrêne in France introduced a new element of destruction in art. Rotella detached parts of film posters from walls around Rome and pasted them onto a support. Villeglé occasionally collaborated with Hains (Ardenne 1997: 120) on 'poster art' and often retained random lacerations made by passers-by (he saw this as a challenge to the idea of artist-as-originator). Dufrêne typically dug deeper (Fig. 29), uncovering the encrusted, almost "geological" underside of posters (hence his expression *dessous d'affiches*).

29
François Dufrêne
Le demi-soeur de l'inconnue
1961

Artists like Dufrêne were also associated with anarchic developments in the literary scene, taking language apart along with the French *lettristes* from the mid-1940s onwards[1]. These developments were at least partly related to the 'death' of the language of reason as a result of traumatic events during the war (the Nazi concentration camps and Hiroshima in particular; Dufrêne 2005: 11). Writing about Dufrêne's linguistic perversions and neologisms, Didier Semin asks whether "a certain disorder of language remains…a legitimate correction of the world's order, like an opposition force at the heart of thought" (Dufrêne 2005: 18; my translation).

In their artistic work, these artists also accepted "a certain disorder" by attaching gestures of anonymous destruction and erasure to the picture support. The *décollagistes* elevated pictorial decomposition by turning public vandalism into art. While Rauschenberg used the eraser as an artistic medium, Villeglé admitted street vandalism into the realm of art and, more specifically, into that of the readymade. In the words of Jean-Louis Andral, French artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s were working "towards an apologetics of the manufactured or industrial object including its final form of trash" (Andral 1996: 137).

The anonymity of the vandal's act in these works is crucial. When Arman destroyed a petit-bourgeois interior in a public performance in New York in 1975 (Ardenne 1997: 114), he was making a deliberate artist's statement about a particular cultural setting (in fact, the performance was called *Conscious Vandalism*). Instead, the destruction we experience in the work of the *décollagistes* is more random and anonymous. According to Rosalind E. Krauss, these artists entered the "logic" of vandalism, one built not only on effacement but also self-effacement.

> The work of the *décollagistes*, in performing a strange marriage between graffiti and the readymade, ties the anonymous condition of mass-produced consumer goods (and the apparatus of their advertising) to a violent act of effacement that, in its actual anonymity, having been made by unknown vandals against the public billboards on the streets of Paris...is a form of self-effacement. (Bois and Krauss 1999: 152)

Street vandalism is 'public property' and therefore is susceptible to more acts of vandalism. Indeed, the very existence of vandalism constitutes a threat to itself. What Krauss makes us aware of in her perceptive comment is the cyclic, self-fulfilling nature of vandalism. To erase or tear a billboard poster is to become part of the process of erasure. The vandal becomes the vandalised.

2.1.4 Destruction

In Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, the paper survived the artist's month-long erasing process. Erasing or destroying the paper – the last surviving structure that could possibly signal the presence of 'art' – would then have to be interpreted as an attack not on representation but on the existence of 'art'. If Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing were the murder of the symbolic father, the destruction of the paper support would signify the destruction of the evidence. A parallel example in the realm of artistic biblioclasm would involve not only the removal or reconfiguration of the book's linguistic contents (as in some altered books) but the destruction of the book itself (Latham's *Skoob Towers* are a good instance of this).

Some of the earliest examples of slashed or destroyed canvases or paper surfaces can be seen in the work of Lucio Fontana in the 1950s and some members of the Gutai group in Japan, like Shozo Shimamoto and Saburo Murakami. In 1960, Jean Tinguely expanded the parameters of destruction in art to include sculpture, with his *Homage to New York* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, while in 1961, Gustav Metzger performed his first public demonstration of auto-destructive art in London, in which he produced his *Acid Action Painting* by spraying hydrochloric acid onto three nylon screens.

30
Gustav Metzger
Acid Nylon Technique
1961

The use of destruction for artistic purposes eventually became more extreme in the sado-masochistic performances of the Viennese Actionists: a member, Otto Muehl, wrote in 1963 that he could "imagine nothing significant where nothing is sacrificed, destroyed, dismembered, burnt, pierced, tormented, harassed, tortured, massacred…stabbed, destroyed, or annihilated" (Rush 1999: 56).

Both Metzger and the artists of the Gutai group were responding to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and (in Metzger's case) to the Nazi concentration camps. Ross Birrell writes:

> For Metzger, auto-destructive art represented the only effective response to the destruction and violence of a humanity which lived in the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. (As a Polish Jew growing up in Germany in the 1920s and 30s, Metzger had witnessed Nazi violence at first hand. Later he would discover that both his parents had perished in concentration camps). Such horrifying events motivated and governed Metzger's development of auto-destructive art as a critical action against a corrupt society. If Adorno considered poetry impossible after Auschwitz, Metzger's Acid Nylon Technique implied that after Hiroshima there could be no more painting. (Birrell 1999: 5)

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Metzger also contributed considerably – with John Latham – to the *Destruction in Art Symposium* in London in 1966. His name became synonymous with destructive art or, as one critic wrote, with an "aesthetic of revulsion" (Wilson 1999: 74). In his essay on Metzger, Andrew Wilson also quotes Lyotard's belief that the Holocaust cannot and should not be represented in art, because the extreme horror of Auschwitz is ultimately unpresentable. Metzger not only avoids representation in his work; his political beliefs are expressed by destroying the framework that might have supported representations (a stretcher).

2.1.5 Dematerialisation and Anti-Form

Agnes Kohlmeyer has written that the minimalists who appeared in the 1960s "shared a refusal of compositional hierarchies" (Kohlmeyer 2001). It can be argued that there was already a certain 'minimalism' at work in Malevich's black squares and Newman's paintings. Indeed, minimalism in art is always implicitly a form of erasure, since it 'minimizes' by simplifying, reducing, refusing or simply by negating something. What the minimalist work does *not* erase is objecthood itself. This "dematerialization of the art object" – documented by Lucy Lippard in *Six Years...*– pertains more specifically to the history of Conceptual art, although Lippard also referenced the work of minimalists and other artists frequently throughout the book. According to Lippard and John Chandler, the dematerialisation of art refers to art "that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively" (Lippard 1997: 42), making the object almost irrelevant or obsolete. As early as 1964, Fluxus video artist Nam June Paik presented an empty film called *Zen for Film* in New York. In 1965, Joseph Kosuth started to produce 'propositions' about art rather than individual works. In 1968, Daniel Buren sealed the door of a gallery with vertical white and green stripes. In 1970, John Baldessari cremated much of his previous work. While Metzger physically destroyed the object and the Minimalists abandoned the frivolity or pictorial excesses of earlier art, many Conceptual artists rid themselves of the need to produce a physical object that can be 'consumed'.

*Six Years...*also documents the work of artists who prefer formless, indeterminate materials to the well-organised form of a 'good' Gestalt. Referred to variously as Anti-Form, Process art and Anti-Illusion, these works often look accidental, thus following to a certain degree the path trodden by Jackson Pollock. In the 1960s, Robert Morris produced works in felt that yielded to gravity, falling in piles on the floor. At around the same time, Lynda Benglis made enormous "spills" in brightly-pigmented latex and amorphous foam sculptures (Schwabsky 2002). Robert Smithson was exploring his notion of entropy and produced works like *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), *Glue Pour* (1969), and *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970). These earthworks, pours or spills emphasise the formlessness of matter, and deliberately transgress compositional or pictorial unity. They are materials in the process of *not* becoming something, rather than finished sculptural objects. Some book-works described in the second half of Part Two (for instance, some of the work by Huang Yong Ping) similarly transform books or magazines into piles of paper pulp. In some of my work, too, history or religious textbooks become pulp, transforming the unity of a text (or an ideology) into sheer matter.
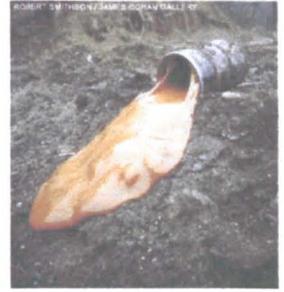
31
Robert Smithson
Glue Pour
1969

2.1.6 Ephemerality

At times, the process of erasure appears to acquire a life of its own; the artist only initiates the process and subsequently the work erases itself over a period of time, usually offering the viewer the possibility of observing changes taking place within the work. The work is said to be ephemeral, which generally means that it is subject to the effects of time. One could argue that all works of art are subject to the deteriorating effects of time. But works that are deliberately ephemeral are different because in them, the process of erasure itself becomes the subject. Instead of presenting us with a fixed, single image, the ephemeral work is relatively open-ended. The centrality of the time-factor is such that the work cannot be epitomised or represented by one definite stage in its existence; rather, the only distinguishing feature of such a process is its changeability.

32
Dieter Roth
Chocolate Lion (Self-Portrait as a Lion)
1971

There were already elements of ephemerality in Metzger's early work, particularly "auto-creative" works like *Liquid Crystal Projections*, which he started in 1965. During the same period, Dieter Roth criticized the notion of the 'masterpiece' by using organic materials that would rot, like chocolate and cheese, and transformed printed matter into 'sausages'. Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth chose what is probably the simplest example of a transforming substance – a melting block of ice. Jessica Prinz states that the emphasis in Kosuth's water-based concepts at the time was "on formlessness". She continues:

> Kosuth's melting ice cubes (in one case, humorously labeled "Present Whereabouts Unknown") subvert objecthood, as do the shifting states of physical materials in more recent works of Performance art — Joseph Beuys's *Fat Corner*, for example, or Laurie Anderson's *Duets on Ice*. Not stable objects but temporal processes are the subjects of this art. (Prinz 1991: 53)

These "temporal processes" almost invariably lead to a chaotic state in which the previous 'meaning' of the object is lost and cannot be recuperated. It is possible to trace an analogy with some biblioclastic processes in art here. As a container of 'meaning', the book is the 'good form' that is undone by the biblioclastic process. The artist who does violence on books attacks the finality of meaning. Following Lyotard in Part Three, we shall also see how the laws of discourse (in some kinds of books, for instance) are sometimes violated by the figural, a force that disrupts signification.

2.2 Artistic Biblioclasm

Many examples of erasure in postwar and contemporary art are directed against some aspect of art itself: Metzger's *Acid Action Painting*, for instance, specifically targets art and its limitations. However, if the process of artistic erasure is turned against books, the significance of the process changes. While – as has already been stated – the destruction or erasure of whole texts or parts of books shares some characteristics with other forms of erasure described in previous sub-sections (it is similarly reductive, for example), it is

important not to underestimate the different implications of the two activities. The destruction of a book is often directed at what the book (either the individual title or the wider 'genus' of books) represents to the artist and/or society. Destroying a piece of canvas is different because canvas is recognizably symbolic of the world of 'art' (or, more specifically, of painting). In contrast, the book is suggestive of a much wider (and often, more complex) variety of cultural, ideological, literary, religious and other meanings. The artistic destruction of books delves into these complex layers.

33
Jan Davidsz de Heem
Still Life of Books
1628

Even though artistic biblioclasm is mainly a postwar and contemporary phenomenon, the depiction of decrepit books in paintings already formed part of the Dutch *stilleven* (still life) tradition in the seventeenth century. Already in these early artistic encounters with books, there is an undisguised shade of scepticism about the 'sublime' nature of book knowledge. Painters like Pieter Claez and Jan Davidsz de Heem depicted books either alone or with other vanitas objects like a skull, clock or extinguished candle. In an age when book production was expanding at a very fast rate (making books available to a wider readership), some painters meditated instead on the vanity of knowledge and the fragility of paper. Norbert Schneider interprets this scepticism towards books as the reaction of more conservative, educated members of the public who felt threatened by the increasing 'democratization' of knowledge and information. The abundance of available titles was considered by

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many to be characterized by a reduction in quality, while their existence as records of past events and thoughts turned them into 'dead' objects or symbols of death.

> Added to such pronouncements, there was the irritating realization that books – and indeed any printed media – recorded things of the past, so that they could only ever contain experiences that would soon be superseded or had been superseded already. (Schneider 2003: 189)

Books also found their way into more modern still life paintings by artists like Van Gogh, but the integration of destroyed or erased texts into works of visual art became much more prominent during the second half of the twentieth century. The driving force behind this development cannot be looked for solely in the expansion of artistic modernism or in the avant-garde obsession with innovation. Ignoring the political, religious and other ideological factors that influenced this development would produce a very biased account because books cannot be divorced completely from politics, religion and culture. For example, the rise of political totalitarianism in the twentieth century directly affected the 'destructive' work of Metzger as well as the work of several artists who have worked with books. This is not to say that more formal influences are irrelevant; what is being suggested here is that the iconoclasm of artists like Malevich and Duchamp, the 'discovery' of the found object as a new sculptural medium, the reductionism of abstraction, and literary experiments in the 1940s and 1950s (see reference to Dufrêne's work in 2.1.3) must be woven into history, political trauma and the need to re-think human thought "after Auschwitz" (paraphrasing Adorno). Aggression towards books in art is rarely only about 'art' (in the sense that Duchamp's work might challenge the ontological status of a painting or an object); hence, it must be studied in the wider context of representation, a context that has both religious (particularly Judaic) and political connotations. Modernism (the erasure of pictorial narration) must therefore be interpreted in the light of both counter-modernism (the reactionary revival of nationalistic narratives in Nazism, for instance) and postmodernism (the loss of faith in all "grand narratives" following the horrors of Auschwitz and similar events). In spite of the fact that artistic biblioclasm is a relatively minor phenomenon in the history of

twentieth and twenty-first century art, it nevertheless encompasses some of the major themes and ideas that characterize contemporary human thought.

2.2.1 Book alterations/erasures

One of the most common processes used in artistic biblioclasm is to transform a book in a way that changes its appearance without obliterating the book's function as an object that can be read or seen sequentially. Books that are artistically transformed in this way are often referred to simply as altered books. The use of printed text in early twentieth-century art can be seen as a precursor of the altered book, although the intentions of the earlier artists were usually quite different. Picasso experimented with the technique of collage, introducing newspaper cuttings into two-dimensional compositions. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the Italian Futurists also used printed text (or painted text simulating print) in their dynamic paintings while several Russian avant-garde artists were experimenting with the book format and typography. Varvara Stepanova produced a series of one-off books with poetic text painted over pages and collage elements cut from sheets of newspaper. Works by the Russian artists were also "intentionally ephemeral" (Drucker 1995a: 47): their use of non-archival materials considerably affected the lifespan of their works. However, the decision to incorporate dissected elements of authentic, printed text in these works was important in another respect. Now, words were being treated as a pre-existent medium that could be manipulated by the artist. While a seventeenth-century Dutch still life with books typically reproduced printed or handwritten text in paint, artists now cut out sections of text and pasted them directly onto the paper or canvas support. The selected pages were then altered either by being painted upon (with Stepanova's "transrational" poetry, for example) or by being de-contextualised (for example, in Picasso's Cubist still life paintings).

34
Varvara Stepanova
Gaust Chaba
1919
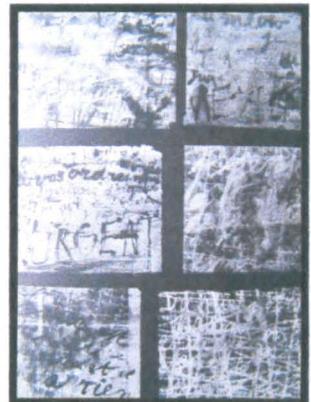
35
Jean Dubuffet
Six Messages
1944
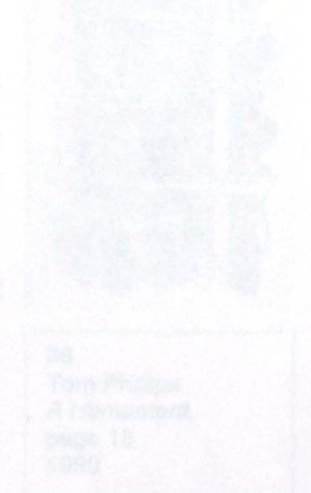
These early alterations and erasures of printed text influenced art in two separate ways. There were artists who continued to work with printed text as a support or collage element in their work. In 1944, for example, Jean Dubuffet produced a series of *Messages* (Fig. 35), scribbles in India ink and gouache on newspaper. Described by Yve-Alain Bois as an "entropic deliquescence of language" (Bois and Krauss 1999: 178), these little scraps of paper are covered in barely legible handwritten messages, some of which seem crossed out again by the artist. Dubuffet's calligraphic *art brut* technique (or lack of technique) purposely deforms the formal aesthetic qualities of the newspaper page – derived from a public "consensus" regarding legibility – and obliterates these qualities by covering them in small graffiti-like marks and words.

A second direction taken by artists working directly on printed pages is indicated by Johanna Drucker (Drucker 1995a: 47), Helen Douglas (Courtney 1999: 130) and Stephen Bury (Bury 2002: 08), all of whom consider the early experiments carried out by Russian artists like Goncharova and Lissitsky as the first examples of book art. Many book artists and even some 'mainstream' artists have sketched, drawn or painted on original volumes, deliberately mixing their visual ideas with their experience of reading. The result often crosses and blurs the boundaries of 'seeing' and 'reading', of originality and citation, and of presence and disappearance. Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert explain this indeterminacy by referring to the open-endedness of postmodern genres. They also point to the importance of erasure in these books:

All these altered books display creative and destructive acts simultaneously, by erasing part of an existing text, by introducing damage caused by fire, by including torn pieces of paper, by tearing out sections of pages, by subordinating certain book techniques, or simply by radical reduction. (Hubert and Hubert 1999: 72)

To illustrate their notion of the altered book, Hubert and Hubert describe works like *A Humument* (started in 1966) by Tom Phillips, *Aus des Liederbuch des Mirza Schaffy* (1992) by Elisabeth Broel, Robert Groborne's *Une Lecture* (1981) and Jean Le Gac's *La Boîte de couleurs* (1995). Phillips used different methods of destruction and
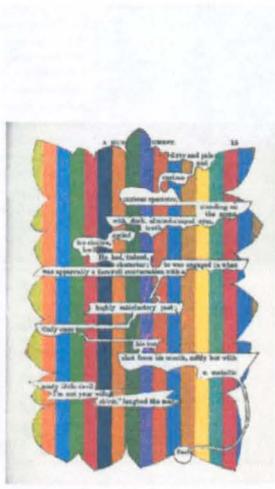
36
Tom Phillips
A Humument,
page 15
1980

bricolage, erasing W.H. Mallock's novel and simultaneously extracting countless new situations and narratives from the book's pages. Broel also worked on a nineteenth-century edition, using techniques of "erasure and erosion" that "serve to impair the borrowed text" (Hubert and Hubert 1999: 78). Similarly, Groborne mutilated Edmond Jabès' *Le Livre des Ressemblances*, paralleling the poet's ideas about the 'resemblance' of different texts, while Le Gac veiled his own writings with lines and scribbles in *La Boîte de couleurs*. Several other artists not mentioned by Hubert and Hubert could be included here: for instance, the Jewish-American artist Helene Aylon's highlighting of homophobic or misogynist passages in the Torah (*The Liberation of G-D*, produced over several years in the 1990s).

Occasionally, books are altered in ways that 'open up' the physical form of the codex. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) have taken apart literary classics like Franz Kafka's *Amerika* and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and used the pages as a grid-like ground on which different images are painted. Rollins refers to the books that he and the adolescents from the South Bronx use as a "visceral struggle" and "a battleground, not only for the images we paint on them, but for the clashing of issues that always seems to surround discussions of our work" (Paley 1995: 43).

Alternatively, text sometimes departs altogether from the pages of a book and ends up on a wall, as in several works by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. In *Zero & Not* (1985), Kosuth transformed a segment from Sigmund Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* into what the artist calls a "made-ready", a borrowed text that is crossed out with black lines. The walls of the space are filled with this negated Freud, in which the viewer can experience a "cancellation which constructs as it erases, suggesting 'one thing' (a field of language itself) present, while removed" (Kosuth 1993: 221). Here, the book is erased (at least partially) not only because its words are cancelled by the artist but also because the book itself is transformed into architecture (the space of the gallery).

37
Joseph Kosuth
Zero & Not
Achim Kubinski
Gallery, Stuttgart
1985

Finally, not all book alterations are definitive or even made by the artist. Earlier, we saw that some ephemeral works (for instance, Roth's chocolate sculptures) continue to change over time. Applied to artistic biblioclasm, this ephemerality would imply that the artist is only partially responsible for the book's alteration. The *Silkworm Books (Tsan series)* produced by Chinese artist Xu Bing in the mid-1990s are a case in point. By placing silkworm eggs onto books and newspapers, Xu Bing initiates a natural process of silk-spinning and transformation that not only exhibits the biological states of the silkworms (from egg to worm, and then from cocoon to moth) but also the process of gradual obliteration undergone by the books. Linda Weintraub explains that "Bing measures his success in terms of the destruction of words and meaning and language" (Weintraub 2003: 373). Words are understood by the artist as a form of control; hence, the natural erasure of language is a form of liberation. This concept bears a relationship with Ch'an (or Zen) Buddhism, which tries "to avoid resolution, not attain it" (Weintraub 2003: 364). Weintraub continues:

> ...Ch'an Buddhism encourages people to abdicate language in order to release experience from within. Bing adopts two of its practices for liberating minds from their bondage to language. One is silence (no language). The other is paradox (no meaning). Bing measures his accomplishment according to his ability to avoid meaning, not create it. (Weintraub 2003: 373)

This avoidance of meaning has already been compared to the loss of representation evident in some forms of abstraction and other iconoclastic or destructive processes in twentieth-century art. In Part Three, it will also be related to the sublime aesthetic. Xu Bing's

alterations reject the 'wisdom' of words by allowing the silkworms to transform the book into a sculptural object. His work, in fact, forms a bridge between the book alterations we have discussed above and the more sculptural book-objects described in the next sub-section.

2.2.2 Biblioclastic Book-Objects

Clive Phillpot defined a book-object as an "(a)rt object which alludes to the form of a book" (Phillpot 1982: cover). Similarly, Johanna Drucker refers to "book-like objects" and "sculptural book works" (Drucker 1995: 361) in order to distinguish these genres from artists' books. While the book format usually presents the reader with a series of surfaces that are scanned sequentially, the book-object typically refers more to the tradition of three-dimensional sculpture, which presents us with a surface that is appreciated circumferentially (by moving round the object). Moreover, sculptural objects are generally one-off works while books are usually reproduced in editions. Thomas A. Vogler is also correct in writing that "we should resist the tendency to call anything with verbal text a book or artist's book or even a book-object, simply because it is a sculpture with text" (Vogler 2000: 449). Vogler adds that we need to approach "an understanding and appreciation of book-object art…in its historical and material specificity" (Vogler 2000: 458) rather than broaden the definition of a book or book-object to include any text-based work. Following Vogler's recommendations, this sub-section will focus on sculptural works that reference the more recognizable codex format of the book. In addition, the works discussed here belong to a sub-genre of the book-object that is even narrower than the scope of Vogler's study, because these works are not just book-objects but objects whose physical presence appears threatened by some kind of destructive process.

One of the best early examples of "the complete progression, from book to treated book to book-object" included in Vogler's essay (Vogler 2000: 453) is Marcel Broodthaers' *Pense-Bête* (1964). *Pense-Bête* started off as a poetry book but was soon transformed
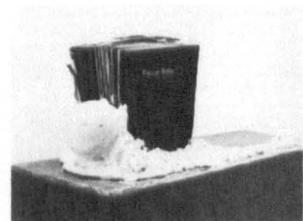
39
Marcel Broodthaers
Pense-Bête
1964

into an altered book by the author himself, who started "erasing large chunks of text while leaving incomplete fragments still visible here and there" (Vogler 2000: 454). Eventually, Broodthaers also made a sculpture out of some remaining copies of the book, embedding them in plaster. In doing so, Broodthaers was implicitly erasing himself, particularly his past as a poet. His gesture consciously allowed the visual to impose itself on the literary.

40
John Latham
God is Great #1
1991

Broodthaers' work is typical of a whole branch of book-objects, in that *Pense-Bête* changes actual books into a sculptural form, preserving their identity but simultaneously destroying their function as containers of information. Artists who have created works that match this description include Buzz Spector, Byron Clercx and John Latham, whose *God is Great #1* (1991) shows Christian, Jewish and Islamic publications floating in a precariously balanced pane of glass (Fig. 40). In this piece, the authoritarian function of the religious books is played against an ironic ecumenism: the three books co-exist dangerously in the same 'transparent' space, but none of them can be opened. Similarly balanced and distant are the books in Rebecca Horn's series called *Ocean Library* (1991), in which well-known novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick,* T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Samuel Beckett's *The Lost Ones* are individually boxed in glass and wooden frames, with fish and blobs of colour 'swimming' in their midst. In Carsten Ahrens' words,

41
Rebecca Horn
Ocean Library. Sylvia Plath "The Bell Jar"
1991

> ...Rebecca Horn transfers the visionary materials of a generation in uproar to a realm of unreachable stillness. These books are tied with strings, settled between shells and fishes, far removed...until perhaps the seals locking the volumes are loosened and the books return to a time of renewal and visionary hope. (Ahrens 1997: 306)

The "unreachable stillness" described by Ahrens is also unreadable. Although all the books used in this series are open, the pages in most works are turned away from the viewer. In this way, the artist hides the book's contents by placing the people outside this ocean realm in the role of viewers and the fish within in that of 'readers'. It is also doubtful whether the books were meant by Horn to "return to a time of renewal" as Ahrens suggests; in a later work incorporating a French literary classic, *Madame Bovary – c'est moi – dit Monsieur Flaubert*

(1997), the pages can only be 'read' by a field-glass within the frame but not by the viewers. Ahrens sees this as a reflection of Emma Bovary's tragic fate, which "expands in the wandering gaze of a field-glass upon the pages of the book to the horizon of a time in which the vision of transformation has been lost" (Ahrens 1997: 306). As we have seen in previous sections about artistic erasure, biblioclasm is tied again to the absence of representation, the irretrievable loss of a narrative or its departure to another 'realm'. The difference lies in the specificity of the act of erasure or destruction: while the monochrome painting erased 'content' in general, Horn and Latham destroy or hide specific texts, emphasizing the symbolic value of the act. Paradoxically, what the erasure of narrative in these book-objects insists upon is that the supremacy of vision (evidenced by the transformation of the book from a literary object to a visual object) is actually only a tragic illusion, since our sight is immediately confronted by the concealment of representation (the disappearance of the narrative).

While all the artists mentioned until now in this section have used books by other authors in their work, others construct books for use in their sculptures or three-dimensional installations. One of these artists is Anselm Kiefer. Even though the term 'artistic biblioclasm' is generally used in this thesis to refer to processes that make use of pre-existent books, Kiefer's work will still be referenced here because the objects he creates are still recognizable as books (albeit rather unusual ones), while the themes he deals with are closely related to some of the key arguments of this thesis.

In the 1980s, Kiefer began to study the Kabbalah, and several of the works he produced during the last two decades of the twentieth century reference Jewish mysticism as well as the literary work of well-known Jewish writers like Paul Celan. The complex layers of physical residue and traces of historical and literary associations in his work were combined to bear witness to a recent Nazi past that present-day Germans cannot fully fathom. Mythologies that pertain to his own, Germanic cultural past are linked to ideas borrowed from Judaism and the 'People of the Book'.

Kiefer's works are often deliberately ambiguous, as though the artist is aware of his inability to 'represent' the multi-faceted layers of history. Lisa Saltzman has suggested that much of his work is a discourse on the ethics of representation and the problem of image-making initiated by the Judaic law, "Thou shalt not make graven images" (Saltzman 2001). Also commenting on the spiritual undercurrents in Kiefer's art, David Morgan has written that the "seductively sublime spaces" (Morgan 1996: 46) in his work combine the Faustian mode (deliverance from suffering and ignorance) with the kenotic mode (transcendence through self-effacement). Nowhere is this second mode (comparable to the process of erasure) more present than in Kiefer's massive, lead books. These books are too heavy to lift and hence must remain closed. If opened, Kiefer's books usually exhibit images of desolation or traces of a former presence: for example, *Heavy Water* (1991) shows images of destruction at Chernobyl while some of the two hundred books included in the huge installation *Zweistromland (The High Priestess)* contain only locks of black human hair that refer to Sulamith, the Jewish woman in Celan's "Death Fugue" (Fig. 42).

42
Anselm Kiefer
High Priestess, detail
1985

The Breaking of Vessels (1990) is another huge library by Kiefer that explores various esoteric, Jewish themes, particularly the Kabbalistic "Tree of Life" and other elements of the Lurianic Kabbalah, founded by the Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572). A key concept in Luria's thought is *Shevirath Ha-Kelim*, or "the breaking of the vessels". The idea refers to a story according to which the evil in the world originally escaped from a number of broken glass vessels in which it was being held captive. In Kiefer's installation, the floor beneath some shelves full of heavy books is covered in bits of broken glass. This could also be an indirect reference to the 1938 *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night, or Night of Broken Glass), an event that is usually considered to be the first stage of the Holocaust. Kiefer's book-objects and other works evoke strong political and even spiritual feelings but remain indeterminate. Like some of the book-objects already described in this section (for example, Rebecca Horn's *Ocean Library*), Kiefer's books present us only with a distant, ungraspable vision of

redemption. What they seek to present is immediately hidden or erased. As John Hallmark Nell writes, this presence is essentially "missing": "Kiefer is searching in all this complex and sometimes obscure material for a means to reveal a missing presence (which we may want to relate to God)" (Nell 1996: 125). We cannot know this God because Kiefer's books only show us that this presence cannot be presented. It is precisely the certainty of presence that is erased in Kiefer's book-objects and paintings. The resulting uncertainties and ambiguities do not permit us to 'read' his books with any clarity.

2.2.3 Formless Books

The previous two sub-sections dealt with books or book-objects that always resemble superficially the form of a codex. At times, artists who use books and other printed matter in their work transform the book to such an extent that it becomes completely unrecognisable. While altered books usually erase the text completely or partially but retain the book's sequential nature in one form or another, formless books undo the physical form of the book too. Formless books have two characteristics:

1) The use of real books or printed matter in the making of the work.

2) The unmaking of the book's form and creation of a new entity that no longer resembles a book.

Karen Raney has described this destruction of books as "the first stage of a creative process from which new forms and meanings emerge" (Raney 2002: 12). In these "new forms", books (and paper, the 'stuff' of books) are only the raw material. Metaphorically speaking, the book's 'body' is lost but its 'flesh' lives on as the medium of the new work.

Two artists whose names are inextricably linked to the history of books in art are John Latham and Dieter Roth. Both Latham and Roth worked with the book as medium during various parts of their careers

and both produced works that involved the erasure of books. Latham's early work incorporated books into complex compositions that often included other objects as well. This was his first step in changing the book from a readable to a merely physical thing. A more destructive, anti-Modernist approach occurred in Latham's work in the mid-1960s. Writing about one of Latham's most notorious acts of biblioclasm, Andrew Causey states that "the end of Modernism is appropriately symbolized by the physical consumption of Greenberg's *Art and Culture*" (Causey 1998: 166). In fact, Latham's transgressive gesture (made by chewing pages from Greenberg's book with a group of students and putting the remains into a bottle of acid) attacks the very theoretical grounds of Modernism. The result – called *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* (1966) – is different from the iconoclasm of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* or that of Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing*. The latter works targeted specific works of art or artists, while Latham erased the theoretical framework supporting a specific era in the history of modern art, represented by Greenberg's book. The book in Latham's work was reduced to the contents of a phial, appropriately labelled 'essence of Greenberg' (Walker 1995: 85).

43
John Latham
Still and Chew/Art and Culture
1966

With his participation in the *Destruction in Art Symposium* held in London in 1966 (co-organised by Gustav Metzger and John Sharkey from the Institute of Contemporary Arts), Latham's ceremonial mistreatment of books entered a new public dimension. His *Skoob Towers* were basically columns of books that he set fire to, obliterating their readability and creating "negative sculpture, sculpture that disintegrated" (Phillpot 1975: 100). Here, erasure became a performance or event "celebrated" in public. The performative aspect of *Skoob Towers* was significant because it turned Latham's action (rather than the final product) into art. The process used to destroy the books was more important than the charred remains.

Like Latham, Dieter Roth also started working with books fairly early in his career as an artist. Roth's rethinking of the book is traceable to the second half of the 1950s, but he constantly returned to books at many points during his life. His use of unusual or found materials (including food and mouldy substances), together with his lack of

respect for the permanence of the 'masterpiece' made him a unique, process artist who combined creation and destruction in his work (the influence of Jean Tinguely's self-destructing machines should not be overlooked). Roth's *Literaturwürste* of the 1960s are probably the epitome of his creative/destructive practice. These shredded books and newspapers stuffed into sausage skins erase language but simultaneously offer "food" for thought. Starting with the transformation of Martin Walser's novel *Halbzeit* in 1961 (Fig. 44), Roth went on to turn German magazines and newspapers like *Quick*, *Spiegel* and *Stern* and even the work of philosopher G. W. F. Hegel into sausages later. The unmistakable neo-dada qualities of these literary sausages express a spirit of irreverence and rebellion. Pages, content and sequence are replaced by the humorously banal form of the sausage (Vischer and Walter 2003: 74-75).

44
Dieter Roth
Literaturwurst
(Martin Walser):
Halbzeit
1961

The common denominator in these formless books or newspapers is the removal of the book's specificity. The artist not only dismisses the text's interactive role with a reader but also dismantles its physical form. Works such as the French-Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping's *'A History of Chinese Art' and 'A Concise History of Modern Painting' washed in a washing machine for two minutes* (1987-93) also fall within this category. Some of Huang Yong Ping's experiments with books and text revolve around what Francesco Bonami has called "the concept of the double point of view" (Bonami 1998: 192) and epitomise the loss of specificity mentioned earlier. For instance, histories of Chinese and Western art are mixed together to form a white mass of pulp, where the East and the West become indistinguishable from each other. In another work called *Kiosk* (1994), made for the 1994 Biennale of Art in Paper in Düren, Germany, Huang Yong Ping turned newspapers and magazines into pulp in a cement mixer and exhibited the mashed pages on a newspaper kiosk. This work tries to decentralise and destabilise political ideologies by mixing them all together. The artist criticizes the "refuse dump" of culture in emphatic terms:

45
Huang Yong Ping
'A History of Chinese Art' and 'A Concise History of Modern Painting' washed in a washing machine for two minutes
1987-93

46
Huang Yong Ping
Kiosk
1994

What history has left behind to us...is a huge mass of writings and texts...We live in the midst of a gigantic refuse dump, which also includes

culture – philosophy, religion and art. Culture can be arbitrarily manipulated and sorted out...If you do not extricate yourself from the refuse of texts (our history, our thinking, and our culture), we will be crushed by a plethora of theories, value-systems, and sermons. (Huang Yong Ping 1996: 289).

Huang Yong Ping's transgression of all value-systems is made in a Nietzschean spirit of rebellion, his irreverence bringing to mind a certain philosophizing with a hammer that marks the "twilight of the idols". *Kiosk* appears to suggest that when ideologies become dangerously similar to idols, they need to be erased completely. This kind of artistic biblioclasm allows chaos and formlessness to creep into the rigidity of systems. The formlessness of the medium presents us with the idea that any final form given to political 'truth' is inherently limited.

47
Graham Gussin
Ghost
1998

Much more minimal is British artist Graham Gussin's *Ghost* (1998), an edition of paper discs made from pulped copies of *The Cambridge Atlas of the Stars*. Since the limits of outer space are impossible to render visible, the artist seems to suggest that the book's contents and codex form must disappear too. The book's ambitious aim to represent infinity itself on a finite number of pages is literally blanked out by Gussin.

48
Leif Elggren and Carl Michael von Hausswolff
The Annexation of Utopia by the Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland
Venice Biennale
2003

In a similar vein, Swedish artists Leif Elggren and Carl Michael von Hausswolff shredded and pulped many copies of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and produced sheets of virtually blank paper, which they then hung out to dry on a clothesline in their installation at the 2003 edition of the Venice Biennale. Described by art historian Linda Nochlin as an "installation in which meaning is erased in favor of

sheer materiality" (Nochlin 2003: 240), the Swedish artists' work denies us the possibility of reading a positive image of Utopia. Like the stars in *Ghost*, Utopia cannot be presented (except negatively) and must remain formless.

Both Gussin's *Ghost* and *The Annexation of Utopia by the Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland* (the title of Elggren's and von Hausswolff's installation) require viewers to visualize the previous bookish condition of the medium used by the artists as well as the specific titles of the destroyed books. Only by doing so do viewers fully comprehend that the "sheer materiality" of the discs and sheets emanates from objects that had a very specific function prior to their destruction. The significance of the works would change considerably if the artists produced identical works made of paper recycled from unspecified origins (the same can be said of Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*: the work would have been very different had the artist presented us merely with a blank sheet of paper instead of an erased drawing). In spite of the fact that these works do not look like books any more, the atlases and copies of More's book are still present in a more immaterial dimension – they are supplemented interactively in the viewer's mind.

2.2.4 Dematerialised Books

The last stage in the erasure of the book presents us with the complete dematerialisation of the book. Lucy Lippard had described the dematerialisation of art in the early 1970s as the absence (or quasi-absence) of the art object in conceptual art. The dematerialised

book is essentially an absent book, or, following Kant's terminology, the "negative presentation" of a book. Viewers are aware of this absence because the emptiness they can perceive in the work implicitly conveys the feeling of a book's disappearance or dematerialisation. Strictly speaking, this does not necessarily involve the actual use and destruction of real books; hence, not every example of a dematerialised book is a clear case of artistic biblioclasm as defined in the Introduction. However, in the examples given below, books were either destroyed during the making of the work, or their destruction in a historical past is implicitly 'included' in the work by revealing their absence in an artistic present. In each case, we can trace this very absence back to the prior existence of books.

The work of two artists will serve as relevant examples of what is meant here by a dematerialised book. The first artist is Israeli-born artist Micha Ullman, whose *Bibliothek* (1995) in Bebelplatz, Berlin presents us with a 'library' that is even more unreadable than Kiefer's oversized books (figs. 49 and 50). Bebelplatz in Berlin is the site of the infamous burning of 20,000 books by the Nazis on 10 May, 1933. The unique aspect of Ullman's work in this square is its invisibility. The stone-paved ground of the square is not topped by some pretentious, self-glorifying memorial that 'commemorates' a historical event. Ullman's work is actually beneath the square: a library of empty bookshelves in a white room that must be seen through a square, glass pane set into the ground. Close to it is a plaque with the words of German poet Heinrich Heine (1820): "There where one burns books one in the end burns men"[2]. Instead of creating a grandiose monument, Ullman reproduced the destruction of books by rendering them absent and also by inverting the traditional notion of a monument. The violent acts committed by the Nazis are implied by Ullman's erasure of presence.

This paradoxical use of sculpture – paradoxical because the physicality of sculpture is undermined by the negative spaces that dominate the work – is also evident in the work of British artist Rachel Whiteread. Her *Holocaust Memorial* (2000) in Judenplatz, Vienna is

thematically linked to that by Ullman in Berlin, in that it also presents us with an unreadable library with various Jewish historical layers of significance. In spite of its size, it is very minimal, bringing together two powerful images: the interior of a room and rows of cast books.
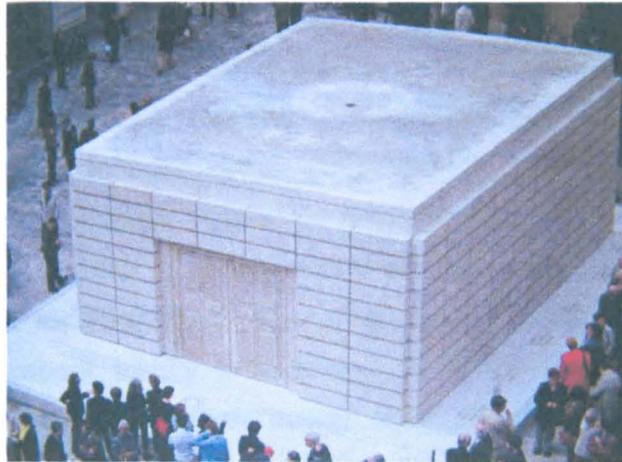
51
Rachel Whiteread
Holocaust Memorial
Judenplatz, Vienna
2000

The spines of the books are not visible because they are all turned towards the inside of the room. The books therefore make explicit reference to the thousands of nameless victims ('the people of the Book') of the Holocaust.

Whiteread also worked on many smaller book pieces from around 1996 onwards. Instead of using hundreds of identical, positive casts of books (as in the *Holocaust Memorial*), these smaller works cast the negative space surrounding actual books in shelves. For the latter reason, the casting process was more 'destructive' than the one used in *Holocaust Memorial*, making these shelves a better example of artistic biblioclasm. The recreation of empty space in sculptural form was already present in Whiteread's earlier work, such as *Closet* (1988), *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)*, (1995), and *House* (1993), a concrete cast of the inside of a whole Victorian, terrace house in London. In works like *Untitled (Five Shelves)*, (1995-96), Whiteread creates sculptural forms out of nothingness, luring us to discover "the uncanny spaces beneath the surface of everyday life" (Bird 1995: 122). In one work, a house is torn down to reveal the concrete volume of air within. In others, books leave their residue in a sequence of pastel hues on the whiteness of her moulds of bookshelves. Art emerges out of destruction.
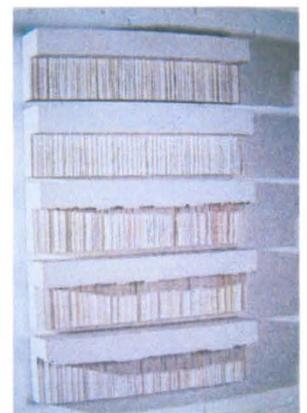
52
Rachel Whiteread
Untitled (Five Shelves)
1995-96

There are various points of convergence between the work of Rachel Whiteread and Micha Ullman's *Bibliothek* in Berlin. In both artists' works, the book is only an immaterial shadow of its former existence. When asked specifically if her *Holocaust Memorial* was in any way inspired by Ullman's work in Berlin, Whiteread answered that it was more of "a reaction against Alfred Hrdlicka's *Monument against War and Fascism* (1988), by the Opera in Vienna" (Houser 2001: 60). This statement is relevant because it shows that Whiteread reacts against figuration, narration, and ultimately, against the need to render visible. In both her work and Ullman's in Berlin, books are invisible. They confront the problem of representation by avoiding positive discourse about the world and about history. Whiteread casts the silence around collections of books. Ullman avoids form altogether: in keeping with his Jewishness, he opts for the negation of representation.

It is pertinent to end this sub-section by making reference to that technological shift that has repositioned the role of the book in society, not quite replacing it but changing our perceptions about textuality and the materiality of the word. To some, the possibility of reading and carrying out endless transformations on texts on a computer monitor may spell the demise of the book, its ultimate erasure or dematerialization. The World Wide Web, moreover, presents us with characteristics that may seem tailor-made to dismantle the qualities of the codex book form: the Web lacks a central author, has no beginning or end, is non-linear, and exists in a constant state of flux. However, it is also true that the Web (and digital technology in general) does not *need* the book form, nor does it require objectification on sheets of paper. Culturally, the book still exists and may continue to do so for a long time, but in the digital realm of pixels and emails, the book is already a thing of the past. In short, people do not really need to think of books when they look at their computer screens, just as they do not think of horse-drawn carriages when they drive a car. This point is being made because in Part Two and in the Introduction, it was argued that works of art can be properly classified as examples of artistic biblioclasm only if the work (a sausage skin stuffed with paper, a paper disc, empty spaces in a plaster bookshelf,

and so on) somehow transports us back to the original book that was altered, sculpted, unmade or dematerialised. As Thomas A. Vogler stated in an essay cited earlier, "we should resist the tendency to call anything with verbal text a book". He adds that

> (W)e sorely need a new definition of the concept of text that has been separated from its immediate association with the specific form of the book – the *codex* – that some seventeen or eighteen centuries ago replaced another form, the *volumen* or scroll, in a similar period of technological transformation of textuality. (Vogler 2000: 451)

It is beyond the scope of this study to define this new concept of textuality. On the other hand, works in new media that also reference the book and its history may be included because they revolve around what Johanna Drucker has called the "present tensions of the book" (Drucker 1995b: title). Drucker's writing about *The Corona Palimpsest* (1995), a video/book installation by artists Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, can serve to illustrate these tensions. The four elements in the installation – two monitors and two codex books – were made to grapple for the viewers' attention. Drucker notes that the static nature of the books is destabilised by the relentlessness of the video as seen on the electronic screens. The blank pages in one of these books also seem to stress the muteness of printed matter:

> Have they been emptied of their history, these pages? Their texts voided and removed as in the perfect censor's successful effort to take away not only a text but all traces of its effacement? ... The palimpsestic process never left so clean a slate as this empty space of the threatening page, the blank, the nothing, the void... (Drucker 1995b: 2)

The book is erased, but it continues to participate in the struggle between the two modes of presenting information: its own and the "forward temporal logic" (Drucker 1995b: 4) of the video. Here, in this juxtaposed condition, the screens are seen to dematerialise language and the books beneath them. In this new spatial dimension, books are no longer a necessity.

2.2.5 Comparative Analysis

The different biblioclastic processes employed in my practical work have already been described in the Practice Methodology section in Part One. In Part Two, we surveyed different forms of artistic erasure and biblioclasm in the work of other artists working in the second half of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first century. At this stage, it will be useful to compare briefly some aspects of my work with other forms of artistic biblioclasm and erasure described in Part Two. This contextualisation of my work will help to pave the way for the more theoretical, political and religious discussions about my work in Part Three and Part Four.

At a superficial level, one could state that a number of the artistic processes of erasure described in 2.1 are encountered in my work. For instance, there is an element of iconoclasm in the mistreatment of religious books in some of my installations. Inevitably, all the processes I use are also destructive to some extent. In some works at least, there is even an 'anti-form' element at work, in the sense that the pulping of books resists the forming of fixed ideas in print on book pages. These similarities demonstrate that artistic biblioclasm is at least partially reliant on some earlier non-representational or destructive processes used by artists. However – as I have already suggested in my introduction to 2.2 – the use of actual books carries some additional, specific implications that are generally absent in works that merely resist representation (like some forms of abstract painting), or works that erase (directly or indirectly) the work of other artists, or works that attack the foundations of 'art'.

The use of books as raw material also distinguishes my work from some other works like Rachel Whiteread's empty bookshelves cast in plaster. The use of plaster introduces an external material into the equation, one that is associated with the world of sculpture and not with that of books. In fact, the only biblioclastic aspect of Whiteread's book-works is the disappearance of the books she uses to cast her work around (some of the books are damaged during the casting process). Her sculpture suggests a radical absence that can be

linked to earlier works by other artists described briefly in 2.1 (minimalism, for example).

The use of book-paper in my work is different because books are both absent (destroyed by pulping or other methods) and – paradoxically – are still very present in the medium of the final presentation (the same can be said of several works described in 2.2.3: Gussin, Roth, Huang Yong Ping, Elggren and von Hausswolff). In *Twelve Non-Books* (Fig. 19) and *Melting Library* (Fig. 20 and Fig. 53), the spine-end of a book was pressed into soft book-pulp and pulled out again, leaving narrow, empty slots in the thickness of the paper. But the paper itself lives on as a reminder that the book and what it represents cannot be obliterated so easily from people's memories.

The historical precedents of my work can be located in the genesis of the book as an artistic medium in twentieth-century art: from Duchamp's use of objects – and specifically his *Unhappy Readymade* (1919) using a geometry book (Walker 1995: 36) – to Dieter Roth's novel ways of "processing text" in the 1950s and 1960s (Vischer and Walter 2003: 74), Metzger's auto-destructive "aesthetic of revulsion" in the 1960s (Wilson 1999: 74), Huang Yong Ping's Dada-inspired washing of cultural artefacts in the 1980s (Nuridsany 2004: 38), and the use of theological texts in Latham's *God is Great* series in the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century (see Moorhouse 2005). These precedents as well as my interest in the sites of installation bring my work closer in spirit to 'mainstream' contemporary art practice than the narrower field of 'book art' (see, for example, Johanknecht 2003[3]). Within the field of 'book art', a work generally still functions as a book that "provides a reading or viewing experience sequenced into a finite space of text and or images" (Drucker 1995: 14), whereas in my practice, these functions are often obliterated and transformed into parts of a larger, artistic environment that, as stated above, merges the use of books with the cultural memories and physical spaces that the visitors own and inhabit.
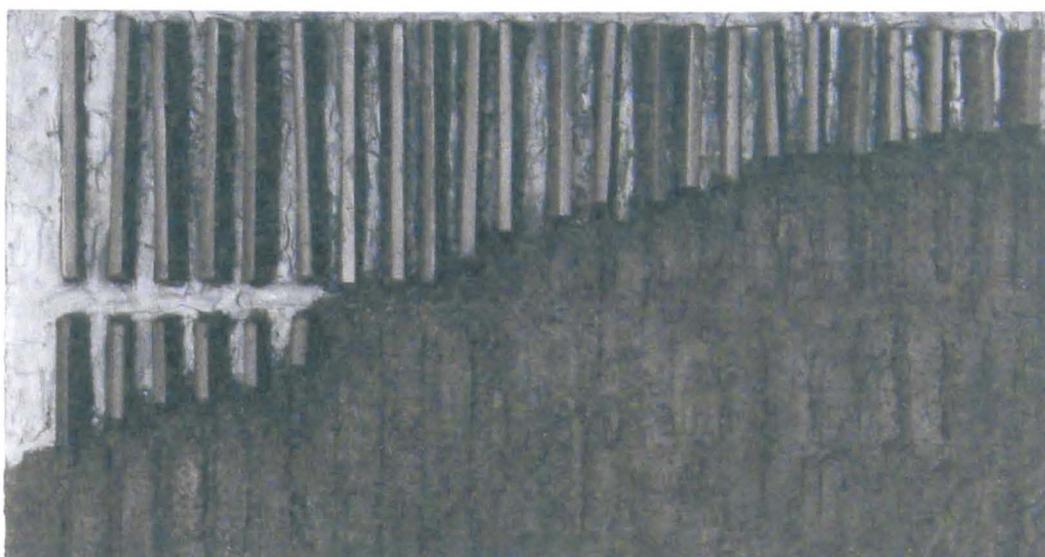
This brings us to another aspect that is very specific to my work. People's memories are shaped by a combination of factors, including upbringing and education, culture, history and physical space. Many of my works, especially my larger installations, deal with issues, social phenomena and spaces that are unique to the Maltese islands. While my earlier work in pulp was often more abstract and philosophical in scope, from 2003 onward the Maltese-ness of my work became increasingly unavoidable. I became increasingly convinced that the significance and effectiveness of artistic biblioclasm are stronger when they are contextualised. Dealing with local phenomena does not make one's work incomprehensible to members of a public that is located elsewhere. After all, the existence of some cultural differences does not rule out the possibility of other cultural similarities. But the differences need to be recognized at all times. The use (and 'misuse') of doctrinal textbooks in some of my works, for instance, cannot be divorced from my upbringing in a staunchly Catholic country, a small, Mediterranean island described by a prominent, Maltese poet as "a Vatican agency" (Schembri 2006: 14). Nor can my work be separated from my experiences of compulsory education in two Church schools and the fact that religion has been and still is a far more important and respected subject in all Maltese schools (and consequently, in society at large) than the creative arts (Eurydice 2003).

Hence, my awareness of the institutional power of education and religion has always been balanced by a belief in the necessity of art's insidiousness in the Maltese context. While some critics may feel that "(t)oo much in contemporary art defines itself by what it struggles to resist" (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 146), I believe that the condition of the Maltese artist – surrounded by tourist 'art', Church 'art', and other productions that simultaneously appeal to the consumer and refer back, indirectly, to the Catholic notion of universality of meaning (see Vella 1996) – can only be lived responsibly by resisting all forms of imposed harmonisation[4].

Critiquing the idea of a 'true' book within a culture that is still not fully secular (and which also happens to be the artist's own culture) can lead to misunderstandings; hence, it is crucial for an artist in this situation to be both sensitive to the public's beliefs and firm in one's own beliefs. Reactions to my work among members of the Maltese public were varied. Some questioned the use of books in works of art; others needed reassurance about the artist's intentions (Are you anti-clerical? Which political party do you favour?). Politicians and journalists visiting the *Borders* exhibition paused in front of the walls of 'blank' EU articles of *Endless Column* (Fig. 76) and appeared to enjoy hunting articles they had written only weeks or days before. Some individuals who saw my work made of pages from catechisms were reminded of rote learning at the MUSEUM (a Maltese religious association that teaches Catholic doctrine to children in many towns and villages in Malta and Gozo)[5].

It should be clear that reactions like those listed above cannot be 'exported' or experienced in the same way in another culture. When artists elsewhere make use of religious books (Xu Bing's use of the Bible, *The Liberation of G-D* by Helene Aylon, or Latham's *God is Great* – a Chinese-American, a Jewish-American and a British artist respectively), the implications of their work are quite different from mine, especially when the public and educational contexts (Fig. 54) are taken into account too. It is also possible to find overlapping concerns in our work: for instance, the inadequacy of the book (its sublime aspect) in Xu Bing's *Silkworm Books*, Gussin's *Ghost* and

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The Unpronounceable Name
Detail of Catholic catechism and student's marginalia
2003

Leif Elggren and Carl Michael von Hausswolff's *The Annexation of Utopia by the Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland* can be discerned in my works too. Yet, the Maltese element is almost invariably present in my practice, especially in the installations.

A more detailed analysis of the Maltese aspects of my work will follow in Part Four (4.3) and in the Conclusion. Before turning to this subject, however, we need to conduct a more thorough theoretical exploration of the book's "perversion" as analysed in parts of Lyotard's work, and study the relationship between the destruction of the book in art and the aesthetic of the sublime.

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[1] These literary experiments include the *Crirythmes*, the *Poèmes lettristes*, and the *Lectures Collages* (see Dufrêne 2005).

[2] '*Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen*' (from Heine's play *Almansor*, 1821).

[3] Johanknecht provides a brief comparative analysis of works – including my own – that make use of books in sculptural or functional contexts (Broodthaers, Latham, Spector, and others).

[4] It would be pertinent to add here that modernist ideas in Maltese art came very late (around 1950) and had to 'compete', for a number of decades, against more popular academic approaches and religious subjects in painting and sculpture.

[5] This religious society was founded by Fr. George Preca in Malta in 1907. The acronym M.U.S.E.U.M. stands for *Magister Utinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus* ("How I wish, O Lord, that all the World follows your Gospel").

Part Three

Biblioclasm and the Sublime

"A project would consist in discussing the perversion of the book"
(Lyotard 1993b: 125). This is how Jean-François Lyotard begins his
essay called "False Flights in Literature", published in 1974. Although
the essay has been very rarely commented upon by other scholars, its
discussion of the book's perversion at the hands of artists like Dieter
Roth and writers like Michel Butor makes it very relevant to this study.
The full implications of this essay (particularly in the context of a study
of artistic biblioclasm) can only be properly judged by reading it as
part of a wider trajectory in Lyotard's thought. For this reason, some of
the arguments in this early essay – published at a time in the
philosopher's career that has been described as an "extraordinarily
fruitful period" (Lyotard 1993b: xiii) – will act as a fulcrum in Part
Three, bridging the gap in time between some of his earlier writings
like *Discours, Figure* (Lyotard 1971) and some later concerns like
postmodernism and the sublime. Part Three will therefore focus on
several related areas (artists and the avant-garde, the book in art,
postmodernism, the sublime) that address the very core of Lyotard's
thought – aesthetics[1]. Part Three will show that this early discussion
of biblioclasm highlights some central issues in contemporary
aesthetics, anticipating the philosopher's later interest in the sublime
and the postmodern. If this is the case – if, that is, a relatively little-
known essay like "False Flights in Literature" rehearses some of the
ideas developed in greater depth in Lyotard's later writings about art
and the sublime – then a comparison of these two aspects of the
philosopher's work will serve to indicate the postmodern, sublime
nature of artistic biblioclasm. After having established this theoretical
relationship between artistic biblioclasm and some aspects of
Lyotard's work, I shall consider the sublime nature of biblioclastic
processes in specific works of art as well as in my own work. This
philosophical discussion of artistic biblioclasm and the sublime in Part
Three will thus serve to bridge the more descriptive analyses in Part
Two to the religious and political contexts of biblioclasm in Part Four.

3.1 The Perversion of the Book in Lyotard's Thought

3.1.1 The textual and the figural in *Discours, Figure*

Several writers have commented on the difficulty and complexity of Lyotard's *Discours, Figure* (Bennington 1988: 56; Readings 1991: 3; Lydon 2001: 10). Here, it will not be possible to do justice to this complexity; rather, some key arguments of the book will be selectively discussed in order to trace the beginnings of Lyotard's work about the disruption of the textual by the visual.

Lyotard's distinction between reading and seeing in *Discours, Figure* underlines the difference between experiencing a book as a surface that communicates its content or meaning transparently to a reader and appreciating a book as an object with a particular combination of graphic forms. Even though the initial impression in Lyotard's book is one of opposition between discourse and figure (with a certain bias in favour of the sensuality of figure), he eventually shows that it is impossible to disentangle one from the other completely. The figural is shown to be a part of the discursive, and the discursive is shown to be a part of the figural. As Bill Readings has pointed out, the title of one of the later chapters in Lyotard's book ('Fiscours, digure') "marks the extent to which the book has worked to deconstruct the opposition on which it is based" (Readings 1991: 7). A relevant example discussed by Lyotard at some length is Stephane Mallarmé's 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard', in which the poet emphasises the figural nature of poetry and language. The disposition of the words in this poem as well as the blank spaces between the words introduce a spatial element into the text, with the result that the plasticity of the page and the linguistic signifiers are woven inextricably into what Lyotard calls a "book-object" (Lyotard 1971: 71).

It is not difficult to see the relevance of passages such as these in the context of a study of biblioclasm in art. The erased, altered or destroyed book in art similarly presents us with the simultaneity of

heterogeneous presentations, that of the text as a readable (or partially readable) thing and that of the bookish object as a sculpture or graphical disruption of text. The tension evident in the biblioclastic object (its precariously balanced existence between the readable and the tactile, textural, or visual functions of the book) can be compared to Lyotard's references to art in the second segment of *Discours, Figure*, called "Veduta on a Fragment of the 'History' of Desire". His discussion of medieval illuminated manuscripts, for example, shows how text and image were brought together on the surface of a page, emphasising the pedagogical function of the doctrinal text but simultaneously permitting a figural presence to acquire an important role within that text. Here, missing letters are sought by the 'reader', only to be found camouflaged under layers of codified images. The tension is twofold: the text is disrupted by the figural, while the figural must be 'read' or deciphered like a code, i.e. like a form of writing. Lyotard shows that this tension is typical of the medieval mind, in which the world itself is like a book written by the hand of God but at the same time, writing is admired for its sensual, 'worldly' qualities. Things in the world are 'readable' and yet, the written word itself often verges on the unreadable.

This incommensurability of different spatial dimensions is inscribed in other examples discussed by Lyotard in his "Veduta" section. He finds it in Masaccio's *Trinità* at Santa Maria Novella in Florence, where medieval and Renaissance conceptions of space intermingle, and also in Cézanne's later paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, where, according to Lyotard, the painter presents the mountain "in the process of giving itself to be seen" (Lyotard 1971: 204). The viewer of Cézanne's painting is confronted by colour and form passing over the retina and being *seen* just before being *looked at* or *recognised*. Bill Readings rightly compares Lyotard's "aesthetics of the incommensurable" in *Discours, Figure* to his later writings about postmodernism and the unpresentable, i.e. to the need to bear witness to what cannot be presented (Readings 1991: 23-24).

Another commentator, Mary Lydon, relates Lyotard's interpretation of Cézanne to another key idea in the philosopher's thought, that of

enfance, childhood or *infantia* (speechlessness). The child's inability to recognise letters and words reduces textual signs to "black print" (Lydon 2001: 26), just as Cézanne's paintings of the mountain present us with the unpresentable, unthinkable image of seeing the world without recognizing its forms. What all these examples have in common with artistic biblioclasm is the eye's hesitant and indeterminate grasp of the object: in *Discours, Figure*, we are caught between reading and seeing or between seeing and looking, while in various forms of artistic biblioclasm, a gap opens up between the sequential and finite nature of the book and the book's malleability at the hands of the artist.

3.1.2 Artistic Biblioclasts: From Book-Objects to Still Life

The artistic malleability of the book is discussed very directly in an early essay by Lyotard, published three years after *Discours, Figure*. "False Flights in Literature" is a complex, difficult text that focuses on the relationship between textual montage and some aspects of Michel Butor's literary output. Even the history of the text is a rather complex one: the essay (with minor variations) appeared in French in different publications under three titles – "Faux-fuyant dans la littérature", "La Confession Coupée", and "Biblioclastes". Here, I will deal mainly with Lyotard's treatment of artistic "perversions" of books.

In the first paragraph of the essay, Lyotard compares the work of French writer Butor to that of visual artists who have worked with the medium of the book.

> Michel Butor's entire work, especially since *Mobile*, must be associated with the work of hundreds of biblioclasts like Dieter Roth, Bruno Lemenuel, Michel Vachey, Humbertus Gojowczyk, the John Cage of *Silence* and *A year from Monday*, or all those who want to write in space, like Sonia Delaunay with her great scroll in Blaise Cendrars's *Prose of the Trans-Siberian*. (Lyotard 1993b: 125)

The comparison is debatable. In the first chapter of Stephen Bury's *Artists' Books* (1995), the author states that works like Derrida's *Glas* and Butor's *Mobile* are essentially different to artists' books, even

though they may resemble them superficially. Here, Bury is concerned with defining the parameters of the artist's book, and distinguishes publications like *Glas* and *Mobile* from artists' books by arguing that the former were not made by artists and hence should be called "novelists' books or philosophers' books" (Bury 1995: 1). Writing more than two decades before Bury, Lyotard seems to have been less concerned with the boundaries of strict definitions in "False Flights in Literature", although it must be said that the philosopher did write that his earlier work *Discours, Figure* functioned rather differently from an artist's book (Lyotard 1971: 18).

In "False Flights in Literature", biblioclasts are described as artists who work on the material support of the text, thus perverting the traditional functions of the book. First of all, the book's perversion effaces the book's conventional "function as messenger". The book-object hides its meaning and "even signifies nothing". Secondly, instead of inscribing intensities on the actual narrative of the book, the book-object transforms "the pages, the typography, the spaces, the page composition, and the organization of the volume", deconstructing what Lyotard also calls "the skin of the book" (Lyotard 1993b: 126). This skin becomes mobile, setting to flight not only reading conventions but also the whole question of representation. The book-object, in fact, highlights the support rather than the represented, narrative subject.

Lyotard's interest in the book-object in "False Flights in Literature" also transports him back to the eighteenth century, to a little book by a Franciscan friar, Father Christophe Leuterbreuver, entitled *The Cut Confession or The Easy Method for Preparing Oneself for Particular and General Confessions*. Quoting the friar's instructions, Lyotard shows how the book could be used prior to confession. Using a small tool like a knife, the confessant would cut into the page next to chosen lines of text representing one's sins. These sins would then rise out of the page (Fig. 55). This description leads Lyotard to conclude that "here is the first object-book, here is the first mobile printed object, here is the first open work, the first collage-book" (Lyotard 1993b: 127). Like other twentieth-century experiments in artistic biblioclasm,
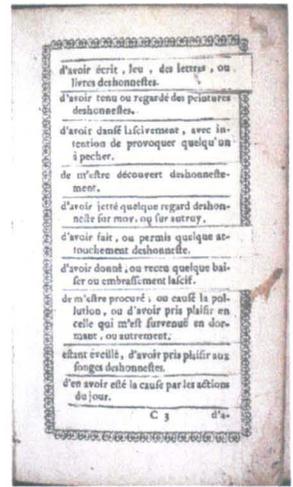
55
Christophe
Leuterbreuver
Page from *La Confession Coupée*
1739

The Cut Confession engages the support of the printed text, combining various religious, pedagogical and tactile dimensions of the book. Resembling some of the examples discussed by Lyotard in *Discours, Figure*, this religious book is not merely a readable object; its material presence also plays an important part in the confessant's experience.

The Cut Confession is also interactive, encouraging the confessant to become actively involved in both the reading and redemptive processes. Due to the fact that the confessed sins would be cancelled once they were cut, Lyotard adds that "there is a noticeable erasure whose value lies in an exoneration of sins, a redemption" (Lyotard 1993b: 127). The process of erasure is compared to the purging of the person's sins, a kind of cleansing of his or her moral life. The penitence of the sinner marks a change in that person's life and this is reflected in the changes taking place in the book. Lyotard also compares this redemptive, altered state of things to Michel Butor's literary work, where Lyotard discovers a sort of "extreme mobility", a form of linguistic "surgery" that tears open the text in a way that resembles the work of artists like Vachey and Roth or the cutter slicing through the little, eighteenth century confession book. The cutter, Lyotard tells us, becomes a "nihilist activity: "the world" was not well tailored; let's re-tailor it; let's make it more aesthetic" (Lyotard 1993b: 132). Butor's work, like that of visual artists who create book-objects, breaks with received reference points in literature or art, re-arranging the found world in ever-new compositions.

Towards the end of "False Flights in Literature", however, Lyotard comes to the conclusion that these re-arrangements and possibilities will inevitably end up being controlled by some "big pimp"; this perversion or "infantile polymorphy" is mastered by the artist or author, by Father Leuterbreuver or Butor. In spite of the fact that the flight of artistic combinations is supposed to be infinite, Butor ultimately offers us a finished product and acts as a sort of guide who helps us travel through it. In place of a guide or educator, Lyotard prefers the "perversion" of childhood (*enfance*), with its as-yet-unfulfilled condition and its infinite possibilities. Lyotard concludes by

expressing this desire: "that he (Butor) never succeed, that he give infinite/unfinished products, that pain and *jouissance* surface, that he rid himself of glory and despotism" (Lyotard 1993b: 142).

In another text that Lyotard prepared for the opening of an exhibition in Paris towards the end of his life (November 1997) - almost quarter of a century after he wrote "False Flights in Literature" – he returns to the subject of biblioclasm in art. This text, called "Parce que la couleur est un cas de la poussière" ("Because colour is a case of dust", in Lyotard 2000a: 301-307), provides a philosophical interpretation of the pastel drawings of French artist Pierre Skira, a still-life painter and author of a book dealing with the history of the genre (Skira 1989). Even though Skira's works are *representations* of the erasure of books (rather than works that make use of actual books), Lyotard's commentary about Skira is still very relevant to our discussion, especially when this essay is compared to some other writings by the philosopher that are being studied here.

Skira's images often employ traditional techniques like chiaroscuro to depict disorganised piles of books, loose sheets and even the occasional musical instrument. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these images is the fact that none of the books painted by Skira contain any trace of language. The pages and book covers are blank, as though the text that was once printed there has now disappeared or has been erased. In Skira's work, it is therefore the role of the book that suffers the greatest metamorphosis or the greatest

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"perversion". Instead of helping to preserve culture and scholarship, these books merely exhibit their own emptiness and muteness.

Lyotard's text describes the disorderliness of Skira's books and papers, comparing it to the leftovers of a meal or a state of post-orgasmic slumber (*un désordre d'après jouissance*, Lyotard 2000a: 301). Unlike the more traditional *Vanitas* still-life, in which life's satisfactions are balanced by a *memento mori* such as a skull or a candle, Lyotard explains that Skira's work neither reminds us of death nor does it promise a better world. And unlike the confessant redeeming himself or herself by cutting into the "skin" of *The Cut Confession*, here no significant redemption is possible. For Lyotard, the effacement of text that we see in Skira's works is almost inevitable:

> Was there ever anything to write and to read? Was the Book ever anything more than a material fantasy of understanding, the graphic hallucination of a voice, the voice of an inexistent Other, whose arbitrary code inscribed on the page would have vainly succeeded in faithfully recording the supposed words, whereas they were really invented? (my translation, Lyotard 2000a: 303)

This theme of an absent "Other" was already present in yet another short text called "Foreword: After the Words" that Lyotard wrote about the installations of conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, whose works typically make use of words and textual erasures:

> The definition of a word is its usage. And usage is a homeless wandering and a faithfulness to an absent Voice. It is without end. (Kosuth 1993: xviii)

While Kosuth presents language to the viewer (to be read, deciphered, interpreted, possibly misread), Skira removes language altogether from his images, as though the words in his painted books are disarmed by whatever they were trying to master. Moreover, the conceptual art of Kosuth "makes very little concession to the colour medium, not to say none at all" (Kosuth 1993: xviii), while according to Lyotard, the pastels of Skira celebrate the sensibility and worldliness of colour, combining it with a sense of deterioration yet never

permitting it to be overcome by writing. Kosuth's work, for Lyotard, shows that text renders colour unnecessary, while Skira's colours drown words, making them invisible. Discourse cannot master Skira's sheer chromaticism, this combination of tonalities that cover his sheets of paper. Moreover, it is very relevant for Lyotard that these tonalities are "powdered" onto the dark background with sticks of pastel colour, "a case of dust". Are not the torn, disordered books themselves "a case of dust"? In these works, "melancholy laments the precariousness of being but at the same time, the joy of the body sings hymns of the coloured world" (my translation, Lyotard 2000a: 307). Colour makes these books visible in the first place, and colour also renders these books useless, by obliterating the printed text.

The importance of colour here easily brings to mind Lyotard's earlier writings about Cézanne in *Discours, Figure*. In Cézanne, the painted colours of Montagne Sainte-Victoire transport us to an in-between zone that is neither here nor there; similarly, Skira's colours bring us face to face with the *infantia* or speechlessness of a hazy zone that is wrapped in the exterior form of language (books) but does not quite function yet (or any more) like a language. Lyotard also finds this imposition of the figural on the textual in the work of Israeli-French artist Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, whose overprintings and diffracted "(t)races of writing, erasures of trembling" are "pulled out from readability and visibility, then placed under the threat of annihilation and forgetting in order to make mystery manifest" (Lyotard 1995: 23, 26). Lichtenberg-Ettinger's works are only ambiguous traces which do not permit us to discern words or images with any clarity.

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Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger
Woman-Other-Thing, No. 11
1990-93

My discussion of *Discours, Figure*, "False Flights in Literature", "Parce que la couleur est un cas de la poussière", "Foreword: After the Words" and "Diffracted Traces" has shown that Lyotard's occasional references to books and texts at different times in his life tend to focus on the book's effacement or perversion. Texts or books are either erased or cut into (Kosuth, Leuterbreuver), represented as blank objects (Skira), layered with imagery (medieval manuscripts, Lichtenberg-Ettinger), or transformed into sculptural objects (Roth and other biblioclasts). In most cases, what survives of the book does not

seem to be as important for Lyotard as the actual process of disruption/transformation. These references to the book's perversion therefore provide us with some initial arguments about the possible motivations and attitudes of those who 'mistreat' books artistically. This does not mean that we can ignore differences between biblioclastic acts in art or the different contexts in which these works may have been produced, but one should not overlook the fact that many of the cases of artistic biblioclasm studied in Part Two benefit from a postmodernist, specifically Lyotardean, reading.

3.2 Postmodernism and the Sublime

It was stressed in the introduction to Part Three that a study of artistic biblioclasm in a handful of Lyotard's lesser-known essays would benefit from a wider discussion that brings in other areas that stand out in the philosopher's work, namely postmodernism and the sublime. This section and the next (3.3) will rely heavily (though not exclusively) on Lyotard's interpretations of postmodernism and the feeling of the sublime. Yet, these areas will not be explored simply to discover relationships that may exist between essays like "False Flights in Literature" and other concerns in Lyotard's work. Rather, the main objective is to contextualise examples of artistic biblioclasm (including my own practice) in a specific theoretical framework.

3.2.1 Lyotard and the Stakes of Art in a Postmodern Age

Postmodernism is a notoriously difficult term to define, particularly if one takes into account the various fields (art, architecture, philosophy, literary theory, and so on) in which it has been applied. In the context of this study, the most pertinent implications of the word are of a political, ethical and aesthetic nature. More specifically, we will need to study why artistic biblioclasm (and its political undertones) is more of a postmodern than modern phenomenon. For instance, what makes the artistic erasure of a book more postmodern than some of

the examples listed under 'Abstraction' in Section 2.1.1? The aim here will not be to expand the definition of postmodernism or postmodern art but to expand our understanding of artistic biblioclasm by presenting it against a wider philosophical, artistic and political backdrop.

Geoff Bennington writes that the term 'postmodernism' as used by Lyotard had a connection with art from the very start, even though *The Postmodern Condition* "is not concerned directly with questions of aesthetics or of the philosophy of the arts, but with knowledge and the problem of its legitimation in 'advanced' societies" (Appignanesi 1989: 4). In place of the traditional 'Grand Narratives' that legitimated knowledge in the past, Bennington explains that for Lyotard, what is really at stake is the importance of keeping the process of experimentation alive. Experimentation exists *within* rather than *after* the modern: artists like Cézanne, Malevich and Duchamp "are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (Lyotard 1984: 81). On one hand, the notion of a 'correct' rule can be found in poetics, the classical approach to art-making (Appignanesi 1989: 15), while the postmodern artist tries to "impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (Lyotard 1984: 81). The aim of experimental research in the arts is neither that of recovering a lost unity (nostalgia) nor that of discovering a new horizon (progress); rather, it simply bears witness to the groundlessness which it inhabits.

So, the purpose of art for Lyotard is neither the celebration of technique nor the pleasure of the viewer. Rather, its function is to present the fact that there is something that cannot be presented, that something indeterminate, formless, invisible, or sublime comes to disrupt the visible. Hence, the relationship between the artist and the public is not determined by common criteria of beauty or taste (see Vella 2004). Instead, this relationship is based on an element of surprise resulting from the overturning of rules or manifestos established by previous artists or institutions.

For Lyotard, Cézanne was such a turning point, not an exceptionally talented painter but one who was capable of asking the most essential

question: What is painting? Art, according to Lyotard, can be such a disruptive force that even commentary about it is rendered difficult, if not entirely impossible. This is what attracted him to an artist like Duchamp, whose work often destabilised conventional attitudes toward art. As implied by the French title of Lyotard's book about the artist (Les transformateurs Duchamp[2], translated as Duchamp's TRANS/formers), Duchamp's work transformed the field of artistic practice in a way that threatened to render art unrecognisable and even problematized the function of art criticism. In Lyotard's very unorthodox 'critique' of the French artist's work, we find the following statement: "In what you say about Duchamp, the aim would be not to try to understand and to show what you've understood, but rather the opposite, to try not to understand and to show that you haven't understood" (Lyotard 1990b:12). The force of the figural in Duchamp therefore comes to disrupt the structures of discourse, in a way that easily brings to mind other literary and artistic examples given by Lyotard in Discours, Figure. This disruption or disturbance is what characterises postmodernism in art; similarly, we are neither attracted to Duchamp by some common idea of beauty or Utopian vision nor is the inconsistency of his work comparable to a mystic's journey into the 'ineffable'. His inconsistency is ultimately a form of artistic elusiveness or philosophical groundlessness. The postmodern in art similarly rejects the 'pleasure' of a universal sense of understanding and good taste, celebrating this rejection not as a loss but as a liberating form of incredulousness.

This sense of adventure and experimentation was also present in an exhibition called Les Immatériaux organised by Lyotard (in collaboration with Thierry Chaput) in 1985 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The idea behind Les Immatériaux was to turn "the exhibition itself into a work of art" (Blistène 1985: 35) and to encourage visitors wearing radio-controlled headphones to wander off into different zones within the space, without prescribed paths, rules or destinations. The choice of leaving out the trendy Transavanguardia artists championed by Achille Bonito Oliva from the exhibition stressed the idea that postmodernism did not mean the end of the avant-garde nor could postmodernism be associated with painterly

approaches that returned, nostalgically, to earlier periods in the history of art.

In various ways, *Les Immatériaux* was a virtual act of biblioclasm, challenging traditional writing and printing conventions by asking twenty-six individuals, including Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Daniel Buren, Michel Butor, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jacques Derrida, to "sound out the effects of "new machines" on the formation of thought" (Lyotard 1985a: 6). Each participant was given an Olivetti M20 computer and asked to send his/her electronic responses to a predetermined list of words to a central unit at the Pompidou Centre which, in turn, would redirect these responses to all the other participants via its Olivetti M24 computer. In an essay very tellingly entitled "Post-scriptum" included in the exhibition catalogue, Lyotard, Elisabeth Gad, Chantal Noël and Nicole Toutcheff claim that this new 'support' on which the participants had to post their messages not only affected their manner of writing but located the text in a new dimension, one that is already dominated by the transmission of messages and interaction between participants. The result of this postmodern experiment was a complex set of opinions in a number of heterogeneous styles, a "small-scale projection of the galaxy of messages in which "we" travel as nomads" (Lyotard 1985a: 263). Amongst other things, *Les Immatériaux* tried to show that the postmodern world surrounds us more than ever with language, yet the space of language is no longer a sheet of paper but a screen. The static space of the book is replaced by a screen which transmits messages to nobody in particular, in a virtual space where nobody really says the last word about anything. As Lyotard explained to Bernard Blistène, "the exhibition could be thought of as a sign that refers to a missing signified" (Blistène 1985: 35).

Les Immatériaux was not literally biblioclastic; the authors of "Post-scriptum" distinguish between the "writer-artist" who retains visible traces of his or her work like erasures or insertions and the word processor, which does not permit these manual accidents to inhabit a text. Yet, the idea that discourse can be 'attacked' by an indeterminate and even formless force – the 'nomadic' space of the

computer screen – is undeniably related to various processes of artistic biblioclasm and links Lyotard's early works like *Discours, Figure* and "False Flights in Literature" to the experiments of *Les Immatériaux* and to his concern with the feeling of the sublime in the 1980s and 1990s.

3.2.2 Art and the Sublime

As Bill Readings has suggested, the radical nature of the figural was eventually developed by Lyotard in his work on the aesthetics of the sublime (Readings 1991: xxxi-xxxii). The sublime became increasingly important for Lyotard from around 1981 onwards: this was the year he wrote one of his essays about the French artist Jacques Monory, entitled "Sublime Aesthetic of the Contract Killer" (Lyotard 1998: 191-230). At around the same time, he wrote his well-known essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", which was eventually added as an appendix to the English translation of *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 1984). This important context helped to transform the sublime into a major subject of study in philosophical and artistic circles in the 1980s.

This fascination with the sublime was also due to a reassessment of the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant, particularly in France. Kant, in fact, had a great influence on Lyotard's peculiarly 'postmodern' interpretation of the sublime. In his Third Critique, Kant distinguished between two kinds of aesthetic experience: the beautiful and the sublime. Beauty is experienced when a work of art "appeals to the principle of a universal consensus (which may never be attained)" (Lyotard 1984: 77). Therefore, beauty is responsible for a "stabilization of taste" (Lyotard 1984: 78), while the sublime does not involve this stabilization or even the necessity of communication; instead, it is experienced "when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept" (Lyotard 1984: 78). While we are quite capable of conceiving an idea of totality, for instance, any visible 'example' or image of totality would seem to us to be very inadequate. This Kantian understanding of the

humiliation of the imagination is later developed by Lyotard in his own notion of the "unpresentable", which asserts itself in negative modes of presentation in postmodern art.

The sublime judgement in art is disturbing because it brings one face to face with a failure. Reason conceives the absolute, but imaginative thought is incapable of grasping the absolute in a form. The absolute is therefore unpresentable because the faculty of presentation cannot match the faculty of conception. As Lyotard writes in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, "(t)he sublime denies the imagination the power of forms" (Lyotard 1994: 54). While the judgement of the beautiful is induced by form, the sublime is formless and non-teleological because it leads to no particular form or end. Due to this inability to fulfil thought's desire (that of presenting the limitless), the sublime feeling is experienced as a mixture of pleasure and pain or a combination of attraction and repulsion. Returning to Kant, we find that

> (t)he feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason...(Kant 1952: 106)

Lyotard's departure from Kant is mainly located in his insistence on keeping judgement open and indeterminate, while in Kant's 'Analytic', reason always comes to pass judgement on the sublime (Shaw 2006: 124). In an essay called "The Interest of the Sublime", Lyotard discusses the relationship between the ends of reason and the more chaotic sublime by momentarily setting aside what he calls the *modus logicus* of his exposition and transforming sublime feelings into a "family":

> There are many sublime feelings – not just one, but an entire family...But the father is happy, the mother unhappy. The sublime child will be contradictorily composed of suffering and satisfaction. This is because, in the genealogy of the faculties of "knowledge"...,the parents come from widely divergent families. She is "faculty of judgement", he "reason". She is an artist, he a moralist...Reason wants good little children,...But the mother, the reflexive, free imagination, knows only how to unfold her

forms without predetermined rules and without known or knowable goals. (Courtine et al. 1993: 123-24)

Therefore, the sublime judgement only makes us aware of the lack of a determinate 'destiny'. However, this sublime feeling is not a reasoned 'explanation' of the unpresentable; artists can only present the fact that the unpresentable exists (Kant's "negative presentation"). According to Lyotard, there are two ways of evoking the existence of the unpresentable: the modern and the postmodern. Modern art testifies to the sublime feeling but, according to Lyotard, it is still too nostalgic for the 'lost' totality (determinate rules, goals, a destiny). Postmodern art, on the contrary, is not nostalgic for that which cannot be attained; rather, it requires us to "wage a war on totality" (Lyotard 1984: 82). Rather than present us with a totality that invokes a summation of knowledge – as an encyclopaedia might – the sublime is, in Jean-Luc Nancy's words, "the totality of the unlimited, insofar as the unlimited is beyond...all form and all sum" (Courtine et al. 1993: 39).
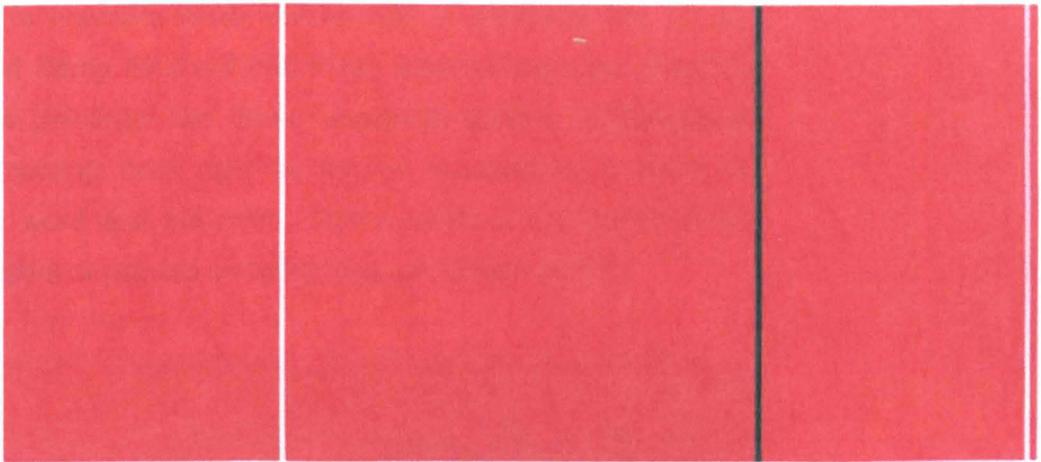
58
Barnett Newman
Vir Heroicus Sublimis
1950-51

In an essay called "Newman: The Instant", Lyotard argues that the work of American artist Barnett Newman provokes the feeling of the sublime whenever a commentator realises that so little can be said about his minimal, abstract paintings (Lyotard 1991: 80). Looking at Newman's paintings, we see no narrative, no development, no subject or symbol. As viewers, we are not led *somewhere else* by the artist; the paintings do not allude to the transcendental. Instead, each painting by Newman simply presents itself as colour, as the

'happening' of colour on a canvas, now. For Lyotard, Newman's work remains at the level of a beginning, a *quod*. In other words, we feel that something happens (*quod*) but we are not shown *what* happens (*quid*). This is Newman's indirect response to the Mosaic law that prohibits graven images, a law that, in Lyotard's words, "prefigures the Minimalist and abstractionist solutions" (Lyotard 1991: 85) of the twentieth century. Newman deliberately does not complete what he begins; his paintings, like the experience of the sublime, have no future. Newman reduces painting to an *event*, to pure presence, to "chromatic matter alone, and its relationship with the material...and the lay-out" (Lyotard 1991: 85). His paintings' blankness constitutes their very indeterminacy.

In *Que Peindre?* (Lyotard 1987), Lyotard also discusses the use of the blank in the paintings of Japanese-American artist Shusaku Arakawa. Influenced by Zen Buddhism, Arakawa's paintings carry titles like *Blank Stations* or *Degrees of Blank*. The blank corresponds to Lyotard's unpresentable because it resists commentary. This unreadability is nowhere more visible than in paintings like *Or air* (1973-74) and *Study for the I* (1978-79), which make use of words (Fig. 59). In paintings like these, Arakawa ignores typographical conventions, writing from right to left or increasing the distance between one word and the next. Some letters are coloured while others are absent or painted so lightly they are barely legible.
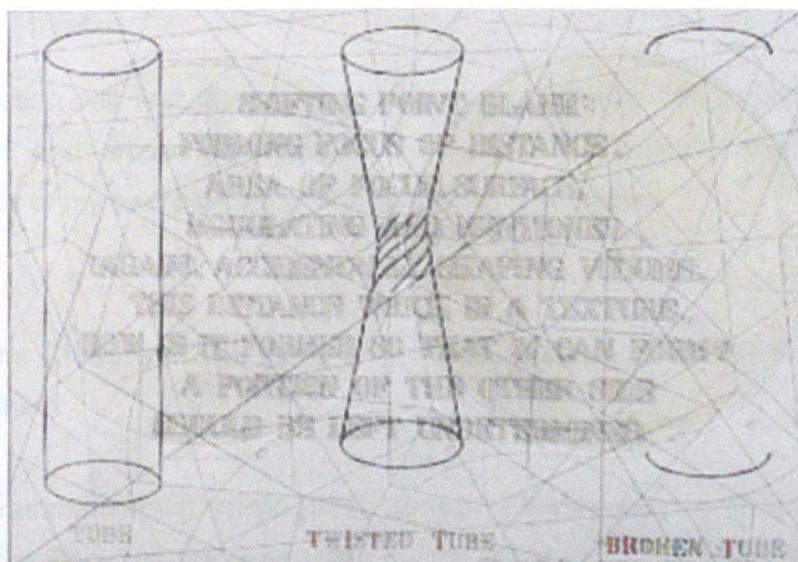
59
Shusaku Arakawa
Study for the I
1978-79

Lyotard compares these works to "book-objects" like Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Lyotard 1987: 79). As in *Discours, Figure*, the insertion of a spatial, figural dimension into language produces an indeterminate surface, suspended between the open pages of a book and a support covered in graphical signs that have no 'meaning'. In works like these, the blank – even the blank 'linkage' between one word and another – corresponds to the present instant that is still unaware of the next instant. The blank is a pause that lasts an eternity; it does not offer hasty solutions.

Lyotard explains: in a Buddhist tale, a man hangs by his mouth to a branch above the void and is asked a question by a passer-by. Answering the question to show off one's knowledge would only result in death. What does the man do? He waits (Lyotard 1987: 69). This waiting reflects an awareness of the futility or absurdity of thinking the 'last word' about anything, and is analogous to Xu Bing's Buddhist-inspired abdication of language in his *Silkworm Books*. The sublime "does not offer itself to dialogue" (Lyotard 1991: 142); it defers indefinitely the final form of language or last words, and reveals the limitations of the book. The following section takes up this theme, and explores the relationship between artistic biblioclasm, postmodernism and the sublime.

3.3 The Limits of the Book

This section will first discuss the relationship between the sublime aesthetic and artistic biblioclasm, and then it will consider some examples of my own practice in the light of this discussion.

3.3.1 The Closure of the Book and the Formlessness of Artistic Biblioclasm

In *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976), Jacques Derrida diagnosed "The End of the Book" as the exhaustion of "the ontological-encyclopaedic

or neo-Hegelian model of the great, total book, the book of absolute knowledge" (Derrida 2001: 27; my translation). Derrida was not celebrating the end of the printed book but was referring to the power that writing has to dislocate a more theological interpretation of the book that anchors meaning in a transcendental signified.

Yet, Derrida also made it clear that this *end* of the book refers simultaneously to the signs of the impending death of an epoch (the marginalization of the printed book, for instance) and to the teleological aim of fulfilling the total book's encyclopaedic project. The word 'end' may refer to "the end as death or the end as *telos* or accomplishment" (Derrida 2001: 28; my translation). For Derrida, this ambiguous 'end' (termination or destination) is actually *sans fin* (endless), for we can never do away completely with the dream of an absolute, all-knowing book. The termination of the book is interminable.

Derrida's notion of the "total book" provides us with an ideal starting-point for a discussion on the book, artistic biblioclasm and the sublime. For this total book is precisely what *disappears* in the work of many artists who destroy or manipulate books, while the material remains of books in works by artists like Gussin or Huang Yong Ping simultaneously demonstrate the ambiguity of this disappearance, as Derrida suggests. If we combine Derrida's encyclopaedic, "total book" with Lyotard's concluding battle-cry in "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" ("wage a war on totality"), we can start to define the relationship between artistic biblioclasm and the postmodern sublime. This war on the total book can only be waged by practising a form of artistic withdrawal, as Christine Buci-Glucksmann suggests in a paper she presented at a conference about Lyotard held a year after the philosopher's death at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris. According to Buci-Glucksmann, Lyotard's interest in the sublime is not related to classical or baroque forms of sublime intensification (exemplified by Poussin and El Greco) but would better be described as "a sublime of Kantian withdrawal, a sublime that presents the unnameable and the unpresentable", bringing about "a mourning for all images" (Buci-Glucksmann 2001: 165). Buci-

Glucksmann also links this sense of Kantian withdrawal (*retrait*) to Lyotard's text about Pierre Skira's drawings of books. Skira withdraws from textual narrative by replacing the words on the surface of his book pages with the figural force of colour. Colour suffers its own, "dusty" evanescence; Skira's pastels appear simultaneously strong and weak, sensual and painful. The story of Skira's books remains untold, languorously suspended in a perpetual state of 'unfulfillment'. The 'totality' of the book is reduced to an instant, similar in some ways to Barnett Newman's blankness.

It is relevant that Newman describes one of his paintings (*Onement*, 1948) as "a non-dogmatic painting" (Lewison 2002: 118). His work is non-dogmatic precisely because it refuses to present us with a recognizable totality, 'story' or 'graven image'. This is comparable to Skira's paintings of blank books or to Xu Bing's Buddhist attitude towards the use of live silkworms: the empty pages of Skira's books and Bing's 'silenced' books offer no resolution, either. This indeterminacy links the postmodern sublime to the aesthetic and cultural significance of artistic biblioclasm. The destructive processes used during the production of biblioclastic works 'pervert' the book's form and image of totality, transforming the *quid* of the book into an indeterminate *quod*. Pre-existent words and grammatical structures are either completely obscured or remain partially visible because, as Hubert and Hubert have argued in their study of altered books, "(p)ostmodern artists, radical readers to a fault, show a predilection for quotations" (Hubert and Hubert 1999: 73). These quotations are not accepted as static representations but are enrolled in a process of change that is "typical of postmodern genres: the need on the part of the critic to problematize and eventually deal with indeterminate boundaries" (Hubert and Hubert 1999: 72).

Artistic biblioclasm therefore shows up the limits of the book by injecting a dose of indeterminacy into the book. If, as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe writes in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, the sublime must be "imagined as an indefinitely decentered context of deferral" (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 65), what it shares with artistic biblioclasm is the inadequacy of the object. The "decentered context" of the sublime is

ultimately the problem of representation as such; its blankness rejects the possibility and necessity of re-presenting the world. Processes of erasure, destruction or blankness merely present this disturbing, sublime fact: firstly, that a gap exists within the object or signifier and secondly, that the artist-biblioclast must uncover the myth of the object's wholeness by revealing the existence of this gap.

Yet, the blankness of artistic biblioclasm is not the tabula rasa of the blank canvas: the latter is 'limitless' only because it is still untouched, while the former's limitlessness owes its existence to the erasure of previously existent limits. The sublime of artistic biblioclasm is therefore not the deferral of a 'truth' into the future tense; rather, it defers by withdrawing, by moving away from fulfilment. Writing about blankness in contemporary art, Gilbert-Rolfe states that

> blankness has moved from...the idea of process as potentiality...–
> withholding, and therefore, promising; absent and, therefore, capable of
> becoming present – to become instead the signifier of an idea of process
> as present but unrepresentable, invisible because unimaginable in spatial
> terms...(Gilbert-Rolfe 1999: 116)

Therefore, the sublimity of artistic biblioclasm must not be confused with the Utopian stance of early abstractionists like Malevich. In artistic biblioclasm, the future remains unimaginable. Biblioclasm in art does not strive to fulfil a project; rather – quoting Jean-Luc Nancy writing about the sublime – "*it is the infinity of a beginning*" (Courtine et al. 1993: 35).

Although the sublime has occasionally been "dismissed as a pathological and politically regressive return to the irrational" (Ray 2005: 9), its strength lies precisely in its ability to disturb an understanding of rationality that depends on certainties, proofs or fundamental 'truths'. Artistic biblioclasm produces this disturbance by presenting us with a "minimal occurrence" (Lyotard 1991: 84) that is affirmative only in the sense that 'something' happens. Writing about the contract killers and murder scenes in Jacques Monory's hyperrealist, monochromatic paintings, Lyotard argues that

(t)he killer must write his novel or paint it, and thus testify that it's finished. But if it's finished, what's the point of writing and painting too? It is this tiny paradox which conceals the artistic impetus. I say that there's nothing to say, I paint that there's nothing to paint. It's my last word. But there is no last word, the last word is the one which says that the previous word was the last one, and so it wasn't the last. There's nothing? There is at least the sentence: *There is nothing.* In this rebound of negation into affirmation, is concealed an infinitesimal will. (Lyotard 1998: 199-200)

This desire to 'say nothing' is reflected in other works described in Part Two (2.2 Artistic Biblioclasm) and can also be traced to "False Flights in Literature". A work like Yong Ping's *Kiosk* (composed mainly of newspapers and magazines that were pulped in a cement mixer) denies us the pleasures of readability, form and political finality. The formlessness of the medium only presents us with the realisation that any final form given to political 'truth' is inherently limited. *Kiosk* presents us with an expression of Kantian *retrait* combined with a more postmodern, sceptical attitude – the kind of attitude Lyotard also associates with the Greek Sophists (Lyotard 1985b).

Similarly, Graham Gussin's *Ghost* – an atlas of the stars pulped and transformed into simple, blank discs – constitutes a withdrawal from the book's totalising dream. *Ghost* resists a scientifically 'correct' representation of the infinity of outer space. The pulped copies of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in Leif Elggren and Carl Michael von Hausswolff's *The Annexation of Utopia by the Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland* similarly resist a political 'absolute'. The sublime element in these works is expressed by the very pulping process with which a pre-existent work is rendered formless. As Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss have pointed out, "(t)he formless is an operation" (Bois and Krauss 1997: 18); the *performance* of the book's destruction is what really matters in many of these works.

This interpretation is congruent with Lyotard's reading of Kant, who "names "formlessness, absence of form", as a possible index to the unpresentable" (Lyotard 1984: 78). However, in some less 'destructive' works studied in Part Two (particularly dematerialised books), the process matters less than the actual absence or unreadable nature of the book in the work of art. This absence is

evident in Micha Ullman's 'monument' in Berlin, where we are only led to understand that thousands of books *would* have filled the underground shelves. In her ghostly casts of bookshelves, Rachel Whiteread similarly empties the space where books *would* have been present. Her monolithic *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna also plays with notions of presence and absence. The whole library is solidly present yet simultaneously absent since it cannot be entered or used. The books visibly line each of the four sides of the memorial but remain uselessly beyond us, distant in their sculptural uniformity.

Still, even these examples do not offer the mind the respite of a narrative destiny. The blankness we experience in works such as Ullman's *Bibliothek* is an absence that remains irretrievably absent, not one that directs us to the possibility of a presence. This perpetual absence either refers to an unimaginable violence that cannot be represented without compromising the seriousness of the crime (as in Ullman's entombed non-library) or expresses a reluctance to attach oneself to a determinate aesthetic or political entity (as in *Kiosk*). In both cases, they share a common hesitation in the face of closure.

What, then, constitutes the closure of a book? Hilary Lawson, author of *Closure: A Story of Everything*, describes closure "as the imposition of fixity on openness...It is the conversion of flux into identity..." (Lawson 2001: 4) Lawson gives a useful example: imagine a page covered randomly in dots that, under scrutiny, combine to form an image of a face. As long as we see the surface as a random pattern of dots, we are faced by openness, but as soon as our eyes start to form a face within the pattern, we have an example of closure. This example ties in with some of the works discussed in the earlier analysis of *Discours, Figure*: both Lawson's and Lyotard's examples (Cézanne's paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, for instance) explore the possibility of retaining the openness of *enfance*, the speechlessness of the unimaginable. Both examples allow us to imagine colours or dots as a *quod*, as the 'happening' of marks and dashes on a surface *before* images start to form and become recognisable.

Lawson also mentions ambiguity as one of the strategies used by artists to avoid closure. According to Lawson, many paintings that merely represent the physical world "make no attempt to avoid closure" (Lawson 2001: 207), while Impressionism and subsequent developments produced works of art that were more ambiguous and less predictable.

Closure, however, is not restricted to images or image-making; even books may be perceived as annoying or even dangerous examples of closure. In several biblioclastic works of art, artists destroy the particularity of texts and explode the book's previous image of closure. Dieter Roth's newspaper-sausages are good examples of this avoidance of closure. Latham's destruction of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* is another. In Latham's work, Greenberg's assertive pronouncements on art are replaced by the indeterminacy of the book's fermented remains. The sublime residue of this biblioclastic work illustrates the artist's need to do away with closure. Artistic biblioclasm is ultimately a form of resistance.

3.3.2 Erasing the Limits of the Book in my Practice

The need to resist the closure of books is evident in several of my own works. At an early stage during my research, I recognised the importance of resisting what Derrida calls the encyclopaedic project of some books (comparable in some ways to Lyotard's notion of the 'grand narrative'). Later, it became increasingly necessary to distinguish between different types of books. In my work, for instance, I sometimes make use of books with a 'theological' centre or authority, books that ultimately depend on the power of closure.

Finally, and most importantly, some aspect of the book survives biblioclasm. This statement does not refer to the remembrance of books in the minds of survivors, as in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Rather, it merely reminds us that closures can be displaced or opened up but continue to survive as a human dream or desire. For Derrida, books themselves are limits that interrupt the act of writing, while the

process of printing texts on book pages characterizes this interruption and this limit: this closure is "the condition of all forms, the very formation of form" (Derrida 2001: 162; my translation). Awareness of the survival of the book in some form is neither a prescription for defeatist resignation nor a reason for celebrating the book's imperishability; rather, the artist-biblioclast resists the book by working *with* the book as he/she simultaneously works *against* it. Hence, my works consist of actual books that are transformed yet still present themselves to the eyes of the viewer in one form or another, even though the remainder may consist only of a Kantian "negative presentation". But the book's survival (often as mere matter: paper pulp, for instance) is not synonymous with the survival of its previous image of closure. The irreversibility of artistic biblioclasm does not permit a return to 'normality'; its processes are radically transgressive.
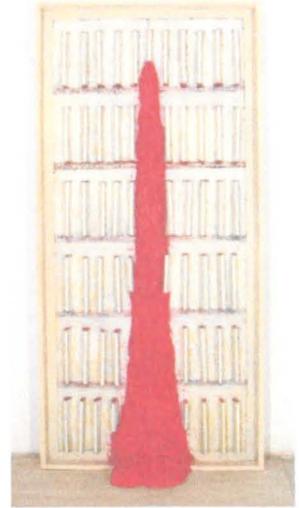
60-61
Above: *Red Spill*
2003
Left: Detail of sliced books and red pulp in *Red Spill*

In several of my works, books are passed through such an irreversible, transformative process. In works like *Melting Library* (2002; Figs. 20 and 53, D13-D17), *Memorial* (2002; Fig. 21, D10-D12) and *Red Spill* (2003; Figs. 60 and 61, D20-D22), books were shredded, drenched in water, glue and acrylic colour and finally modelled like clay to make textured flows of paper. While many of my earlier works (produced before 2002) generally retained the original book form, the papier mâché processes used in my later works (2002-2003) were developed quite deliberately in an effort to make the

origins of the medium (books) less recognisable. As we already saw in the Practice Methodology in Part One, different kinds of artistic biblioclasm can be analysed in terms of the *extent* of damage done to the book. This kind of analysis produces a gradation of processes, starting from those that barely alter another author's work and finishing with those processes that utterly destroy books.

62
Memorial
National Library,
Valletta, Malta
2002

Memorial is an example of a work that shows no visible traces of the source of its medium. In this work, several history books were turned into wet pulp, mixed with red paint, then modelled into a circular form, dried, and finally installed on the façade of the National Library (*Biblioteka*) in Valletta, Malta (Fig. 62). The books used in this work were not just altered. They were kneaded into a disorganised and nameless mass, in which notions of identity or completeness lose all significance. The original identity of the medium (history books) is no longer apparent and hence has lost its ability to wield any institutional power. Rather, the relevance of the transformation from history book to pulp is located in the actual site of installation: the front balcony of a well-known and architecturally significant building that holds the archives of the Knights of St John, beneath which a statue of a seated Queen Victoria dominates one of Valletta's most popular squares. This erasure of history is therefore occurring in an urban context that

63
Memorial
Detail of pulp and
flowers
2002

is replete with powerful symbolic signs that allude to the country's past, especially its history of colonisations[3].

In these works made of book pulp, matter predominates over narrative or history. The ambiguously dual nature of the circle in *Memorial* – referring simultaneously to a lifebelt and to a funeral wreath complete with flowers and 'leaves' made of pulp (Fig. 63) – suggests that Maltese history can only be 'saved' by avoiding closure. Only by 'killing' our history books can we ensure that Maltese history remains unpresentable, stubbornly challenging a series of colonisations that is sometimes perceived as the very essence of the local identity. What is lost in this symbolic murder is the specificity of the written or 'received' history, the specific linkage of one sentence with another to form a determinate story.

The history books that structure the narratives of history are comparable to the idea of 'gestalt' in art, or what Lyotard calls "the problem of composition" (Lyotard 1991: 139): the comparison of one colour's value with that of another colour within the same picture plane (to form a unified picture or gestalt). Pictorial unity depends on the harmonious inter-relationships between colours and forms, just as the past 'makes sense' in history books when it presents itself as a tight weave of related, sequential events. In *Memorial*, book pulp obliterates this gestalt and presents us with the virtually unimaginable 'matter' of history. This matter is so difficult to imagine because, as Lyotard asks, how does one "grasp a nuance in itself" (Lyotard 1991: 139)? Defining the *presence* of colour without recourse to a scale of comparisons means introducing an ambiguous and unsettling question into painting, just as defining matter without referring to form has traditionally been thought to be inconceivable (until the advent of the Kantian sublime). This is why the sublime of artistic biblioclasm is not a modern sublime, one that projects a final destiny or nostalgic past onto its blank canvas. Book pulp is not a project (a progression of events leading to a resolution) but an 'instant' in time that can hardly be grasped, because the matter it is made of is caught in a state of flux.

Even in *Melting Library* and *Red Spill*, the heterogeneity and formlessness of pulp (matter) replace meaning and finality (form). The flow of book pulp breaks down language and the process of signification; indeterminacy pushes representation aside, resisting any final 'occurrence' of writing. This process suggests an 'apophatic' (a kind of denial, as in apophatic or negative theology) or 'peripatetic' (walking around a subject without defining it) approach to biblioclasm. If books offer 'answers', then the erasure of books is a *via negativa* that denies all answers. What is unlimited about this erasure is not so much the form that the destroyed book acquires (which, as Derrida shows in his discussion of the 'frame' in *The Truth in Painting*, cannot escape the finality of objecthood, even in its formless state) but this process of denial coupled with the utter speechlessness and infinite divisibility of pulp/matter that replaces the fullness of language/narrative.

64
Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)
Cittadella Prison, Gozo
2003

In *Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)*, Time – arguably, the most universal symbol of unlimitedness – was 'killed' by burning twelve diaries that were subsequently installed in one of the cells in the Old Prison in Victoria (Gozo, Malta; Figs. 64-66 and D37-D46). The tiny, claustrophobic cells were in use between the mid-sixteenth century and the early twentieth century. As in *Memorial*, therefore, the site is central to the work and links the artistic intervention to history (the passing of time). In addition, the space in *Oubliette* is a reminder of an anonymous, past occupant. The uninhabited prison cell requires

us to 'remember' the forgotten one (the word 'oubliette' comes from *oublier*, meaning 'to forget' in French, and also refers to a hidden dungeon or cell), while the burnt diaries try to make us 'forget' the objectively conventional (hence unforgettable) division of Time into numbered days, months and years.

Books are essentially a time-based medium. At the simplest level, this means that it takes time to read a book. Moreover, the pages in a book can be compared to moments in time that cannot be experienced together. Having turned a page, we lose touch with the previous page and the previous segment of Time. Diaries represent Time to an even greater degree: they keep track of daily encounters and thoughts, and they also represent the unpresentable infinity of Time by a continuous series of numbers. The process of burning a diary transforms these numbers into a single instant: the time it takes to 'read' the unreadable ashes of a book that cannot be opened again. *Discours* becomes *figure*. In this cell, what is sublime is not Time itself but the fictional prisoner's awareness of the limits of the mind's understanding of Time. Biblioclasm here functions as the prisoner's desire: that this ungraspable Time spent in a cruel prison cell finish here and now, in an instant.

What these examples of my practice have in common is an unwillingness to fix 'meaning' or 'big' ideas like Time and history. I have demonstrated that artistic biblioclasm in my work is not just a randomly destructive process but an artistic form of resistance that is brought to bear against closure. The formlessness of pulp or of the book's ashes exemplifies this mistrust of a final 'form' or signified. The question that needs to be asked at this stage is whether the destruction of books is *always* an act of resistance. Can we always justify the burning of books? If not, how can we distinguish between different kinds of biblioclasm? In some political contexts, isn't the preservation (rather than the destruction) of books and libraries generally considered to be an act of resistance? To discuss these questions, we will need to study the relationship between this biblioclastic resistance in my work and fundamentalist understandings of politics and religion.

65-66
Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)
View through opening in prison cell door; detail
2003

[1] Lyotard's interest in aesthetics and the arts is well-known. He wrote about literature (Kafka, Shakespeare, Joyce, Malraux, Butor), music (Cage, Berio, and others), and especially the visual arts (Duchamp, Monory, Adami, Buren, Arakawa, Newman, Lichtenberg-Ettinger, Ayme, Francis, Skira, and several others).

[2] Literally translated, Lyotard's title would read as 'The transformers of the field'.

[3] Like other cities and towns in the Grand Harbour area, Valletta has many buildings that are historically and architecturally significant. *Memorial* was installed in one of the most beautiful squares in the city, popularly known as *Pjazza Reġina* (Queen's Square). The square is surrounded by many symbols of Maltese history and politics: the National Library, the Grand Masters' Palace, the Parliament, and a 19th-century statue of Queen Victoria.

Part Four

The Unpresentable:
Politics, Religion and the Book

Part Three discussed the relationship between the sublime and the book's perversion at the hands of visual artists. While Part Three dealt mainly with the *aesthetic* aspect of biblioclasm, Part Four will introduce its *political* and *religious* dimensions. We shall start by tackling the phenomenon of political biblioclasm (the destruction of books by totalitarian regimes) and then study the relationship between biblioclasm and religious fundamentalism. This first stage (4.1) is necessary because I will later distinguish between these oppressive forms of biblioclasm and artistic forms. This distinction will also support my conclusions about the goals of artistic biblioclasm. In order to delve deeper into the significance of these artistic forms and to make connections between the aesthetic, political and religious aspects of artistic biblioclasm, 4.2 will discuss the problem of representation and will relate the notion of the unpresentable to artistic, literary and other forms of biblioclasm. This section will pay particular attention to the ethical dilemmas brought into play by the artistic destruction of books and will argue that artistic or related forms of biblioclasm confront us with responses to politics and religion that are very different from those that inspire the totalitarian and fundamentalist systems discussed in 4.1. The final stage of Part Four (4.3) will focus on the political and religious characteristics of biblioclasm in my own work.

4.1 After Auschwitz: Biblioclasm and Utopia

Following the work of writers like Adorno and Lyotard, the term "after Auschwitz" has come to designate a problematic relationship with

writing, representing, remembering and even thinking. For how does one *write* such an event? And where does one start thinking about it? Auschwitz is a particularly barbaric, 'unthinkable' example of a group of political phenomena (political repression, genocide, totalitarianism, racism) that could be exemplified by other 'cases', but the extreme nature of the Nazi concentration camps transports us beyond the limits of reason, to a state of excess that corresponds with the feeling of the sublime as described in Part Three. Auschwitz is also an event that has left its mark on a number of artists who have dealt with the subject of the book: for example, Kiefer, Ullman, Whiteread. Hence, this section will explore the relationship between politics, religion and biblioclasm (not artistic biblioclasm, but *actual* biblioclasm: historical examples of book burning and destruction of libraries) and will discuss the particularly volatile region where art and politics overlap. This discussion will develop in two stages: the first will draw an outline of political biblioclasm while the second will explore the relationship between religious fundamentalism and sacred books.

4.1.1 The Politics of Biblioclasm

Book burnings of all sorts have occurred throughout history and are generally abhorred for their obliteration of human knowledge. This history has been documented in many essays and publications, so the aim here will not be to add anything substantial to this history but to provide a contextual outline of some of the more infamous examples of biblioclasm and to sum up some of the reasons offered by scholars trying to explain the phenomenon of biblioclasm. Nevertheless, I will also propose a theoretical conclusion that will shape my discussion of artistic biblioclasm later on.

In publications that deal specifically with the destruction of books, like Battles (2004) and Raven (2004), the authors describe and evaluate a series of historical examples of biblioclasm: from the (legendary?)

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destruction of the libraries of Alexandria to the burning of books by the Chinese Qin emperor Shi Huangdi, the burning of Aztec painted books by the Spanish conquerors in Mexico, the Nazi bonfires of 1933, the destruction of books in Tibet following the Chinese take-over, and the bombing of the Vijećnica library in Sarajevo in 1992. It is impossible to quantify the vast amount of books lost in these and similar cases of biblioclasm, but it is not hard to perceive a correlation between a political force rising to power and a hatred for specific kinds of books, generally pertaining to another culture that the aggressive political force aims to supersede. Naturally, political or ethnic forms of hatred can also be expressed through violence against people, but the obliteration of other cultures (represented by history books, religious texts, literature, and so on) often precedes or accompanies the destruction of human life.

Although works such as Matthew Battles' or James Raven's show that biblioclasm is not exclusively a modern phenomenon, the twentieth century was notoriously biblioclastic and inventive in its methods of destruction. Battles points out that "it was in the twentieth century that new ways of destroying books, and of exploiting their destruction, were tested and refined" (Battles 2004: 156). In *Les biblioclastes: Le Messie et l'autodafé*, psychoanalyst Gérard Haddad also links biblioclasm to modern forms of totalitarianism, which he describes as the conjunction of three elements: "the considerable technological means offered by science, the bureaucratic organization of modern societies, exploited by the old ghost of millenarianism" (Haddad 1990:136, my translation). Biblioclasm is therefore related to what totalitarian political systems perceive as a necessary transformation of society, the murder of the Symbolic Father by the new order (i.e. replacing a previous authority or law). Haddad, in fact, interprets biblioclasm as a form of patricide, the fulfillment of the Oedipal desire (following Freud, for whom the foundation of a new community – like Christianity – was dependent on such a 'murder'). In Haddad's view, Hitler's Final Solution reflects this hatred of the (Jewish) Book, and the

ultimate objective of the Nazis' anti-Semitism was "the erasure of the paternal function" (Haddad 1990: 148, my translation). Only by eliminating this 'father' (symbolised by book collections) could the 'son' achieve dominance.

Other publications like *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation* (2001)[1], edited by Jonathan Rose, and *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (2003) by Rebecca Knuth, also stress the relevance of the twentieth century in research about biblioclasm. The Holocaust, in particular, is seen as a terrifying case of racial extermination that was paralleled by a similarly enormous biblioclastic undertaking. As Rose explains, the murder of six million Jews was accompanied by the systematic destruction of one hundred million books between 1933 and 1945 throughout occupied Europe (Rose 2001: 1). This intensification of aggression against books is very relevant because, as shown in Part Two, even artistic forms of biblioclasm are restricted to the twentieth century, specifically the second half of the century.

Battles divides political book burnings into two categories: "attempts at revision" and books that are destroyed "in order to erase their authors and readers from history" (Battles 2004: 42). The German relationship with books during the Nazi era was a particularly exemplary case, belonging to Battles' second category but simultaneously aimed at giving the *Volk* a new approved literature for consumption. The seizure and burning of thousands of "degenerate" books written by Jewish and other authors (destroyed during organized, public "spectacles") in the 1930s was thus accompanied by the expansion of German libraries and the promotion of books in the German language. Describing this situation, Battles argues that "the destruction of so many books, and the censorship of so much German literature, created a gap that had to be filled – or at least papered over

with a simulacrum composed of authentic Nazi literature under strict ideological control" (Battles 2004: 169).

The fact that biblioclasm was understood by the Nazis as a form of ideological 'purification' is also confirmed by historian Leonidas E. Hill in Rose's compilation of essays about the subject. Hill writes about "the Nazi conviction that the German *Geist* and culture could be expressed in the German language only by "true" Germans, that is, non-Jews" (Rose 2001: 11). According to Hill, this kind of attitude in Germany eventually led to the book burnings of 10 May 1933, even though the latter event was organised by students groups, not the government of the Third Reich. Articles attacking "corrupt" or "degenerate" Jews and lists of "un-German" authors compiled by Joseph Goebbels and others appeared regularly in Nazi newspapers before the fatal day in May 1933. Hill asserts that "(b)etween 30 January 1933 and the 10 May book burnings Germany seethed with Nazi activity against writers, their books, publishers and bookstores" (Rose 2001: 12). This shows that after Hitler had seized power on 30 January that same year, the concretisation of this aggressiveness after a few months was almost inevitable.

This aggressiveness, however, did not stop at the book pyres in Berlin and elsewhere. The German poet Heinrich Heine's words "There where one burns books one in the end burns men" have often been quoted in the context of discussions about political biblioclasm (see Battles 2004: 156, for example) and are also included in Micha Ullman's *Bibliothek* in Berlin (see 2.2.4). Heine's prophetic statement indicated that the destruction of books was simply an 'innocent' prelude to an even more horrifying crime: genocide. Writing about biblioclasm in the twentieth century, Rebecca Knuth also links genocide to what she prefers to call "libricide", which she describes as "large-scale, regime-sponsored destruction of books and libraries, purposeful initiatives that were designed to advance short- and long-term ideologically driven goals" (Knuth 2003: viii). Knuth uses five

case studies (Germany, Bosnia, Kuwait, China and Tibet) to show how the phenomenon of genocide is related to totalitarianism and the urge to homogenize a given culture by eliminating cultural artefacts (including books) that cannot be assimilated. Hence, following Knuth's arguments (and those of other writers like Haddad), one could conclude that the Nazi Final Solution would not have been complete without the utter destruction of whole libraries and book collections in Germany and elsewhere. Biblioclasm is thus an essential part of the ideology of evil.

We have seen that the destruction of books is usually characterised by other, extreme forms of violence and is often caused by the desire to 'purify' one's culture by eliminating parts of or a whole other culture. In some circumstances, the destruction of books is paralleled by some very peculiar political aspirations, as in "The Wall and the Books" by Jorge Luis Borges, in which the author writes about his own mixed emotions on reading that the Chinese Emperor who initiated the building of the Great Wall was also the person who ordered his subjects to destroy all books that were written before his coming to power. Borges concludes that "the wall in space and the conflagration in time were magical barriers designed to hold back death" (Borges 1967: 90). Architecture (creation) and biblioclasm (destruction) were two sides of a single plan: the Emperor's desire to achieve immortality.

Yet, another reading of the Emperor's actions can also be suggested. Political biblioclasms never happen for their own sake. They are generally accompanied by a constructive, aesthetico-political idea, by a dream (or nightmare, depending on who is judging it) about a 'better' world, a political 'truth' that needs to be unveiled. In the Chinese Emperor's case, this political dream led him to add a geographical barrier to an intellectual one: the former would isolate his people from other peoples, while the latter would isolate them from their own history, from themselves. The Wall monumentalised this

isolation and imposition of closure, while the books' ashes became the *tabula rasa* on which the Emperor would inscribe a new, uncontaminated history within that Wall.

In this sense, all political biblioclasms are 'positive', which means that they only negate something in order to build something afresh. The Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten had the name of the god Amun erased from every inscription in the land only because he wanted to replace that god with the sun-god Aten, bringing into existence – as Freud suggested – a new kind of religious intolerance (Freud 1990: 258). Books were thrown on the pyre after the conquest of Mexico mainly because the Spaniards wanted to replace Aztec culture with the one, 'true' book, the Bible (Battles 2004: 42). Similarly, the *Feuersprüche* (fire speeches, or incantations) sung by students during the Nazi book burnings of 1933 proclaimed that the youths were "(a)gainst class struggle and materialism" and "(f)or the national community and an idealistic outlook", "(a)gainst decadence and moral decay" and "(f)or discipline and morality in family and state", and so on (Battles 2004: 165-66). In cases such as this, the perception is that the 'sick' society will be cured by a state-approved, Utopian phoenix, rising out of the ashes of a morally decadent culture in order to establish a new (and supposedly 'better') organization of things. This, of course, does not justify Goebbels' gleeful reaction to the students' actions: "German men and women!...You are doing the right thing in committing the evil spirit of the past to the flames...It is a strong, great and symbolic act..." (Battles 2004: 167) But it does show that the Third Reich could only come into being by sweeping aside the 'other' and simultaneously presenting the people with a new Utopian project. As Gérard Haddad has argued, biblioclasms (and totalitarian systems) seem to be tied to a quasi-archaic, millenarian idea or a political form of messianism. The Führer comes to eliminate that which does not match the identity of the *Volk*, 'purifying' or homogenising the people in the process.

This theory that seeks to explain some of the goals of political or totalitarian biblioclasm is corroborated by research about another similarly destructive phenomenon: iconoclasm. Art historian David Freedberg argues that in Nazi Germany, "(t)he lovers of art are the destroyers of art" and that : "(o)nce one had got rid of degenerate art, then one could seek out the degenerate artists too" (Freedberg 1989: 388). Here again, the destruction of cultural artefacts precedes the destruction of people. Freedberg also confirms that the destruction of images is frequently linked to a "messianic impulse" (Freedberg 1989: 408). This impulse is found in individual cases of vandalism on works of art but transforms itself into a more widespread (and potentially dangerous) 'performance' in violent episodes of collective iconoclasm, such as the infamous destruction of images throughout the Netherlands in 1566. Freedberg analyses theological arguments used by iconoclasts to justify their actions, psychological issues that affect individuals' responses to images, and even political reasons that are often given to explain iconoclastic motivations:

> The aim is to pull down whatever symbolizes – stands for – the old and usually repressive order, the order which one wishes to replace with a new and better one. One removes the visible vestiges of the bad past. To pull down the images of a rejected order or an authoritarian and hated one is to wipe the slate clean and inaugurate the promise of utopia. (Freedberg 1989: 390)

Freedberg's arguments about iconoclasm are more complex than this brief reference suggests, yet the quoted paragraph suffices to draw a parallel. We read that political iconoclasm is sometimes aimed at a "repressive order" or a "bad past". Images of the toppling and dismemberment of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square in April 2003 easily come to mind to all those who experienced it on TV. But we saw earlier that political biblioclasm is also committed (rather than suffered) by repressive orders. Even dictatorships have their visions of Utopia, their true and false gods. Indeed, one might add that the very notion of a 'true' god is relative. The Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has explained how

religious icons are transformed into pagan idols in the eyes of a new religious offshoot like iconoclasm:

> For the Christian iconoclasts of the eighth century gave the name "idol" to that which had been conceived and venerated as icon of the true God, and the Jews of the Old Covenant rejected all representation as idolatrous, even representation of the God of the Covenant...In short, the icon and the idol are not at all determined as beings against other beings, since the same beings (statues, names, etc.) can pass from one rank to the other. The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings. (Marion 1991: 8)

The sacred itself becomes a matter of perception. An object with iconic status is reinterpreted as an idolatrous object; its religious and political importance is demoted, yet it remains important enough to be attacked and occasionally removed from sight. Often, a mixture of religious and political drives influence the destructiveness of iconoclasts or biblioclasts, "eliminating for a period of time the threats to centralized authority" and simultaneously justifying one's actions "by an appeal to sanctified religious texts" (Gutmann 1971: XXIV-XXV). This does not imply that all the political circumstances that lead to violent acts of biblioclasm or iconoclasm are virtually identical, following the icon-idol model in a formulaic manner. Nor does the utopian vision of the new, destructive order (as 'pure' as it may appear to the perpetrators) mitigate the nature of the crime in any way. What, on the other hand, needs to be emphasised is that repressive regimes that resort to acts of biblioclasm are not simply *repressing* (defined in negative terms: restraining, quelling, suppressing, censoring, excluding, and so on) but are also building, reforming, reviving traditionalist values, or dreaming of immortality, as in Borges' tale. The liquidation of a political icon/idol (the iconoclastic act) is generally not the perpetrator's main goal.

Similarly, Boris Groys has shown how Utopian dreams insinuated themselves even in the traditionalist paintings of the Stalinist period. He writes that "the art of the Stalin period, like the culture of Nazi Germany, claimed to be building a new and eternal empire beyond

human history, an apocalyptic kingdom that would incorporate all the good of the past and reject all the bad" (Groys 1992: 73). Oppression is often woven into an aesthetical and political tapestry, rich in images of a total transformation of society and culture.

The logic of political biblioclasm revolves around a similar notion of truth (and falsehood). For Knuth, "libricide" also expresses a hatred of "the humanist and democratic values that have come to characterize modern society and internationalism" (Knuth 2003: 49). Since, as Knuth states, books and libraries are often associated with these values or with "an enemy, a group that stands in the way of transformation..., they are attacked along with the renegade group" (Knuth 2003: 71). Hence, the destruction of books in many of the political circumstances discussed here is not only a hegemonic act but also a transformative one. In these cases, the destruction of books does not signify the destruction of ideology itself. The ultimate aim of political biblioclasm is not chaos but order, not perversion but uniformity.

4.1.2 Fundamentalism and the Religious Book

> The religious police went conscientiously to work in Sultan Khan's bookshop that November afternoon. Any books portraying living things, be they human or animal, were torn from the shelves and tossed on the fire. Yellowed pages, innocent postcards, and dried-out covers from old reference books were sacrificed to the flames...
>
> ...Finally only ashes remained, caught by the wind and swirled with the dust and dirt in the streets and sewers of Kabul. The bookseller, bereft of his beloved books, was bundled into a car, a Taliban soldier on either side. The soldiers closed and sealed the shop and Sultan was sent to jail for anti-Islamic behaviour. (Seierstad 2002)

I have already argued that the violent acts committed by the Nazis and other regimes against books should be aligned with a more 'positive', Utopian impulse, often expressed in terms of racial purity, national homogeneity, or a restricted understanding of political order

and discipline. When these political factors are combined with religious ones, we enter the realm of fundamentalism. There exist several types of fundamentalism, but generally, all fundamentalists intensely believe that the truth is singular and are intolerant towards dissenting voices in their midst. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that some books often become the targets of their contempt while other, favourable texts provide fundamentalists with moral justifications for their actions and beliefs. At times, over-literal interpretations of religious conventions and ideas lead to killings, acts of vandalism and even biblioclasm, as can be seen in the above passage from Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

It is also true that one can identify a measure of tolerance in the history of religions, even monotheistic religions. Islam, for instance, has historically demonstrated a certain respect for other 'people of the Book' (Jews and Christians). Yet, this does not mean that fundamentalists will accept that the sacred texts of other religions are as valid as their own. In the case of Islam, this would be mainly due to the fact that the verses of the Holy Koran (known as *al Kitab*, 'the Book') are believed to have been inspired by Allah and revealed to the prophet Muhammed through the angel Gabriel. Consequently, as Stuart Sim warns, "other religions must keep their counsel when it comes to the relative merits of their book and Islam's book" (Sim 2004: 74). A parallel belief amongst Christian fundamentalists is that of biblical inerrancy, which means in simple terms "that the Bible cannot be wrong" (Sim 2004: 80). Thus, while respect for the sacred texts of others is not unknown amongst followers of monotheistic religions, fundamentalists on any side will only admit to the absolute 'truth' of their own faith and book. The belief in the inerrancy of a single book appears to rule out the possibility of the existence of other, absolutely inerrant books. Extremist forms of this belief in textual inerrancy may occasionally lead to the emergence of the "dark side" of religion: a mixture of faith and violence that imposes terror on "the mind of God" (Juergensmeyer 2003).

Several historical incidents illustrate this exclusivist attitude towards rival books, but none express the relationship between religious fundamentalism and biblioclasm better than the story of Caliph Omar in Alexandria, who is said to have ordered the burning of all the scrolls held in the city's famous library in the seventh century A.D. The Caliph's justification for the complete obliteration of the library was that the contents of the scrolls were either in agreement with the Koran (in which case they were unnecessary) or disagreed with the Koran (in which case they did not deserve to exist). Hence, all the scrolls were burnt.

Even though the story of the Caliph is probably not entirely true and is possibly completely legendary (see Battles 2004: 22-25), it provides us with a striking picture of the typical fundamentalist mentality, one founded on censorship, dogmatism and also theological purity. Many fundamentalists believe that a threat to their book's primacy also undermines the book's divine origins, the Prophet who delivered the book to humanity, and the people who attach themselves to that book. The reverse may also be true: that an attack aimed at followers of the book causes believers around the world to feel that the book's authority is also being offended or threatened.

The latter is Lyotard's view in "The Wall, the Gulf, the System", an essay included in *Postmodern Fables* (Lyotard 1997: 67-82). Writing about the first Gulf War, Lyotard refers to the Islamic notion of *Umma* (Islamic nationhood), a concept that weaves religious faith into every aspect of social and political life. While people in modern and postmodern Western societies elect their own political authorities, many Muslims around the world still look up to the book (and hence to the law and morality) as a 'given'. For Lyotard, the military crises in the Near East are ultimately due to this very different conception of authority in Islam. In the latter context, "the authority of the Book demands that the sense of Koranic verses be fixed and able to be

inscribed as a rule to follow" (Lyotard 1997: 78-79), while Western systems are based on argumentation and distinguish sharply between politics and religion. Instead of having a book that 'elects' the people, Western societies depend on the existence of critique to elect their political systems. For Lyotard, critique is what happens in the text's blank spaces in Western societies, and these blanks ensure that "concluding must be deferred" (Lyotard 1997: 81). Like the blanks in Arakawa's paintings (discussed by Lyotard in *Que Peindre?*), this political openness permits narratives to re-write themselves in new ways. The blanks express the idea that there is no finality in postmodern politics and indicate the existence of "an aesthetic of the sublime in politics" (Lyotard 1992: 85). While totalitarian or fundamentalist systems thrive on closure, postmodern societies do not predetermine the ends of politics.

For the fundamentalist, the strength of his or her book ultimately lies in the idea that it forms an essential part of the identity of the community he or she belongs to; indeed, the book is what makes it possible for the community to have an identity at all. Moreover, this very restricted understanding of identity in totalitarian and fundamentalist systems does not permit the assimilation of different elements into the community. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has shown, this logic is related to the notion of mimesis, i.e. the idea that members of the community should imitate a mythological definition of their identity, one that gives them a sense of security and sameness: "All these attempts to reduce the improper, these attempts at cleaning, at "purification," are part of a great machinery of identification which is entirely founded *upon* imitation itself" (Hiddleston and Lacoue-Labarthe 2003: 58). Extreme forms of nationalism like Nazism depend on this mimetic principle, projecting a German type that acts as a model for all 'true' Germans and rejecting all those who cannot be identified with this model.

The relationship between biblioclasm and extreme forms of religious fundamentalism is not dissimilar to the relationship between biblioclasm and political oppression, as discussed earlier in 4.1.1. The elimination of rival books not only rids one's own book of serious competition, but it also helps to keep alive an understanding of truth and identity based on singularity and homogeneity. The existence of rival 'truths' is considered dangerous because it transforms the rigidity of the community's identity into a nomadic flow of narratives. In aesthetic terms, the unified gestalt becomes formless, strewn with blanks that cannot be assimilated into a total and self-contained whole. This intolerance towards impropriety or formlessness is also discussed extensively in Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988) and *Heidegger and "the jews"* (1990c). For Lyotard, the Aryan narrative is dangerously exclusivist not only because it eliminates Jews and all evidence of the crime but especially because it seeks to eliminate the Jewish way of thinking, i.e. the thought of the unpresentable. To the Nazi mind, the Judaic sublime is an unwelcome abyss that insinuates itself in its myth of a national community built on solid principles like discipline, family, and so on.

In conclusion, we may define the fundamentalist's book as an absolutely self-sufficient text to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be removed. For the fundamentalist, the text's permanence helps to retain its purity and its lack of ambiguity. Unlike the postmodern sublime – characterised by irregularities, inconsistencies and the waging of "a war on totality" (Lyotard 1984: 82) – the fundamentalist's book is a total object that imparts a solid sense of certainty to the believer. The insertion of an unknown factor into the pages of this kind of book – for instance, the unreadable textual content of many biblioclastic book-objects – weakens the book's structure and what it represents. Hence, while the unpresentable is deliberately brought to bear on books that are erased, burnt or pulped by artist-biblioclasts, it has no place in the fundamentalist's book. The blank book is ultimately the visual

equivalent of an intellectual (political, religious, philosophical) doubt, the silence that haunts every representation. This silence brings us face to face with the crisis of representation and clearly separates artistic biblioclasm from other political or fundamentalist versions of biblioclasm discussed in 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. This is why the problem of representation needs to be tackled at this stage.

4.2 The Unpresentable Book

Part Three outlined Lyotard's arguments about the disruption of art by the feeling of the sublime, and interpreted artistic biblioclasm as a kind of *via negativa* that leads nowhere in particular. In 4.1, we saw how totalitarian aesthetico-political models and fundamentalist theologico-political models resist this limitlessness by glorifying mythical aspirations linked to notions of racial or theological identity, purity and totality. These models glorify representation itself: the clear representation of a specific (and generally exclusivist) definition of Utopian progress, the textually inerrant representation of a specific religious faith, and so on. 4.2 will respond to 4.1 by first circling back to the tragedy of Auschwitz and exploring its relationship with the problem of representation. It will show how the post-Auschwitz crisis of representation sketched out by thinkers like Adorno and Lyotard undermines the political certainties of regimes that resort to aggressive acts of biblioclasm. We shall then turn back to religion and focus on the religious sublime and mystical forms of biblioclasm.

4.2.1 The Crisis of Representation after Auschwitz

There can be no doubt that several examples of artistic biblioclasm studied in Part Two can ultimately be linked to the problem of representation as outlined by Theodor Adorno and developed by Lyotard particularly in his interpretation of the Kantian sublime. For

Adorno – especially in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1995) – the aporia that faces art after Auschwitz is that culture cannot remain the same (for this is the same culture – or "garbage", as Adorno calls it – that produced Auschwitz) and yet, culture cannot afford to stop resisting the barbarism of catastrophes like Auschwitz. Even when artists do not choose to come to terms directly with events such as this, their post-Auschwitz work must discover new forms in which it can be realised. For Adorno, to persist in the old ways would be tactless and even "barbaric". This problem of not being able to represent the trauma (without risking a misrepresentation) brings Adorno's thought close to the Kantian sublime and the Judaic rejection of representation, as Gene Ray has shown in an essay on the relevance of Adorno's post-Auschwitz philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

> Tactfully, this art would align itself with the Jewish image ban, with the traditions of negative theology, with that form of the sublime Kant named 'negative presentation'. 'Suffering permits no forgetting': it 'demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids' (Adorno 1992: 88). But suffering should be represented only negatively – evoked through absence, or through indirect, oblique, or sublime forms of presentation. (Ray 2004: 227)

Ray refers to Adorno's approach to art as a "negative ethic" of representation and offers examples of artists who have used the necessary historical tact in dealing with catastrophes like Auschwitz:

> In the visual arts, we could point to certain sculptural installations of Joseph Beuys, Christian Boltanski, and Rachel Whiteread; to the so-called countermemorials of Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Horst Hoheisel, Micha Ullman, and Daniel Libeskind; and even to Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah,* which uses negative presentation to remake the documentary form. (Ray 2004: 227)

The possibility of multiple interpretations of works by some of these artists does not permit us to generalize in absolute terms. However, it is also true that several of the names listed by Ray appear to share an unwillingness to extract a positive meaning out of a tragic

representation of a catastrophe like Auschwitz. Just as an artistic biblioclast would remove all or most traces of a book (transforming the book into a negative presence that survives only to confront its own inadequacy), Auschwitz becomes in some of these artists' works an indistinct whisper of a terrible 'form' that can only be de-formed, never re-formed into an acceptable or comprehensible tragedy. The representational aporia that haunts some works by artists like Whiteread and Ullman evokes a mysterious sense of loss rather than a factual description of how this loss came about. The unreachable books in some of their works do not represent the Holocaust, nor do they replace it with a solid metaphor. Instead, it is absence itself (the apparent forgetting of the catastrophe; the emptied, irreplaceable loss that is left empty, its memory untouched by a substitute) that transports the Holocaust to the surface. In works like these, it becomes apparent that artistic biblioclasm is often reliant on historical trauma, to the extent that its very existence as an artistic phenomenon is necessitated by certain events in the twentieth century that can only be evoked in a negative fashion.

The difficulty one might encounter in 'reading' works like these is precisely what constitutes the feeling of the sublime, that unnerving combination of pleasure and pain that Lyotard discovers in postmodern art. Drawing on Kant's Analytic (and his interpretation of Adorno's thought), Lyotard realises that art after Auschwitz cannot be beautiful. Aesthetic pleasure is already absent from the feeling of the sublime (Kant) and disdained by critical thought after the Holocaust (Adorno). In the feeling of the sublime, pleasure is frustrated by the pain of arriving at the limits of the imagination; at Auschwitz, pleasure is nullified by the transcendence of the limits of reason. In both cases, the act of representing is brought to a halt; for Kant, what cannot be represented is the absolute, while for Adorno, it is the past. For Lyotard, this unpresentable past is also comparable to Freud's "unconscious affect" – unconscious processes that cannot be represented but nevertheless affect a person's behaviour. Traditional

understandings of temporality and consciousness cannot come to the rescue here; the unconscious is ungraspable and formless, offering only an indication that there is something (*quod*) but never presenting us with the certainty of a localisable *quid*. For Lyotard, "word representations (books, interviews) and thing representations (films, photographs) of the extermination of the Jews" do not do justice to this hidden nature because they synthesize that which "defies images and words" (Lyotard 1990c: 26).

After Auschwitz, therefore, the real question will be: What can be made to replace books and paintings 'about' the Holocaust? If no form can be adapted to the terror of the event, then it would seem that we can only follow Ludwig Wittgenstein's advice from his *Tractatus*: "About that of which one cannot speak, one must keep silent" (Wittgenstein 1963: 115). But, if complete silence is not an option either (for this would merely amount to passive collaboration), what can art be after Auschwitz? If art cannot speak, but *must* speak nonetheless, then it follows that its voice and words must change. It will situate its willingness to speak in a different dimension, one that preserves the residue of lost words. Art "does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it" (Lyotard 1990c: 47). In this scenario, artists are negative witnesses, demonstrating the sublime impossibility of being positive ones.

Several artists whose works were described in Part Two could be called 'negative witnesses'. Gustav Metzger's destructive techniques can be seen as an angry yet silent response to Auschwitz and Hiroshima; some critics have, in fact, pointed to Adorno or Lyotard as theoretical counterparts of his work (see Birrell 1999 and Wilson 1999). The large books in *Zweistromland (The High Priestess)* by Anselm Kiefer provide us with very minimal traces of memories that cannot be forgotten nor viewed without difficulty. Huang Yong Ping's *Kiosk* cannot sell the truth-claims of political parties any longer, but can present the remains of those claims after their passage through a

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cement mixer, a democratic machine that turns all such claims to negative testimonies of their journalistic existence. Xu Bing uses silkworms to spin silk over books and deny language its vain claim to wisdom. In these examples and others, the book or text is not really the 'enemy' (which is generally the case in political forms of biblioclasm, as shown in 4.1.1); rather, the obliterated or hidden surface functions as a combined sign of inadequacy and resistance, a survivor whose story is erased before it has the opportunity to reach the ears and eyes of an audience. Here, art simply re-enacts the traumatizing process of destruction itself. Artistic biblioclasm is not about destruction. It *is* destruction.

Having outlined the crisis of representation "after Auschwitz", we can now start to relate this problem to the earlier examples of political biblioclasm discussed in 4.1.1. We have already seen that each case of political biblioclasm is a manifestation of human (or inhuman) destruction, often associated with mass murders and even genocide. In many cases, the destroyed books are perceived by the dominant, repressive group as the seeds of an impure culture, one that must first be eliminated and subsequently replaced by a 'pure' or more 'authentic' culture. In the artistic sphere, different forms of biblioclasm (book alterations, biblioclastic book-objects, formless books, and dematerialized books) transform the book into a sculptural or pictorial medium or support. In some cases – especially formless books (Latham or Roth, for instance) – books are completely obliterated and become totally unrecognisable, possibly even more unrecognisable than the charred remains of books on the Nazi pyres in Germany in the 1930s. Many of these works seem to respond to the representational aporia discussed by thinkers like Adorno and Lyotard, i.e. they respond by uttering the unutterableness of art after events like Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the processes used by several of these artists are often quite similar to those used by the

Nazis themselves during their book burning 'ceremonies'. The most obvious difference is the sheer number of destroyed books (enormous in many cases of political biblioclasm; small in most cases of artistic biblioclasm). But the fact that the two situations may use virtually identical processes to destroy books brings an ethical issue into play. Isn't the artist's maltreatment of books at least as problematic or unethical as the dictator's?

The most straightforward response to this problem would be to say that 'this is only art' while the other case is 'the real thing'. This response can be interpreted on at least two different levels. In saying that 'this is only art', the statement may imply that all art is ultimately a simulation of reality; it may also try to distinguish between the two activities by stressing the idea that art is always a creative act, even when it pulls things apart (making something new out of something else). On the other hand, political forms of biblioclasm are perceived either as examples of those very 'realities' that are simulated by artists or, more simply, as essentially destructive acts (what may be termed 'vulgar' destruction, an aggressive act that comes without the artistic intention of constructing/creating something else).

We have already seen in our conclusion in 4.1.1 that the latter idea (that political biblioclasm is not constructive) is frequently not the case. Often, repressive regimes that resort to acts of biblioclasm are obsessed by representation (the Classical architectural, pictorial and sculptural tendencies of the Nazis are a case in point). In many instances of political biblioclasm, a politically 'correct' representation is constructed after sweeping aside an older order of things. The former implication -- that the work of art is only a simulation or symbol that represents destruction -- is also clearly not the case, for artistic biblioclasm is never a representation (on the contrary, this loss of representation is precisely the crisis it evokes). There is no gap between process and 'subject-matter'; the process itself is generally what the work is 'about'.

This should not lead us to the rather bleak prospect that artistic forms of biblioclasm are simply an offshoot of the larger group, political biblioclasm. This conclusion would imply that all forms of artistic biblioclasm are political manifestos in disguise. Although the processes used in artistic biblioclasm may occasionally resemble those used in political forms of biblioclasm, their implications are generally quite different. Before discussing these differences in some depth, we need to tackle the problem of representation in the religious sphere.

4.2.2   The Jewish Sublime and the Unfulfilled Book

It can be argued that religion is unnecessary in the sublime judgement. The history of the subject has touched on several key areas like rhetoric (Longinus), terror (Burke), and the nature of genius (Kant), and it is evident that one can discuss these areas without resorting to religious language. However, it is also true that the sublime feeling has often been associated with the idea of the transcendent in the past, while references to religion (especially Judaism) have not been completely absent in texts that deal with the subject, even in the twentieth century. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (Courtine et al. 1993: 71-108) has indicated two quotations from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in which the German philosopher refers to statements about a divinity as instances of a most sublime passage: that of the Mosaic prohibition ("Thou shalt not make graven images"), and the inscription on the Temple of Isis ("I am all that is, and that was, and that shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from before my face"; Kant 1952: 179). Both examples refer to a divinity that refuses visibility, either by prohibiting its own image to acquire form or by stating the impossibility of unveiling its appearance.

This fear of falsifying or unveiling God has theological and aesthetic implications that lead to the sort of artistic impasse that is best expressed – in Lacoue-Labarthe's view – in Michelangelo's *Moses*. This is a work that stands "in clear opposition to Judaic (Mosaic) sublimity" (Courtine et al. 1993: 88) because the artist uses a 'graven image' (the statue itself) to represent the God-sent man who is depicted at the very moment when he is confronted by the idolatrous Golden Calf. Moreover, we could add (following Freud's unique interpretation of Michelangelo's work) that the unbroken tables of the law still visible in Moses' hand – evidence of the man's refusal to resort to biblioclasm, according to Freud – affirm the representational aspect of the artist's work as well as the permanence of God's laws. In Michelangelo's sculpture, art does not seek "to efface itself", as happens in the sublime according to Lacoue-Labarthe (Courtine et al. 1993: 103). Rather, it monumentalises the possibility of art at the very moment when art is made to represent its own impossibility.

But how can this impossibility be expressed in a way that avoids both Michelangelo's Western, classicizing model and the repressiveness of politically totalitarian or fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm? How can it be Jewish – following the Mosaic image prohibition to the letter – without being theocratic? One way of articulating this difficulty would be to imagine a more biblical, biblioclastic Moses, one whose act of destruction would reduce the idolizing impulse of fellow humans to smithereens. This example would parallel Franz Kafka's last, unthinkable request to his friend Max Brod and the similar request of the Hassidic master Rabbi Nahman (1772-1810) of Bratslav in Ukraine. In the latter case, the order was carried out: Nahman's esoteric book was burnt by his friend as the Rabbi lay dying in bed, and the lost text came to be known as the 'Burnt Book' (unlike Kafka's work, which was left intact by Brod). Rabbi Nahman was an ascetic, spiritual leader and storyteller, the great-grandson of Ba'al Shem Tov who founded Hassidism. The book his disciple burnt on his orders was no common book; it represented Nahman's great, religious

achievement of a lifetime. Marc-Alain Ouaknin interprets this 'Burnt Book' as an exercise in self-effacement, a desire to dissolve the holy book into an empty space (Ouaknin 1995). In Ouaknin's view, holy books "bar the way to re-ligion (relation). They offer what they cannot offer, absoluteness and Infinity...Holy books...are of the same nature as the idol" (Ouaknin 1995: 299). For Ouaknin, the act of burning Nahman's book conforms (albeit in a radically unorthodox and almost 'artistic' manner) to the Hebrew tradition of continuous interpretation (and re-interpretation) of sacred texts; it is a way of refusing to say the last word, just as Lyotard's blank in "The Wall, the Gulf, the System" defers political conclusions. This act of auto-biblioclasm does not destroy an idolatrous 'other'; instead, it resists its own theological fulfilment.

From this crisis of representation, there emerge a number of elements that are undeniably Jewish in character. This, after all, is the kind of crisis felt particularly by those who are obliged to address a God who remains inaccessible, unseen, only heard. The tension that links and simultaneously separates Jewish religious experience and the representation of this experience is not only articulated in the Jewish Commandment that prohibits 'graven images' but also, or especially, in the relationship with the written word. The Jewish incredulity toward the power of the visible must therefore be located within the feeling of anxiety engendered by the impossibility of writing the book. Nahman's biblioclastic or kenotic request – his desire to do what Michelangelo's *Moses* refrains from doing – is comparable to the Jewish image ban. In both cases, the ineffable is judged to be sublime (beyond comprehension), hence unpresentable.

Even though Nahman's biblioclasm is essentially a spiritual act (and as such is not synonymous with an artistic act), it similarly brings into play a negative relationship with what it seeks to destroy. Negativity is understood as the only possible means of coming to terms with the unpresentable. It must be opposed to the positive, constructive forces

of totalitarian and fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm described earlier. These repressive forces depend on a continual re-enactment of Utopian myths; their strength lies in a perpetual, mimetic repetition of a political, racial or theological identity. For dictators and fundamentalists, biblioclasm is merely a means to this mimetic end. It sweeps away negativity in order to assert its 'faith'; it eliminates the plural to affirm the singular; it eradicates the question because it must cultivate a positive sense of certainty and fulfilment.

It is precisely the indeterminacy of the negative that the Nazis sought to eradicate, in an attempt "to destroy not just the Jews, but the Judaic sublime" (Gasché 2001: 125). In one of Lyotard's clearest references to the relationship between the Judaic sublime and biblioclasm – a short text called "l'Europe, les juifs et le livre" ("Europe, the jews and the book": Lyotard 1990a) – the philosopher refers to the desecration of a Jewish cemetery by a group of neo-Nazis at Carpentras in France and concludes that Europe tries to abolish the memory of the Jews because the Jews are not united by nationhood but by their common root: a book. In Lyotard's words, the Jewish book says: "God is a voice, one can never have access to his visible presence" (Lyotard 1990a: 114; my translation). In place of an incarnation, Judaism offers its faithful a book to read and interpret. The Apostle Paul transformed this idea, preaching that Jesus was a visible example of the voice of the Jewish God. What followed was a history of political, religious and social oppression against the Jews of Europe, a sustained attempt to annihilate the contents of their book. The Jewish book (the Torah) expresses an unfulfilled idea (that of the Messiah); it retains a measure of foreignness that is subsequently revoked by the Christian Incarnation. As Lyotard explains in his published discussion about Judaism and Christianity (with Eberhard Gruber)[3], the letters of the Jewish book "are still subject to the interdiction against figuration, which is an interdiction against incarnation, against the temptation to make the Voice itself speak, to make it speak directly and visibly" (Lyotard 1999: 24). This is the Judaic sublime that leads from the

self-exile of the Jewish book to the imposed exiles in European communities.

In contrast, fundamentalist definitions of the book thrive on theological or political incarnations that must censor the 'interdictions' described by Lyotard in order to exist. This is what must ultimately distinguish political or fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm from artistic biblioclasm. Artistic forms of biblioclasm – even when they are a-religious – should in principle be somewhat Jewish in character: they need to efface themselves as they simultaneously efface the other if they are to distance themselves from the destructiveness of political dictators and religious fanatics. As long as art blends erasure with self-erasure (avoiding spectacles that seek to transform trauma into Utopia), it cannot be associated with propaganda[4]. The kind of artistic biblioclasm being described here relies neither on simplistic images of progress nor on the kind of nostalgic archaism found typically in fascist systems. Instead, its approach to representation is often oblique rather than direct, blank rather than mimetic, unfulfilled rather than complete, interrogative rather than prescriptive.

This interrogative mode is 'Jewish' because it procrastinates; like the work of the Jewish, Egyptian-French poet Edmond Jabès, it "still waits for the Messiah or...for something to happen, one continually hopes that the text will be complete..., yet one also knows that the book may be finished but will never be complete" (Ettin 1994: 31). The book in Jabès' work subverts itself by deconstructing the sacredness of all holy books; it writes itself at the limits of writing, praying obsessively for its own demise. In a form that breaks with all literary traditions, it questions its own existence as it comes to terms with the nomadic, Jewish and difficult nature of the written word, simultaneously refusing to forget the Holocaust and refusing to remember it logically or sequentially. For Jabès, the book is a Jew; it is unfinished, lacks a definite identity, and locates itself at the flickering edges of a burning fire. His "many volumes bring both the racial and the textual together

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in their experience of ashes and fire" (Brandt 1998: 147). Two historical ruptures mark this strained relationship between Jew and book: the first, biblical example of biblioclasm (Moses' Broken Tables) produces a rupture between the Jews and God, while Auschwitz exemplifies the rupture between the Jews and the rest of humanity. Both incidents confront the Jew with a representational crisis, the first being theological and the second historical. This crisis is what makes the book become, in Jabès' questioning words, the "object of an inexhaustible quest. Is this not how the Jewish tradition sees the Book?" (Jabès 1991: 247)

In different ways, Rabbi Nahman and Edmond Jabès both resist prescriptive closures. This resistance to totality in their thought (particularly in Jabès) also makes it analogous to the notion of the unpresentable in Lyotard. Although Joan Brandt has criticised Lyotard for 'forgetting' to tackle the writings of Jabès (Brandt 1998: 139), the French philosopher and the poet did have some common areas of interest in the artistic realm that should not be overlooked. Both Lyotard and Jabès, for instance, wrote about the work of artist Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger and referred to it as a "threshold"; for Lyotard, her work constitutes a "(t)hreshold between simple apathy – mute inanimate – pure amnesia, and the well-regulated talk of the organized world" (Lyotard 1995: 27) while for Jabès, it is the threshold between "Anonymity and the Whole" that attracts him to her work, that questioning side of her that shows him that "(t)he Whole is a Utopia; totality doesn't exist" and that "(w)e are in multiple, innumerable, infinite totalities" (Jabès 1990: 7). Both interpretations stress the idea that we are faced by an art composed of fragmentary traces, not one that accomplishes a picture of a final 'truth'.

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Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger
Eurydice, No. 2
1992-94

In an analogous way, many examples of artistic biblioclasm do not extract a political system or 'truth' out of their own destructiveness; in this sense, artistic biblioclasm can be considered to be more negative than political biblioclasm. The range of this negativity brings

together some very different works: from the playful re-interpretations of a literary work evoked in Tom Phillips' A Humument to the poetic and irretrievable books in Rebecca Horn's series called Ocean Library. In my own practical work, too, the all-encompassing narratives of religious textbooks are deconstructed and left in a state of abeyance. While the wide-ranging variety of work produced with destroyed or manipulated books does not permit us to outline a singular aim or function that would unify all examples of artistic biblioclasm, what is immediately clear is that all these artists make art out of a text in hiding. The text is reduced to a gaping negative space, a blank that refuses the book-as-idol.

Similarly, art historian James Elkins – who (in On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art) refers to the burning of books in art as "almost a stage that artists have to go through if they are interested in books and specifically in the Bible" (Elkins 2004: 88) – looks for a way of talking about the religious or spiritual in art in the apophatic language of negative theology. For the apophatic writer, "the sense of not knowing...has to be continuously renewed by fresh doubt" (Elkins 2004: 107). Comparatively, the destructiveness of the artist who tears apart and burns books distinguishes itself from political biblioclasm because it harbours the same kind of doubt.

Needless to say, the literary or religious works that these artists manipulate are not made extinct; in erasing a single copy of a title, the artist-biblioclast does not deprive humanity of a valuable part of the world's heritage (unlike the politically repressive biblioclast, whose intention is usually that of annihilating the existence of all copies of an author's work). The erased book in art may still be read in its entirety elsewhere (in other copies of the same title). So to speak, many examples of artistic biblioclasm (including my own) do not simply attack or 'pervert' the book's contents; more forcibly, they attack the idea that a book can or should represent at all.

John Latham's *God is Great* series is particularly pertinent to our discussion about belief systems and the book because this work expresses especially well the tension between the positive and negative connotations of the biblioclastic in art. The artist started to show a deep interest in the three monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) around 1990, focusing on the differences that separate them. He even designed a simple frame diagram in an effort to find "a way of representing biblical and other sacred texts (that) could enable them to be brought into (numerated) conformity with each other, and with secular disciplines, eg. with physics" (Iles and Elliott 1991: 115). For Latham, this common 'map' is necessary because each of the three theologies "proclaims important features that are mutually exclusive, so that laws, cultures and customs to be followed are found mutually unacceptable at critical points" (Iles and Elliott 1991: 115).

Early examples of *God is Great* (like *God is Great #1* and #2, both produced in 1991; Figs. 40 and 68) show the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran embedded in a sheet of glass, their differences sealed within their covers. Latham associates these works with a period in history (the first Gulf War) "when Arabic Muslim militants were simply getting at anybody who wasn't into their ideas" (Hunt 2005: 29). This collision of religious belief systems led Latham to seek a solution in the possibility of a single system that would somehow unite these differences. Art critics have often commented about this aspect of Latham's work. John A. Walker and Andrew Hunt have both compared this utopian element in Latham to the work and transformative ideals of Joseph Beuys (Walker 1995: 3, and Hunt 2005: 30). Walker has written that Latham

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John Latham
God is Great #2
1991

...regards his inclusive theory as crucially important because he believes it is essential that all the peoples of the world should subscribe to a single model of reality. Without such a common basis they will never be able to overcome the divisions that disfigure human relations. (Walker 1995: 165)

Similarly, Paul Moorhouse has stated that in Latham's work "books are monuments to the fragmentation of knowledge and to a continued resistance to unified thought – 'divided state disease', as Latham calls it" (Moorhouse 2005). According to Moorhouse, the message in the artist's *God is Great* works "is clear: the need to find a unified world view is as urgent as ever" (Moorhouse 2005). In an interview I conducted with Latham at the artist's home in Peckham, South London on 17th November, 2005 (six weeks before his death), the artist related this unity in the future to a singular point of origin. Latham spoke passionately about

> ...a primary impulse, which we call God, or Allah, or whatever. We say, the unnameable. For defining something, you need to get back to an agreed starting-point. The premise has to be the same. (Vella, unpublished interview, 2005a)

And on the differences between religions, Latham had this to say:

> They can be as far apart as they can persuade themselves. They are live forms with a genetic background which is giving the instructions...What I see (in the *God is Great* works) is a unity that is expressed in the glass and those three books that are great stories. And the glass is the source of those stories and the source of all the events that we spin stories about.

> *Raphael Vella*: So the glass would be God?

> *Latham*: Yes...If you want to develop a future, you'd better have a start from the same base, the same basic assumption...This material (glass) doesn't have a colour. The glass pre-dates the white canvas. You need to get behind the minimal. The discovery of the glass made it simple enough to take three holy books, slit them on both sides and make them seem as though they are going through it. The book is vulnerable while the glass is very resistant. (Vella unpublished interview, 2005a)

Latham's belief in the possibility of surpassing the exclusiveness of religions by seeking a singular 'truth' risks aligning itself with the side of power (with whoever decides where that 'truth' resides) rather than the more ambiguous and sublime sense of a Jewish 'question-mark' as previously described. There is a very real danger that the Beuysian side of Latham could – in a lesser artist's hands – become

too self-assured and prescriptive, replacing the disturbance of the sublime feeling with the safety of a political horizon whose parameters have already been conclusively defined. The traditional dichotomy between the avant-garde and the totalitarian generally ignores this similar projection into a Utopian future, as Boris Groys has shown in his analysis of the relationship between the Russian avant-garde and Soviet realism (Groys 1992). Even though it would not be difficult to discern some important differences between the artistic objectives of avant-gardists like Latham and the messianic impulses of politically repressive forces, the desire for a collective 'language' evident in some of Latham's statements threatens to glorify a political condition that work like his sets out to destroy, i.e the positive representation of a political or theological fable.

Yet, it is also important to note that this ecumenism in the *God is Great* works is only represented negatively in what lies "behind the minimal", i.e. in the sheet of glass. This negative presentation of "the unnameable" aligns Latham more with Kant than with Hegel; the glass effectively opens rather than closes the question of the origin or end of things. In spite of some of the artist's own statements, the sheer negativity of the glass would seem to point more towards the perpetually unfulfilled state of any ecumenical discourse than towards a definite starting-point. Unlike his linear frame diagram, Latham's actual work does not provide us with simplistic notions of hope but exposes us to the fragile tensions involved in any momentary unity of religions. That this fragility is ultimately due to religious extremists' fear of the unpresentable seems to have been confirmed by the decision taken by the administration of Tate Britain to remove a *God is Great* piece from their exhibition dedicated to Latham's work, held in 2005-2006 (*John Latham in focus*, 12 September 2005 - 28 February 2006; see Smith 2005: 6). The removal of this work from the exhibition due to the tense religious climate in London at the time indirectly confirmed the clear distinction that needs to be made between artistic biblioclasm and fanaticism. And when I asked the

artist himself to delineate the differences between artistic and fundamentalist forms of biblioclasm, he answered that the artistic variety is "an educational act which is to inform, the other is to prevent education" (Vella unpublished interview 2005a).

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John Latham
God is Great #4
2005

Even more forcibly, Latham's *God is Great #4* (2005) – an installation with the same three sacred books lying on the ground amidst thousands of fragments of shattered glass – performs a ritual of ecumenical failure as it simultaneously declares a state of mourning for a lost unity (Fig. 69). No longer sealed safely in the sheet of glass, the books appear to wait for a curious reader to open their covers and release into the world their "mutually exclusive" letters. For Latham, this installation echoes a question directed at members of the three monotheistic faiths: "Is this what you want?" (Vella unpublished interview 2005a) The shattered glass here (reminiscent of the glass and books in Kiefer's *The Breaking of* Vessels, 1990) becomes a death or murder of God, a loss of the common denominator that alone guarantees the possibility of a future unification of thought. It is the modern equivalent of the broken Tables of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, with an important difference. The biblical episode allows for a renewal of Moses' dialogue with God and a subsequent restoration of the laws. Latham's installation offers no reconstructive

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continuation because his work is a singular performance rather than a narrative. Despite the artist's faith in unified thought, the work itself refuses to give answers. We are left with a question. "Is this what you want?"

4.3 Artistic Biblioclasm in Malta:
Party Politics and Catholicism

This section will explore the relationship between some of my works and the Maltese contexts in which they were produced. Some of the works that will be discussed were made for specific sites and so need to be studied contextually, not as autonomous entities but as interventions in particular spaces. Others refer to a specific time or occasion in which the piece was made or shown. And Malta, with its island mentality, is always in the background, both physically (in the architectural backdrops it provides for my artistic work) and culturally (its history, way of life, religious beliefs). In a country the size of Malta – with a centuries-old colonial history and a religious heritage that is thousands of years old – political and religious issues or controversies are bound to dwarf everything else whenever they make the news. At the same time, the significance of artistic biblioclasm in such a context resonates with religious and political meanings that transcend the individual.

The following two sub-sections will follow the system employed in 4.1 and 4.2. The first sub-section (4.3.1) will focus on the relationship between politics and artistic biblioclasm in my work, while the second (4.3.2) will deal with elements of Catholicism in my work. The general aim is to show that the negation of books in my work provides us with a way of objecting to hasty or simplistic conclusions in the political or religious realms. The failure of imagination to exhibit the book's

totality is not a form of impotence but represents a desire to experience the sublime feeling even in politics.

4.3.1 The Book as Symbol of Political Truth

Study Table (2003) is a product of its times. Together with another installation called *Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barra (Either In or Out)*, it formed part of a large-scale exhibition (*Borders*) I helped to organise with a group of Maltese artists at Pinto Stores near the cruise liner terminal in Valletta (see Vella 2003b). Both the timing of the show and the location were related to the title: the exhibition opened to the public in February 2003 (a few weeks before a major referendum about Malta's place in the EU) in a location (huge trading stores in the Grand Harbour) that is historically linked to shipping, the arrival of tourists and colonising forces, war-time enemies, and so on. Major restoration works were taking place within the building during the exhibition. This meant that the building itself – like the rest of the country – was in a state of change at the time. The Maltese public was typically divided in half about the referendum: the government and its supporters were in favour of Malta's entry into the EU, while the Opposition and its supporters were against. Newspapers and

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political speeches representing either side defined the future relationship with the EU in unequivocal terms, as either heaven or hell. Manifestos, pamphlets and other sorts of published material arrived in the mail in every household, predicting the 'truth' about the country's borders and international relations, employment, and the people's identity.

One of the works I showed in *Borders* was a large table constructed out of wood, wire, and grey paper pulp (Figs. 25 and 70-72). Generally found in university libraries, study tables feature a central dividing upright that is often fitted with pencil ledges and adjustable book rests. The function of the study table is similar to that of the medieval carrel, a box-like enclosure next to a library window that permitted a monk to study alone, secluded from the general space of the library and other monks. The carrel provided shelter and clearly defined 'territorial' lines. Some modern libraries use study tables, vertical 'fins' sub-dividing long tables, or even bookshelves to separate readers from each other; others create staggered individual niches using units of furniture. Spatially and architecturally, such arrangements transform books into screens, stressing the privacy of the act of reading, an act that is not influenced or disrupted by other readers, readings or interpretations (see also D23-D30). Students or university academics can assume ownership of a table for an unspecified amount of time, protected from prying eyes. Unlike circular or rectangular reading tables (which normally can accommodate six or more readers), the study table is only wide enough (usually around 90 cm) to be used by one individual (or two readers separated by a partition) at any given time.

In *Study Table*, books in a dilapidated state are placed on either side of the table's central upright and on the floor surrounding the table. All the books on one side are white, while the books on the other side are black. The table itself is virtually invisible because it is completely covered in rough-textured, grey book pulp that appears to flow down
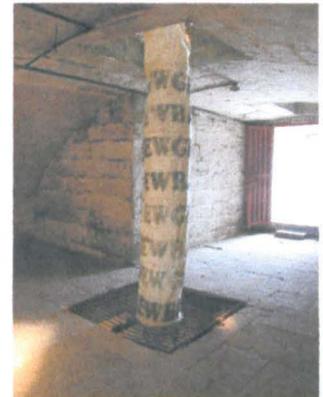
73-75
Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barra (Either In or Out)
Views on three floors
2003

its legs to make formless, 'hills' of paper on the ground (Fig. 72). This pulp is composed entirely of book-paper.

The cultural significance of the exclusivist books (*either* black *or* white) placed on the divisive piece of library furniture (belonging *either* to one side of the table *or* to the other) was magnified by the historical moment as well as by the table's proximity to another installation I produced for *Borders*. This other work, entitled *Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barra (Either In or Out)*, was composed of a suspended, cylindrical column made of white fabric that led the viewer's eye from the ground floor of the building right up to the second floor, traversing two ceilings. On the ground floor, hundreds of newspaper headlines with the articles cut out were glued to the walls, referring to the 'endless' political EU-related columns in Maltese- and English-language newspapers (Fig. 76 and D31-D36). The fabric column (resembling a giant condom) was stencilled with the Maltese words *Jew Ġewwa Jew Barra*, then a popular motto used by one of the political parties. Translated as "Either In or Out" (of the EU), the Maltese expression carried other sexual connotations that became an integral part of the work. The hundreds of 'censored' articles on the ground floor appeared to have passed through the condom only to emerge as a large mass of shredded newspaper at the top. Regardless of their political persuasion, all articles came together to form a single, unidentifiable mixture of paper 'sperm'.

In these two works, artistic biblioclasm destroys the text's narrow, political ideology. In *Study Table*, black and white books melt to form grey pulp, not so much out of a desire to unite forces (as in Latham's faith in the unification of divisive belief systems) but in order to weaken the force of the one-sided discourse used by local, political parties before elections, referenda and other times of political crisis. The shredded articles in *Endless Column* similarly resist the fixed viewpoints of some segments of the media that wield their immense

power to influence the public and a country's political future. By resorting to biblioclasm, the political 'truth' about Malta is not represented but suspended, visible either as flux (the grey flow of pulp) or as excreted remains (a ball of shredded newspaper). Instead of proposing a new order, the erasure of text here is an act of perpetual withdrawal. A work like *Study Table* is neither pessimistic nor optimistic: in spite of the fact that it shows us a book-laden table that divides the world in two, it shows it at the very moment when the table is metamorphosing into the *absence* of books (pulp).

Walter Benjamin famously described the work's loss of "aura" as a result of technological advances in an age of mechanical reproduction (Arendt 1973). In the *Borders* works, it is mechanical reproduction that is the victim of change. If, for Benjamin, the end of authenticity meant that the function of art was transferred from the world of ritual to that of politics, the destruction of political texts in my works may appear to signal a return to the work's aura. After all, in the works

described above, mechanically reproduced books and newspapers were mashed or torn to bits and transformed into sculpture. Yet, there is nothing ritualistic or theological about the result. This is no return to the 'idol'; it is not an artistic representation of a deeper political 'truth' that succeeds the simplistic 'truth' of the books destroyed in its making. What is sublime here is not what the works represent but the fact that they represent *nothing*. This nothingness is a blank that resists the authority of the written word.

4.3.2   The Book as Magisterium

If artistic biblioclasm can be used to deflect political authoritarianism, it can also be applied to religious texts. In both instances – politics and religion – the book is understood in my work as a symbol of authority and dogma, one whose fixed script does not tolerate dissent or rival ideas. It must be distinguished from Paul Moorhouse's description of Latham's books as "monuments to the fragmentation of knowledge and to a continuing resistance to unified thought" (Moorhouse 2005). In my work, it is precisely this unification that needs to be resisted. The book is perceived as the master's voice while the 'perversion' of this voice via artistic biblioclasm is understood as a deconstructive force that does not seek to proclaim a new master.

This understanding of the book also distinguishes my work from Rebecca Knuth's interpretation of "libricide" (Knuth 2003); for Knuth, libraries represent humanist values that need to be defended at all costs, while acts of "libricide" destroy these textual manifestations of humanism for ultra-nationalistic, racist and other reasons. In my work, the doctrinal or political text is generally understood as an object that harbours the potential of being turned into a dangerous weapon, while artistic biblioclasm seals, destroys or otherwise transforms parts of the book in order to deconstruct its dogmatic image. Even though some

of the work may be perceived in Malta as an irreverent attack on the religious messages contained in some texts, the goal in my work has never been to ridicule or belittle religious belief. Rather, the intention has been to think of religion or politics as open-ended questions.

In a Catholic country like Malta, the use of doctrinal texts in works of art has a contextual relevance that is rather unique and carries meanings that would not be perceived in quite the same way had I shown these works in other, more secular, Western countries. For this reason, the actual Maltese venue in which my works were shown became integrated in the concept and production of each piece. One such instance is *Deus Absconditus* (2002), an installation in an abandoned house in Valletta that formed part of a group exhibition called *Cityspaces* which I curated (Vella 2002). Most of the works in *Cityspaces*, including *Deus Absconditus*, were installed in an old Valletta *kerrejja* (a typical, Maltese city slum generally occupied by many families) that was rumoured to have been a brothel in the past. Some of the physical and historical characteristics of the place were 'accepted' as integral parts of the work that I installed on site (D1-D9).

77
Deus Absconditus
Detail
2002

In *Deus Absconditus* (Figs. 14, 23 and 77), hundreds of pages pulled out of cheap, romantic novels were glued to each other to form a huge, soft book (over four metres long) which was installed on its side in a small, blacked-out room lit only by a sickly, yellow neon tube. Large white sheets of paper were attached to the central part of this book to suggest the sheets of a bed. A used copy of a religious textbook called *The Student's Catholic Doctrine* (Hart 1948: a book that was used for many years in Maltese secondary schools) was nailed to one of the walls and sealed in a way that permitted the public to read only two pages, those showing the first paragraph of a chapter offering 'proof' of the existence of God. The chapter's title was marked by a young girl's handwriting in pencil: "for exam".

The diverse elements of the installation suggested a mixture of the sacred and the profane. The idea of 'studying' God by heart – an idea that would not sound so strange in the context of Maltese, Catholic doctrine lessons – was deliberately stopped short by gluing the fore edge of the textbook's pages. After realising that 'proof' of God's existence was not forthcoming in this sealed catechism, the reader/viewer would have to turn his/her gaze to the much larger, fallen book that spoke only of cheap love. In this black room, God remained defiantly unpresentable.

78
The Unpronounceable Name
2003

In *The Unpronounceable Name* (2003), the same theme is taken up again. I decided to use copies of an old, Catholic catechism again in this and several other works that followed. I felt that the relationship between religious doctrine, indoctrination, and biblioclastic processes deserved to be explored further, and that this textbook, with its old-fashioned pedagogical structure and rigid content, was the right candidate for an exploration of this sort. In *The Unpronounceable Name*, pages from the religious textbook were pasted to a linen support to form an oversized, wall-hung book. The central area of the work is dominated by a gaping hole or wound made of black book-pulp, turning the doctrinaire, didactic text of the catechism to a *tabula rasa*. While the sublime judgement in Kant generally refers to the human inability to visualise or depict the Absolute's 'image' (in the Judaic prohibition of 'graven images', for instance), works like *The Unpronounceable Name* and *Deus Absconditus* try to come to terms with the inability to describe or define the Absolute in words. The unpresentable becomes the unpronounceable or the unutterable. As postmodern theologian Mark C. Taylor asserts, following the example of Maurice Blanchot, God must be imagined as a "*failure* of language" (quoted in Elkins 2004: 109).

79
The Unpronounceable Name
Detail of central section with book pulp
2003

The writer's awareness of the ultimate unreliability of language is a theme that already surfaced in previous sections: in our discussion of

Adorno or Jabès, for example. In *The Confession of Augustine* (Lyotard 2000b), a posthumously published work written (and left unfinished) by Lyotard before his death in 1998, we are confronted again with the finite and limited nature of the book. In Lyotard's unusual text (in which Lyotard's voice seems to disguise itself as Augustine's), the saint-philosopher Augustine also complains about writing; he accuses it of being late, of always finding itself in the subordinate position of running after the event. God cannot be captured in writing: "The event comes before writing bears witness, and writing sets down once the event has passed" (Lyotard 2000b: 27). Augustine therefore cannot really bear witness to God in writing, and by writing about his delayed conversion, he only perpetuates this delay. Moreover, how does one write (that is, put into duration) the atemporality of God? Here, we return to the problem of the sublime, of the pleasure of being able to *think* God and the pain and suspicion associated with any attempt to *write* God. According to Lyotard, even other works by Augustine (like *De Magistro, De Dialectica* and *De Rhetorica*) "teem to obsession with marks of suspicion brought against the validity of linguistic units" (Lyotard 2000b: 44). It appears that for Lyotard/Augustine, the act of writing is doomed to remain incomplete, like Lyotard's own projected work about Augustine.

In works like *The Unpronounceable Name*, pulp expresses this suspicion. The pages of the catechism are the didactic form of the Church's magisterium (its official teaching), while the biblioclastic act opens up the book's pedagogy and fixed sense of duration. Artistic biblioclasm becomes a way of inserting a question-mark into any text that asserts its authority by excluding other texts.

In Malta, the anti-representational stance of works like *Deus Absconditus* and *The Unpronounceable Name* also needs to be set against the country's Baroque heritage and dominance of the Baroque idiom even in modern times. This southern Baroque style, typical of ecclesiastical art in the south of Italy and Malta, not only represents the visible but also the invisible. Church vaults offer beatific visions of

the transcendent and use all kinds of optical devices that seem designed to satisfy "the voyeurism of those who need to see to believe" (Vella 1999). The blackened walls of *Deus Absconditus* present us with the antithesis of this voyeurism, while the pulped wound in *The Unpronounceable Name* replaces visionary power with the inarticulate.

80
Weapon of Mass destruction
2004
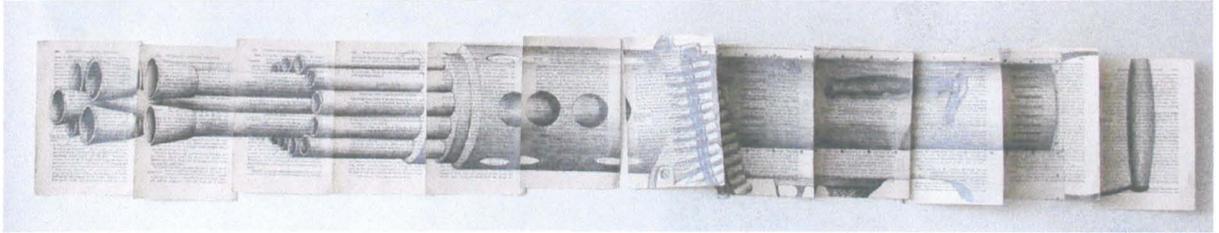
In my work, this inquiry into the ultimate theological question (the problem of defining the undefinable) constituted a preamble that soon led to more political questions relating to religious faith, fundamentalism and terrorism. Once the religious book's limits were exposed, then any act of violence that justified itself by referring to the contents of a religious book would, in principle, be prone to deconstruction too. The political climate was ripe for such deconstructions: following 9/11 in New York in 2001, the conflict in Iraq and the futile search for weapons of mass destruction became the main issues on the agenda of 2004. I started to think about how and why religious texts can influence political talk and lead, at times, to acts of aggression. I started exploring the possibility of relating religion to war and terrorism by making detailed drawings (like *Weapon of Mass Destruction*, 2004; Figs. 10 and 80) that superimposed deliberately comical machine-guns on a sequence of pages taken from a Christian textbook. These elongated weapons are *supported* by the religious pages but they simultaneously *obliterate* the text beneath them. The machinery of war and terror in the early 21st century is fuelled by religious fanaticism and capable of erasing the very religious foundations that support it (see also D47-D49).
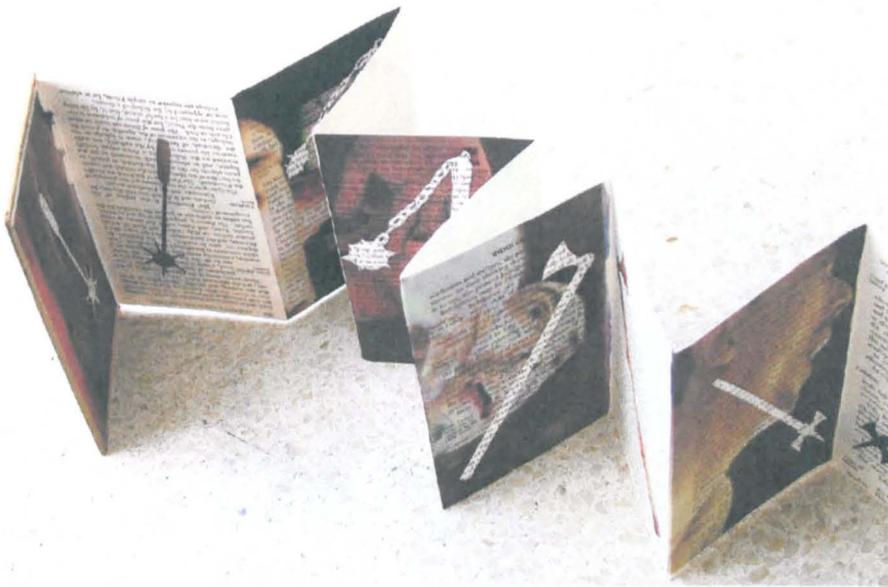
The drawings led to *Catholic Pillow Book* (2004). Influenced by television footage and images of dead civilians in Iraq, I took photographs of myself as a 'dead person' and overprinted these images digitally on Catholic book-pages (D50-D57). The images were overprinted twice or more to increase the density of the ink that covers the printed text. Silhouettes of medieval weapons cut from the same type of book-pages were pasted onto the overprinted images in order to stress the primitive, crusade-like nature of the notion of a 'holy war' (Figs. 11, 84–89).

The digital images were made into an accordion fold book with twenty panels (Figs. 7 and 81). Finally, I took the book cover apart, using a surgical knife to separate the red book cloth from the cover boards. I formed a little pillow case with book cloth and placed the accordion fold book into the case. In this way, I expanded the idea of using the book as a support for drawings to a more metaphorical interpretation that presents the book as a support for the head/mind (Fig. 83). The Catholic doctrine book was transformed into a mental crutch.

My next project, *God is on our Side* (2004), involved the use of pages extracted from both Christian and Islamic doctrinal books. These pages were overprinted with images and text in a colour ink-jet photo-quality printer, which resulted in the partial obliteration of the original printed text. The overprinting process involved between two and fifteen print jobs per page (depending on the quality of the book-paper). The overprinted images and text were once again related to the upsurge of terrorism and the war in Iraq. For example, Islamic texts in Arabic used by kidnappers to justify the capture of Western hostages in Iraq were printed over Islamic doctrinal texts. Images of tortured individuals from the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were

used too, often in conjunction with texts on pages that taught young school children aspects of Catholic doctrine like confession, heaven and hell, and so on (D58-D66).

The overprinted book-pages were taken to Gothenburg in Sweden during the summer of 2004, where I stayed as artist-in-residence at *Konstepidemin*, an artists' community. I used the pages as collage material in the production of mixed media works on rectangular sheets of paper, along with other media like screen prints, acrylics, ink, pencil, graph paper, correction fluid, and even blood (Figs. 91-96). The resulting works were gradually transformed into ironic 'lessons', with the aim of each 'lesson' written in pencil beneath the images. Drawings and small screen prints of Kalashnikov assault rifles and other weapons with lists of technical characteristics (barrel length, calibre, range, etc.) hid parts of the text, offering oblique reactions to textbook questions like 'What is Heaven?' or 'What are the Books of Allah?' The main goal of these works on paper was to link education (or indoctrination) to political violence and self-righteousness.

The installation of *God is on our Side* in Sweden was intended to show evidence of the origin of the overprinted pages (books) and simultaneously remind the viewer that the used books had been 'perverted', not only by being pulled out of their cover but also by being covered in violent imagery. The works on paper were individually attached to a wall either by their two left-hand corners or the two right-hand corners (Fig. 90). This unbound, wall-hung 'book' could be shifted around, because the pages are interchangeable and follow no definite sequence. The changeable format was intended to stress the impermanence of these altered pages.
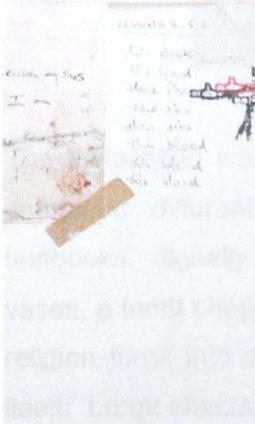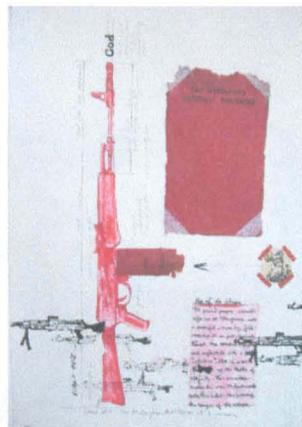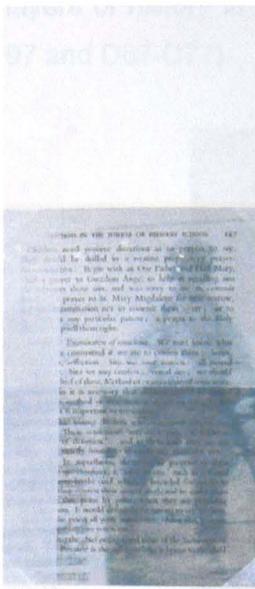
The juxtaposition of religion and war in works like *God is on our Side* was eventually developed sculpturally in the context of a group exhibition I organised between March and June 2005 in an underground, wartime shelter in Birgu, a maritime city in the southern Cottonera area of Malta. The exhibition was called *Blitz* and was intended to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Second World War and reflect about contemporary conflicts and political struggles. During the war, Cottonera was one of the most badly-hit areas in Malta, so the war shelter was used by hundreds of people, many of whom lived in very cramped conditions in tiny, rock-hewn chambers.[5] My piece was installed in one of these chambers, so the

layers of history in the space become an extension of my work (Fig. 97 and D67-D77).

The installation was entitled *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction* and combined different materials like pages from Catholic doctrine textbooks, digitally overprinted guns, wood, plaster, plastic, glass vases, a lamb chop in vinegar, wine, and masking tape. In this work, religion turns into a weapon of the masses that ultimately destroys itself. Large sheets made of hundreds of book-pages overprinted with images of real and toy guns provide a book-like backdrop for a white, sculptural machine-gun on a tripod placed upright on the ground. Parts of the machine-gun are pasted over in doctrinal book-pages too. Two rubber tubes lead downwards from the back of the weapon to a couple of transparent glass vessels, sitting like testicles beneath the phallic gun. A lamb chop floats in white vinegar in one of the glass vessels while a Catholic textbook floats in red wine in the other (Figs. 98-103). Both of these are references to the figure of Christ (the Lamb of God and the sacrificial blood) who is transformed into symbolic weapon rounds that feed the machine-gun. The work is ephemeral, incorporating organic matter and other perishable combinations (like the book in wine).
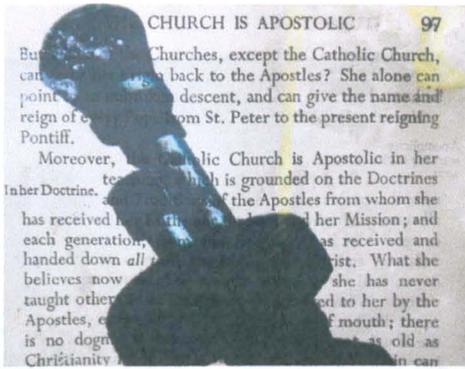
The research and processes used in the production of *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction* were applied to another sculptural piece in 2006. *Magisterium* recreates a bishop's robe out of pages of a student's catechism that were overprinted with military imagery similar to that used in the installation in the war shelter. While the robe and accessories like the sash represent as closely as possible the actual clothing of a Catholic bishop, the dominant use of yellow and white refer to the Church's central authority, the Vatican (Figs. 104-106).

98-103
Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction
Details
2005
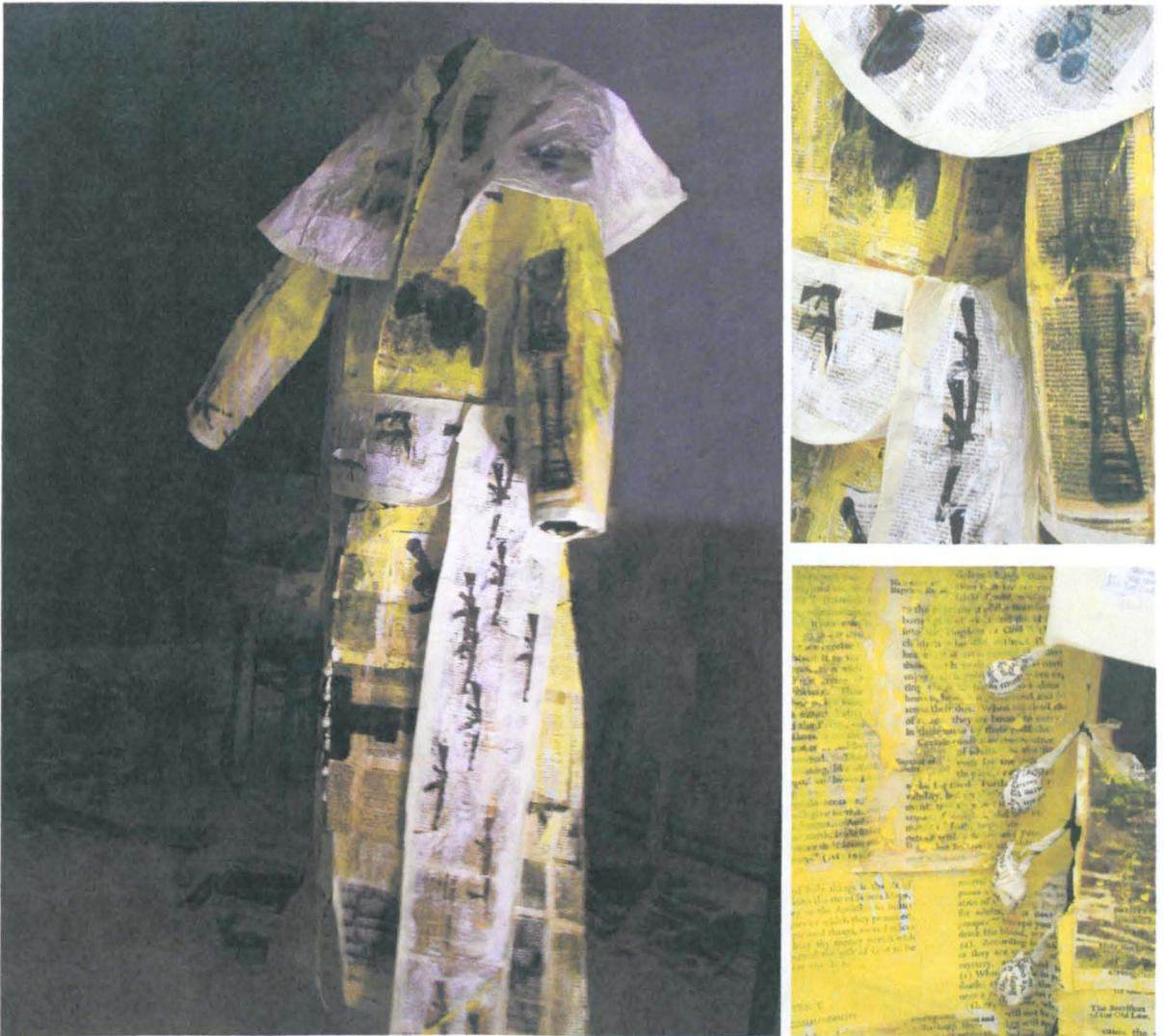
104-106
Magisterium
Clockwise from left:
complete robe; detail
of sash and sleeve;
detail of buttons
2006

While *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction* and *Magisterium* highlight the fact that religious texts are sometimes used to justify abuses of power or even military actions (a 'holy' crusade, for instance), the illegibility of much of the text in the book-pages also shows that violence renders that faith unrecognisable (hence self-destructive; see also D74). The aggressive, phallic form of the lower part of the Birgu installation transforms religious 'lessons' into metaphors of power and violence. Similarly, *Magisterium* (the Latin word literally means 'the

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office of a master' and refers to the official teaching of a bishop or pope) deliberately mixes a symbol of Catholic hierarchy with dogma, power and warfare (D91-D99).

The city of Birgu is not only known for the extent of military activity during the Second World War. Even the historical relationship between religion and power is probably nowhere more in evidence on the Maltese islands than in Birgu. Birgu, in fact, has a discreet history of book burning. The Inquisitor's Palace was based there, and the Holy Office of the Inquisition burned many prohibited books (especially books that belonged to other religious faiths) in the main square from the sixteenth century onwards. In spite of the fact that reading had become more widespread by then, the circulation of books was controlled by the Inquisition. One ordained member of the Order of the Knights of St John, Don Francesco Gesualdo, was actually burned at the stake in Birgu in 1563 after being found guilty of possessing a number of Lutheran books (Cassar 1988).

This biblioclastic backdrop prompted me to produce another installation in Birgu in 2005. Entitled *Nihil Obstat*, the work was produced for a large, arched hall in Caraffa Stores, a historic building on the waterfront, and was shown during a literary event called "*Ktieb għall-Ħruq*" (A Book for Burning) in April, 2005. The term *Nihil Obstat* is used by the Catholic Church to refer to books that teach Catholic doctrine 'correctly'. The words are usually printed on the second page of religious books (often followed by the name of the *Censor deputatus*), and their function is to reassure readers that the book in question is not morally objectionable in any way. *Nihil Obstat* is therefore a stamp of authority as well as a form of religious censorship.
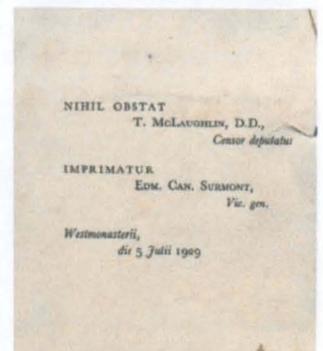
107
Detail of *Nihil Obstat* in a religious catechism 1929

The arched room was conceived as a sort of classroom, with a blackboard at the far end and a group of paper-works spread randomly around the room. The images on the paper-works were

composed mainly of children's marginalia, picked out of used copies of *The Student's Catholic Doctrine* (Hart 1948), photographed and enlarged digitally, and finally re-printed onto pages of the catechism. These images were transformed into sculptural pieces by having a thin wire inserted at the back and by mounting the paper-wire construction onto wooden stands of different heights. Candles hidden behind each image provided back lighting (D78-D90)[6].

108
Nihil Obstat
Caraffa Stores, Birgu
2005

The installation juxtaposed religious book burnings, indoctrination and censorship in Malta with little acts of rebellion against authority carried out by so-called heretics in the past and schoolchildren in modern times. The marginalia (pencil drawings of students' faces and clothes, lovers' names, song lyrics, and even the occasional defiant comment about religion) introduce a mundane element into the serious content of the textbook, manifesting a humorous indifference to the *Nihil Obstat* printed in the book. Indeed, the addition of any new material to a catechism after it has passed the Catholic censor's test is a direct transgression of the censor's authority and negates the validity of the test. These transgressive works of 'art' and writings provided all the documentary and visual material for my work. My input consisted merely in putting their ideas together in a new context.
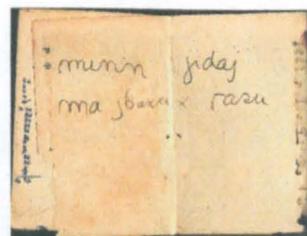
109-110
Nihil Obstat
Detail of blackboard and
*minn jidaj ma jbaxxix
rasu* inscription
2005

One of these pencilled notes was particularly striking: covering two adjacent pages, a girl had written in incorrect Maltese *minn jidaj ma*

jbaxxix rasu (literally translated as "whoever swears keeps his head up high"). I glued this book to the blackboard, next to a handwritten list of names of heretics persecuted by the Birgu-based Inquisition in the sixteenth century for having been found in the possession of books by Luther, Melanchton, Erasmus, and other prohibited authors (Figs. 109 and 110).
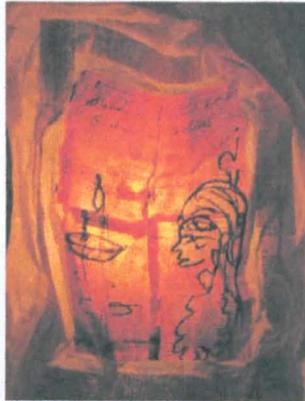
111-114
Nihil Obstat
Details of marginalia on paper-works
2005

Setting two kinds of biblioclasm (religious/political biblioclasm and artistic or childrens' biblioclasm) side by side in this installation helped to express the divergent motivations of different biblioclasts. While the flickering flames of the candles, the pages of doctrine and the blackboard refer to the Church's magisterium and methods of dealing with heresy in the past, the children's clandestine drawings and comments produce fascinating book alterations and erasures, deconstructing the book's authority and opening it to new interpretations. If the installation *Nihil Obstat* deals with the book's

115
Nihil Obstat
Detail
2005

150

closure, it also points beyond that closure. Its references to an imposed 'consensus' about doctrine and truth are deconstructed by two, separate negations: the heretic who negates official dogma by reading the 'other' and the child who negates doctrine by altering it with funny drawings. The latter biblioclastic urge is linked to the former desire for plurality.

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Nihil Obstat
Installation during literary evening
April, 2005

In conclusion, one could legitimately ask the following question. In what way is a biblioclastic breakdown of theological thought still theological? We could seek an elucidation of this question in a "theology of the sublime" based on the work of Kant, Derrida, Lyotard, and others, as theologian Clayton Crockett does when he argues:

> What would it mean to work out a postmodern theology of the sublime?...In some ways, such a theology is necessarily a negative theology, in the sense of lacking a determinate or objective (Christian) content. (Crockett 2001: 98)

And further on, in explaining the crisis of representation as "a crisis of intelligibility", Crockett proposes a new form of theological thinking that embraces this sense of disorientation and "pursues the most

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negative of negative theologies in an apocalyptic way", i.e. a theology that "does not accept answers uncritically" (Crockett 2001: 112).

In the kind of artistic biblioclasm I practice, this would not be a theology that prays to an intelligible god of ideology or religion. Rather, it manipulates positive or constructive theologies or ideologies, simultaneously retreating *within* them in an attempt to avoid generating new, Utopian forms. The pulped book, for example, bears witness to such an attempt; its formlessness points to the futility of fundamentalist discourse *and* simultaneously presents us with the remains of its continued existence. Unlike politically intolerant forms of biblioclasm, artistic biblioclasm does not show us *the* way. It simply reminds us of the need to remain vigilant.

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[1] This collection of essays includes eye-witness accounts by Holocaust survivors and work by scholars about areas like policies of Nazi censorship, the library of the Vilna ghetto, the confiscation and suppression of books in Rome, Salonika and the Soviet Union, and the experience of reading in the ghettos and concentration camps.

[2] Seierstad is a Norwegian journalist who spent three months in Afghanistan in 2002. Her novel is based on her real-life experiences of the Taliban.

[3] *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity* (1999) is presented in the form of a dialogue between Lyotard and Gruber and deals with the hyphen in the expression 'Judeo-Christian'. Gruber interprets the hyphen as a bridge between the two religions, while Lyotard understands the punctuation mark as a differend.

[4] Utopia is defined as "an imagined perfect place or state of things" (OED). Political or religious Utopias strive toward a determined state of perfection in the future, generally thought to be achievable by establishing a society that reflects ideal values and virtues. On the contrary, artistic biblioclasm is indeterminate (it does not aim to achieve a specific end) and cannot achieve 'perfection' because it is essentially an act of destruction.

[5] The air raid shelter was originally intended as a civil defence shelter, but increased in size after an increase in the intensity of enemy air attacks. Following further excavation, the shelter acquired a maze-like layout. The shelter in Birgu is one of the largest on the island.

[6] The large hall had a single window at the far end. This was blocked with black fabric in order to be able to control the minimal lighting in the room using candles.

Conclusion

This study of artistic biblioclasm and its relationship with the sublime feeling has proceeded in four stages. The first (Part One) reviews the literature that is related to different aspects of this study. It shows that several publications have dealt with the use of books in art but few of them focus specifically on the *destruction* of books or seek to study the theoretical, political or ethical implications of this artistic phenomenon. In particular, the present study seeks to define the postmodern character of artistic biblioclasm and to establish a link between the destruction of books in art and philosophical discussions about the sublime and the unpresentable pertaining especially to the work of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard.

In order to establish this link, it was necessary to start by describing the practical field in some depth. The 'Practice Methodology' section in Part One describes and analyses the different technical methods involved in my own works and installations. Part Two looks at the wider arena of artistic erasure in the twentieth century in order to contextualise the narrower practice of artistic biblioclasm, and subsequently classifies the latter field into different groups: book alterations/erasures, biblioclastic book-objects, formless books and dematerialised books. This classification is important because it shows that the field is both rich and extremely varied in spite of the fact that all its variants have evolved from a similar concern with the book and the roles it plays in societies.

After having described the different forms of artistic biblioclasm and compared them to other artistic practices in the twentieth century, the next step was to provide a critical and theoretical framework for the erasure or manipulation of books in works of art. Part Three develops a series of arguments around the work of Lyotard that permit us to delve deeper into theoretical issues involved in the disruption of the

textual by different artistic or graphic means. From Lyotard's early preoccupation with the figural and its insertion into the printed page (in some of Mallarmé's work, for instance), we are led to his interest in book-objects in "False Flights in Literature", focusing on the ways in which these objects carry out a "perversion" of the book's traditional function as a messenger of meaning. This perversion is also linked to the work of one of the last artists Lyotard wrote about towards the end of his life, Pierre Skira. In Skira's paintings, the book-as-messenger is attacked again and replaced with the book-as-surface. Instead of providing their readers with text and meaning, the sheets of Skira's painted books are filled with the loud blankness of pure colour.

These references to the blank or deconstructed book in art are then brought to bear on Lyotard's propositions about the postmodern and his interpretation of the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime. This link is what permits this study to contrast a specifically dogmatic conception of the book as a closed image of totality – what Derrida has called "the ontological-encyclopaedic or neo-Hegelian model of the great, total book, the book of absolute knowledge" (Derrida 2001: 27) – with a more open-ended interpretation that perceives the book's deconstruction at the hands of the artist-biblioclast as a point of entry into a more postmodern flux (or 'pulp') of things. According to this interpretation, the act of artistic biblioclasm is postmodern because it refuses the consolation of representation, avoiding especially a form of representation (language) that is intended to communicate consensual meaning. The sublime withdrawal from narrative and representation that is evident in many examples of artistic biblioclasm only presents the fact that the totality of the book is unpresentable. This withdrawal of the book is also a form of resistance.

This interpretation of artistic biblioclasm as an act of resistance has several political implications that are explored in Part Four, the final stage of this study. This exploration of the political and the biblioclastic could not avoid tracing a history of book burning that

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belongs to the realm of totalitarian or fundamentalist politics rather than art. Only by uncovering ideologies that made a trauma like Auschwitz possible can we start to understand an art "after Auschwitz", i.e. after a dramatically heightened awareness of the difficulty of an enlightened deliverance from evil and suffering. Part Four explores the relationship between this Utopian promise of a better world and the more negative, more 'Jewish' interpretation of artistic biblioclasm being proposed by the present study: one that links artistic responsibility with the sublime response, i.e. with a response that accepts the limitations of its own perspective.

Each of the four Parts also includes a section or sub-section about my own practical work. In this way, reflections about my work are constantly woven into the text, linking with the work of other artists and theorists. This conclusion will now highlight and expand on some of the main arguments put forward about my work in this study. These arguments may be summarised in the following three points:

1. *Text to Context*: Both my practice and my thoughts about my practice developed from an early concern with *text* (and its transgression) to a preoccupation with *context* (and its assimilation in the process and presented work). Some of my first experiments with book-pulp and book-objects were concerned with the inadequacy of *any* book. In the production of works such as *Melting Library*, the fact that the books were identical to each other was more important to me than knowing what genre the books belonged to (literature, non-fiction, and so on). The actual subject of the books was not sublime; what was sublime to me was the feeling that occurs when one thinks of a book's structural and conceptual limits, which became analogous to the limits of human experience.

At that stage, the problems I was grappling with were generally more abstract, more philosophical. This first stage in my practical

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and theoretical research helped me to get to grips with a book's ontological status and to open up the book and the sense of closure associated with its inadequacy.

As my research developed, my exploration of the book's limits became more focused and contextualised, hence less abstract. Reflections about political events, Catholicism and the relationship between organised religion and power started to influence the development of my practice. Religious texts started to play a more central role, with Malta providing not only a physical space for my work but also an ideological backdrop which permitted me to anchor my more philosophical reflections in specific lived experiences. This stronger awareness of context is evident in later works like *Nihil Obstat* (where the actual site becomes an integral part of the work's appearance and 'history') and *Magisterium* (where the context is a more generalised world of ritual that characterises Catholic societies). Naturally, this development did not signify a diminished interest in the book; what it meant was that the book started to symbolise, more than before, an image of dogmatic power that needed to be challenged.

2. *Confronting the Political and the Social:* The importance granted to context did not only influence the mode of presentation of my work but ultimately affected my writing too. Part Four is in fact largely a reflection of the situational inclination evident in my installations in Malta. Yet, even though the constraints of writing a scholarly study require internal divisions in a text like the present one, my practical work always aims to show that the artistic and political spheres cannot be completely isolated from each other. Many of the texts I use in my work – political newspaper articles, catechisms – do not encourage 'disinterested' readings. Hence, the interpretation of artistic biblioclasm that my work and this study offer needs to be distinguished from those forms of modernist erasure that present the work of art as an autonomous object. As

Boris Groys has written, the early avant-garde erasures of artists like Malevich attempted to liberate art by 'destroying' the world itself (in a nonobjective way); for Malevich, paintings like *Black Square* "transcended all beliefs and ideologies" (Groys 1992: 31). On the contrary, in my work I do not search for some neutral niche outside history, ideology or politics. The unpresentable is not a pure, aesthetic zone where less is more but a complex, "relational" space where conflicting visions of truth or dogma come into contact to produce provisional 'solutions' for different people to interact with (Bourriaud 1998).

The aim of this combination of different textual traces is not to achieve a kind of superficial eclecticism, either. The textual sources used in the work are very deliberately selected and then 'recycled' in different ways; negation is always present but this is neither the negation of 'anything goes' (an indiscriminate form of nihilism or relativism) nor that of a Utopian escape from the world (where nothingness comes to stand for the groundlessness of a prehistory before the advent of language). The alteration or destruction of books in my work combines the aesthetical with the political; as Gene Ray explains in his collection of essays about terror and the sublime in art, the sublime aesthetic is "the name of an event in which ethics, politics, and aesthetics intersect" (Ray 2005: 9).

At times, in direct contrast to the history of modernism, the work hovers ambiguously between the flat surface and the sculptural or between the sculptural and the ephemeral (as in *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction*, where the audience is crammed into a tiny shelter surrounded by violent imagery printed on hundreds of religious book-pages and the subtle smell of slowly decaying meat). Aesthetics is never pure; it is mixed with the transitory smell of the 'here and now'. The actual becomes integrated in the work because the public's response must take into account the

fact that the fragility and temporary nature of the installation cannot guarantee the comforting security of completeness. There is always the possibility that tomorrow's audience might experience the work differently.

In the context of Maltese society, the cultural and cultic meanings of the used materials (for example, the use of doctrinal textbooks that many members of the public may remember from their own schooldays) and the deliberate impoverishment of these materials help to forge a link with the public domain, occasionally clashing with some viewers' expectations (why are these pages about Jesus overprinted with big guns?). While some members of the public appeared hesitant when confronted with the religious or political nature of the texts I used, many enjoyed the possibility of being challenged to re-think religious or political ideas. A few of my works were even integrated into experimental performances in contemporary Maltese theatre and literature (Figs. 117-120).

This fusion of the social and the confrontational is almost inevitable in biblioclastic works that make use of texts that deal with sensitive issues like religious belief. In almost all the works that were shown to the public, the social and functional dimensions of the environment replaced the neutral, white spaces of museums or galleries. The objective kind of lighting we associate with galleries was also avoided in many installations; instead, works like *Deus Absconditus*, *Study Table* and *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction* were deliberately left in semi-obscurity, like the interiors of Maltese, Baroque churches. At the same time, the people who visited these installations were confronted by visions that strayed more toward a fall from grace than toward the uplifting feeling of an ecclesiastical space. In *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction*, for example, the *horror vacui* of the Maltese Baroque church – where an excess of divine beauty and material wealth placed in an immanent plane seeks to

117-120
From top:
Literary reading in front of *Endless Column* (2003); actors performing around *Study Table* (2003); poets and audience near *Nihil Obstat* during a literature recital evening, "A Book for Burning" (2005); theatrical performance in a hall adjacent to *Nihil Obstat* (2005) during "A Book for Burning"

convince the spectator of the truth of the transcendent – is replaced by a roughly assembled 'altar' that only commemorates the abuse of religion and suggests, with its biblioclastic treatment of a Catholic catechism, that its pedagogy is obsolete.

This relationship between artistic biblioclasm, the spectator, and pedagogy became more important after I started to make regular use of textbooks, especially doctrinal works. Working with textbooks as an artistic medium made me become more directly aware of what Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire referred to as the "banking" concept of education (Freire 1993). According to this traditional interpretation of the educational process, knowledge is a gift that is deposited by teachers into students' minds. The educational context becomes a one-way, narrative space, where the teacher narrates and the student is merely a spectator or receptacle. A "banking" educational system therefore turns books into oppressive objects that discourage true inquiry. Although a more detailed analysis of these oppressive, pedagogical systems was beyond the scope of this study, this area of research that deals with the links between education, books and art has great potential and could be expanded much further (see also Rollins 2005: 5). Within the parameters of the present research, what concerns me most is the way art can be brought to bear on books that simply narrate determinate 'stories', contradicting the image of completeness that these books seek to convey. The installations also seek to encourage visitors to cease being mere spectators or passive members of a 'congregation' but to move *within* the work. In *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction*, the idea of a universal catechism for the 'masses' (referring to the etymology of the word 'Catholic', meaning 'universal') is linked to militancy and an us/them mentality.

This confrontational side of artistic biblioclasm is not to be confused with political partisanship; the process of physically

deconstructing books embraces a radically negative politics, one that has no scientifically valid solutions fixed in advance. It does not set out from the start to be beneficial to society by offering a cure for its ills; it can only be beneficial if we accept its disturbance.

3. **Art, Religion and the Contemporary Sublime:** Stuart Sim has argued that people living in the early years of the twenty-first century have witnessed the rise of a "new dark age of dogma" (Sim 2005). Events like 9/11 in 2001, the Istanbul bombings in 2003, the Madrid train attacks in 2004, the London bombings in 2005, and regimes or groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda prove that fundamentalist thought is capable of influencing world history by wielding a dangerous cocktail of religious fanaticism, politics and violence. For Sim, the political force of fundamentalism seems to counter Lyotard's claims for a 'postmodern condition' in which universal theories have lost their attractiveness. Yet, Sim concludes his book by writing that this "new dark age" only makes Lyotard's claims more important than ever; in his view, postmodern scepticism is still the best response we can possibly cultivate against fundamentalism. Similarly, in my practice, Sim's "new dark age of dogma" is expressed in the image of an authoritarian book of 'truth', while artistic biblioclasm is employed as a sceptical process that opens up the book.

Indeed, one of the most intriguing aspects of the present study is the fact that some of the themes I deal with in my practice became increasingly topical during the years of research. While it is generally true – as James Elkins states (Elkins 2004) – that serious or authentically pious attitudes toward religion have distanced themselves from contemporary art in the West, it is also impossible to discuss international, political developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century without conceding some time to talk about organised religions and their connections with

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fundamentalism and violent conflicts. The controversies surrounding the publication of cartoons representing the prophet Muhammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September, 2005 and the subsequent protests in several countries around the world did not only indicate a serious escalation of destructive behaviour associated with religious beliefs but also brought to the fore discussions about the problem of representation in Islamic societies today. Debates in the press about the prohibition of images of the Prophet in Islam often veered in the direction of issues that were being tackled in the present study.

These political developments on an international scale influenced my interpretation of the sublime. I do not accept, for instance, the idea that images of frivolity best express the contemporary sublime (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999) or that the sublime today has lost touch completely with its "apocalyptic" philosophical heritage and can now be replaced with superficial 'religious' faith in figures like Elvis or Lady Diana (LeVitte Harten 1999: 9-12). Both Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* and the exhibition curated by LeVitte Harten (*HEAVEN* at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool) preceded 9/11 and its aftermath: the "war on terror", kidnappings, bombings in the West, civil strife in Iraq, and so on. In the contemporary political climate, frivolity can lead to serious misunderstandings (the issue of the Danish cartoons is a case in point). The history of the first years of the twenty-first century neither permits intellectuals to do away with religion altogether, nor does it impose on them the need to be 'religious' in the traditional sense of the word. What contemporary events impose on thinkers (including artists) today is the need to engage with these issues responsibly, refusing both fanaticism and frivolity, as Swiss theologian Hans Küng has suggested in his response to the problem of the Danish cartoons (Küng 2006: 12).

It is this kind of reality that artistic biblioclasm tries to tackle by avoiding any kind of singular, totalising discourse. The sublime feeling of artistic biblioclasm is not to be found in a sense of divine 'truth' beyond the book but in the presence of contradictory discourses and ongoing denials. The use of books as a medium (rather than the virtual space of the computer screen, for instance) means that what is 'perverted' is still present in one form or another, often in the same context as a similar perversion of the 'other' (as in *God is on our Side*, where altered pages from Islamic textbooks lie alongside sheets from Christian texts). Some of the works interrogate the discourses of authority by invoking the centre, i.e. by appropriating texts that belong to that centre and simultaneously crossing out most of its traces. In some cases, the actual physical centre of the work is obliterated or emptied (for instance, *The Unpronounceable Name* or an earlier piece like *Theology*). The planting of the seeds of suspicion into the text is an important aspect of artistic biblioclasm because it does not come from the side of power; this characteristic immediately distinguishes it from the authoritarian suspicions of fundamentalist regimes such as the Taliban. At the same time, some aspect of the book survives, usually as detritus. Hence, the pain-pleasure aspect of the sublime in artistic biblioclasm is this very deployment of negativity at the centre of fundamental 'truth'.

This persistence of that which the sublime feeling dislocates is also expressed in the spaces I selected for some of the installations. The idea that artistic biblioclasm resists closures was 'contradicted' by the enclosed environments in which several works were installed: a small, black brothel room in *Deus Absconditus*, a prison cell in *Oubliette*, a dark hall blocked by restoration works in *Study Table* (Fig. 121), an underground war shelter in *Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction*, and an arched, oppressive store in *Nihil Obstat*. In these claustrophobic spaces – where the defining quality of the Mediterranean light could not

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Restoration scaffoldings covering façade of Pinto Stores, Valletta 2003

penetrate – the public was made to experience the restrictive closures that exist in our books or our minds in order to realise that the "relational" in biblioclastic art cannot be equated with collective pleasure. Some visitors even complained about the lack of fresh air in the brothel room and in the war shelter, or about the amount of dust due to masonry works at Pinto Stores in Valletta.

In these installations, the Utopias of political horizons (the EU issue in *Study Table* or *Endless Column*, for instance) and the Utopias of religious indoctrination are presented to the public as they slip away in decadent environments. This sense of a fall from political or aesthetic harmony or consensus – evident in work by other installation artists like Ilya Kabakov (see Groys 1995: 19) and Thomas Hirschhorn – constitutes the feeling of the sublime in postmodern times, when universal solutions for the 'people' are shown to be nothing more than self-propagating myths that only re-enact "Terror in the name of freedom" (Lyotard 1985b: 92).

The place of the book in the contemporary political and cultural arenas needs to be situated outside extremist positions of the either/or or us/them variety. In my practice, my relationship with these positions reveals a sense of incredulity. This incredulity is 'Jewish' rather than Catholic to the extent that its 'truth' has not been incarnated yet and must always be postponed. Books that attempt to seize totality can lead to notions of textual inerrancy, which, in turn, can become instruments of oppression. Yet, none of the artist-biblioclasts I have dealt with call for an indiscriminate destruction of the written word. By undoing some kinds of books, art promotes a healthy sense of disbelief; it challenges those who hold that 'we' can speak for everyone else (by calling for a 'war on terror', for instance). Instead of desiring the whole or unity, artistic biblioclasm shows that something always remains unsaid, beyond the grasp of totality. This 'something' must remain unpresentable, because its radical negativity is also our hope.

Documentation

Most of the works described in this thesis were produced between 2002 and 2006, and several of them were shown in different venues in Malta and Gozo. The following images document different stages in the production of these works, processes used in their making, sketches or maquettes, and pages from exhibition catalogues in which these works appeared.

Deus Absconditus
2002

Venue: House in Old Mint Street, Valletta
Exhibition: *Cityspaces*, July-August, 2002
Curator: Raphael Vella
Media: Book pages, paper, wood, black paint,
catechism, yellow light
Dimensions variable
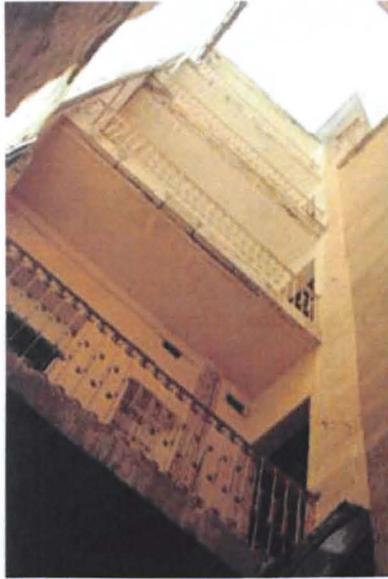
D1-D4
Clockwise, from top left:
View of slum building in Old Mint Street, Valletta;
room before transformation; pasting sheets of paper
together; painting the room black

D5-D8
Clockwise, from top left:
Installation of yellow light; catechism; detail;
finishing touches

D9
Double page spread from *Cityspaces* exhibition
catalogue

Memorial
2002

Venue: Malta National Library façade, Valletta
Exhibition: *Cityspaces*, July-August, 2002
Curator: Raphael Vella
Media: Book-paper pulp, paint, rope, artificial flowers
Diameter: 98 cm.

D10-D11
Left: Maquette of wreath

Below: Installation on balcony

D12
View with statue of Queen Victoria in the foreground, Valletta

Melting Library
2002

Venue: Vilhena Palace, Mdina
Exhibition: ~~BOOK~~, April-May, 2003
Organiser: Raphael Vella (one-person show)
Media: Sliced books, egg tempera, pulp,
acrylics on panel
Dimensions: 144 x 100 cm.

The images on this page document different biblioclastic processes used in the creation of *Melting Library* and other works produced in 2002 and 2003.

D13-D16
Clockwise, from top left:
Shredded book pages; torn pages soaked in water; sliced books (used in *Melting Library* and *Red Spill*); pulped pages

D17
Melting Library
2002

The Unpronounceable Name
2003

Venue: Vilhena Palace, Mdina
Exhibition: ~~BOOK~~, April-May, 2003
Organiser: Raphael Vella (one-person show)
Media: Pulp, pages from Catholic doctrine
books on canvas, acrylics
Dimensions: 184 x 132 cm.

D18- D19
Above: *The Unpronounceable Name*, 2003
Left: Detail of central section

Red Spill
2003

Venue: Vilhena Palace, Mdina
Exhibition: ~~BOOK~~, April-May, 2003
Organiser: Raphael Vella (one-person show)
Media: Pulp, sliced books, wood, acrylics
Dimensions: 207 x 95 x 39 cm.
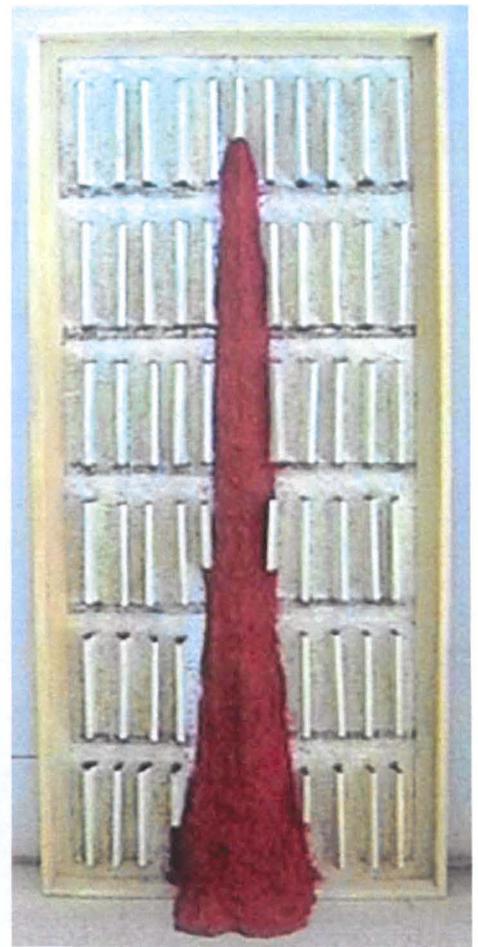
D20-D21
Above and Right: Detail and frontal view of *Red Spill*, 2003

D22
Below: Pages in *BOOK*, designed and published by Raphael Vella (2003). Left page shows detail of *Red Spill* (2003); right page shows poem by Joan Michelson, written after viewing Raphael Vella's work at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, USA.
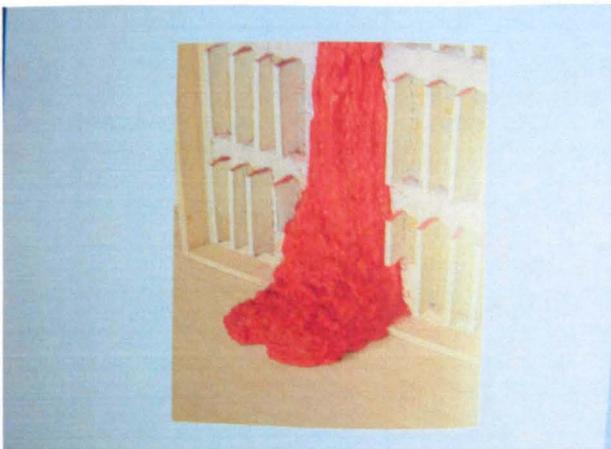
Art

Does the poem live in the opened vein,
blood of swine, jug of bloody milk?
Does music lie in the varnished wood
painted red with a lover's blood?
Is there an eye that bounces like a stone?
Is there a womb that sings out for its own?

Does music live in the opened vein
painted red with the lover's blood?
Does the poem lie in the varnished swine,
jug of blood, eye of milky wood?
Is there a poem made from a pulped book?
Is it an art to beautify the dead?

Joan Michelson
19.07.01
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, U.S.A.

Study Table
2003

Venue: Pinto Stores, Valletta
Exhibition: *Borders*, February-March, 2003
Curators: Richard Davies and START
**Media**: Wood, pulp, wire, black and white books
Dimensions variable
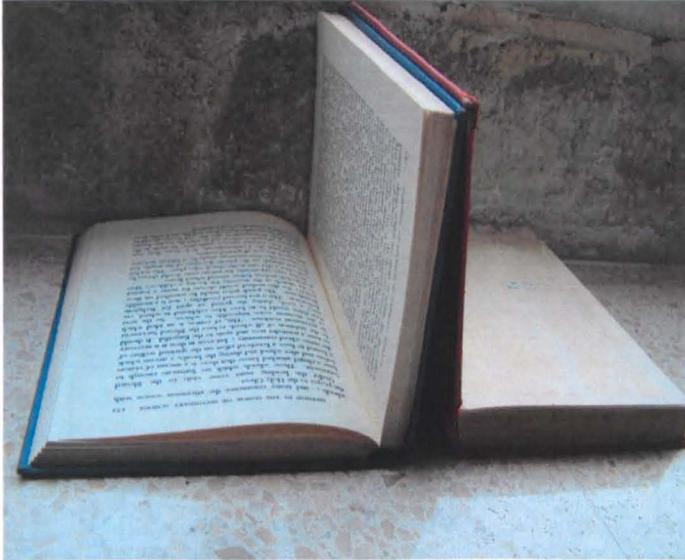
D23-D26
Clockwise, from top left:
Two books propped up against each other
provide an initial source of inspiration; small
maquette made of wood and pulp; sketch;
Study Table taking shape in studio

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D27-D28
Above: *Study Table*, 2003
Left: Digital rendering of table with
two seated girls

The Politics of Library Furniture
Raphael Vella

Study tables are found particularly in university libraries. They feature a central dividing upright that is often with pencil ledges and adjustable book rest. This allows for communication between a single reader and shelves. The function of the study table is similar to that carried in medieval libraries, a box-like enclosure with a window that permitted a monk to study alone, secluded from the general space and other monks, carried provided shelter and clearly defined territorial lines. Some modern libraries use study tables, either 'fins' sub-dividing long tables, or even bookshelves to separate readers from each other, others create staggered individual niches using units of furniture. Spatially and architecturally, such arrangements transform bodies into screens, stressing the privacy of the act of reading, an act that is not influenced or disrupted by other readings or interpretations. Students or university academics can assume ownership of a table for an unspecified amount of time, protected from prying gazes. Unlike circular or rectangular reading tables which normally can accommodate six or more readers, a study table is only wide enough (usually around 90 cm) to be used by one individual (or two readers separated by a partition) at any given time. In some libraries, study tables are located close to the source of information (bookshelves) and occasionally have lighting fixtures that can be controlled by the individual reader. The whole set-up not only provides a comfortable reading environment but also a sense of institutionalised isolation, a private world characterised by one pair of eyes, two hands, a text and an enclosed physical space that is not intruded upon by external distractions.

D29-D30
Four pages from *Borders* catalogue, designed by Raphael Vella, 2003

Endless Column, Jew Ġewwa jew Barra (In or Out)
2003

Venue: Pinto Stores, Valletta
Exhibition: *Borders*, February-March, 2003
Curators: Richard Davies and START
Media: Canvas, hundreds of Malta-EU articles, shredded newspapers, wire
**Dimensions** variable (installed on three floors)

D31-D33
Above: Details of newspaper headlines; work under way in studio; digital impression using Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*.

D34-D35
Below: Details of installed work.
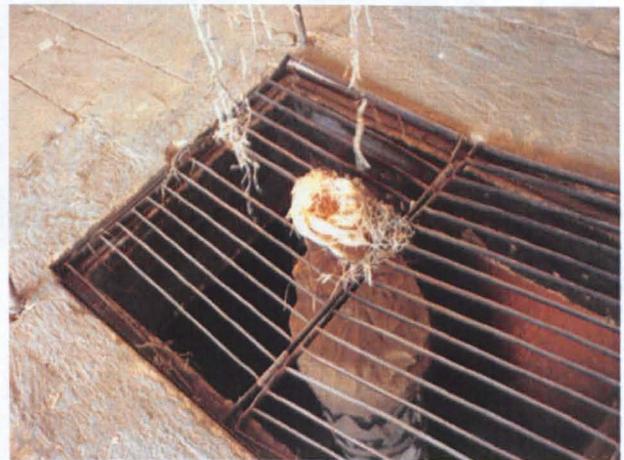
D36
Two-page spread in *Borders* catalogue

Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time) 2003

Venue: Old Prisons, the Citadel, Victoria, Gozo
Exhibition: *Escape*, May-June, 2003
Curator: Austin Camilleri
Media: Twelve burnt diaries, wooden stands, copper
**Dimensions** variable

D37-D39
Preliminary sketches

D40-D42
Clockwise, from above left: Burning diary; fire almost
completely extinguished; cover of *BOOK* (2003),
showing detail of *Oubliette*
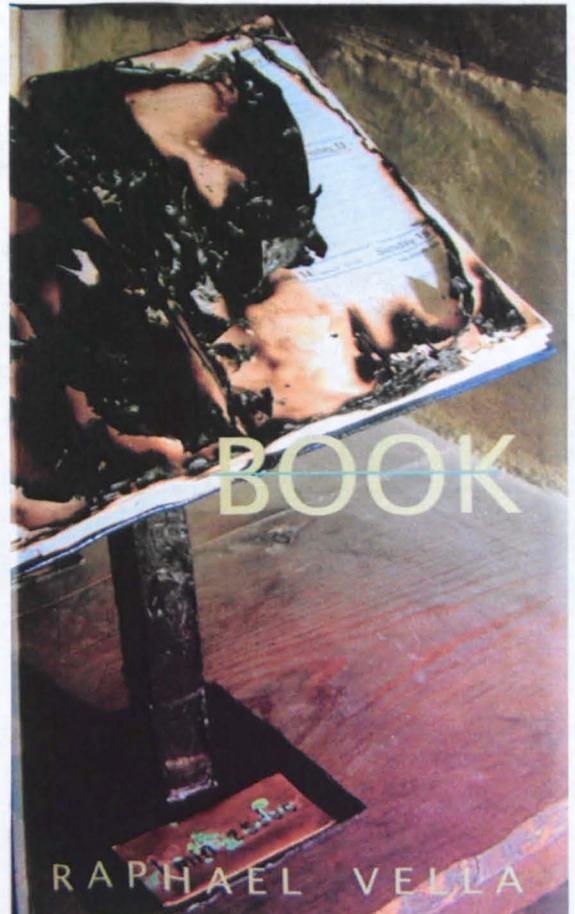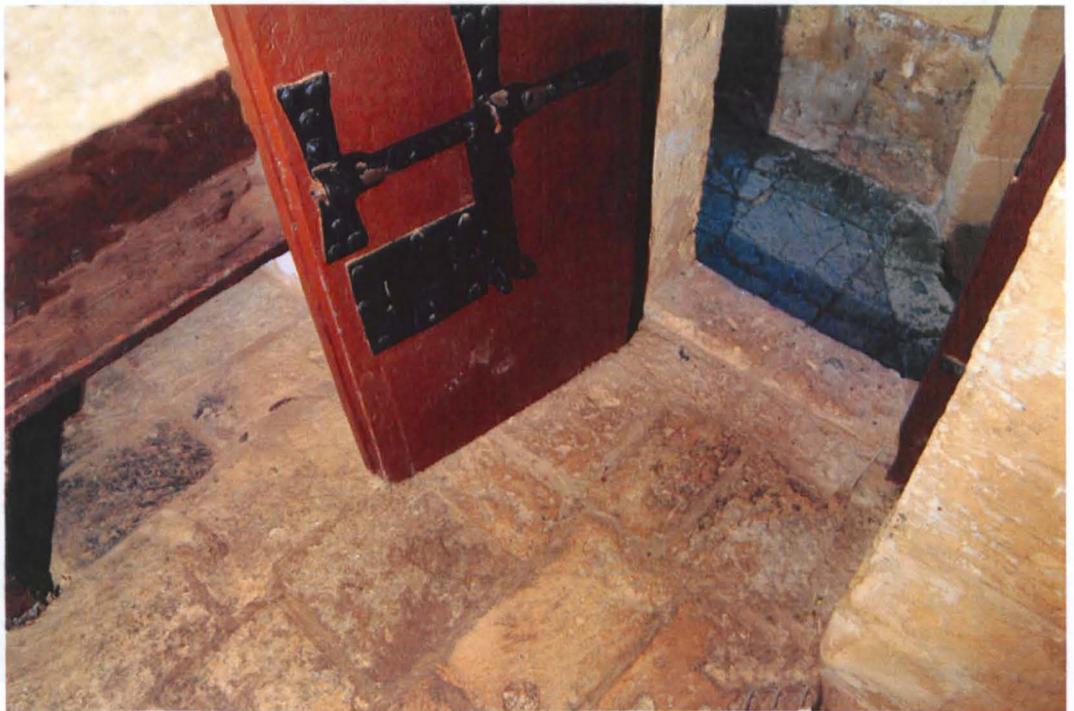
D43-D44
Pre-installation photographs of prison cell

Raphael Vella   *Oubliette (The time it takes to kill Time)*
12 Burnt Diaries, wood, copper, 2003
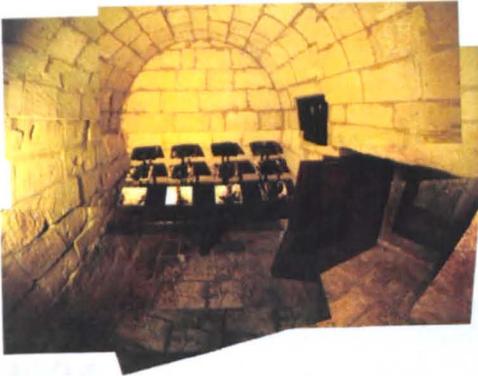
D45-D46
Four pages in catalogue of *Escape* exhibition
2004

D47-D49
From top: Preliminary
drawing on book pages;
*Weapon of Mass
Destruction, 2004*; detail
of *Weapon of Mass
Destruction*

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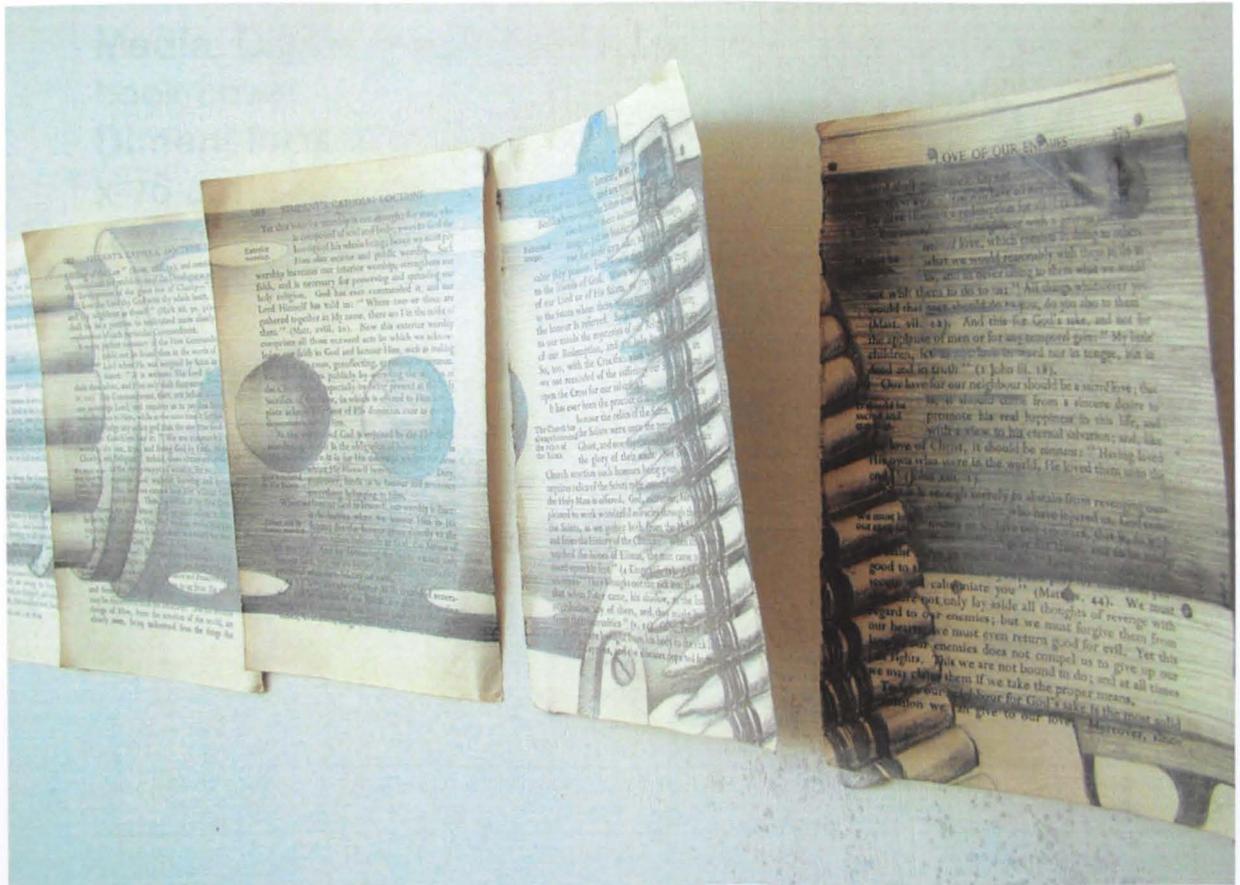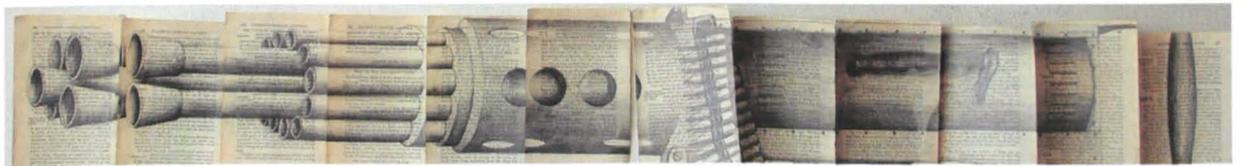
Catholic Pillow Book
2004

Media: Digital images printed on book pages, paper, book cover
Dimensions of accordion fold book when open: 211 x 16 cm

D50-D52
Above: Some photographs that were used in the digital overprinting process

Below: Details of accordion fold in *Catholic Pillow Book*, 2004
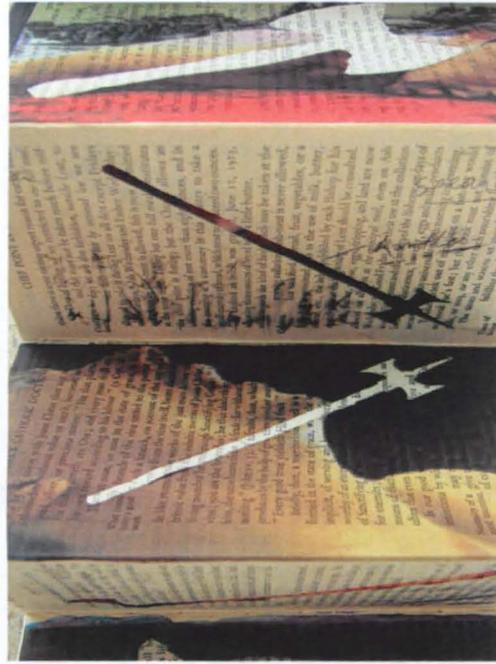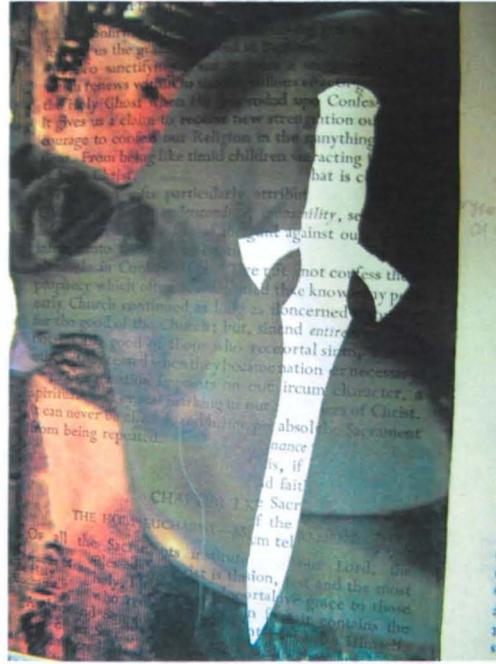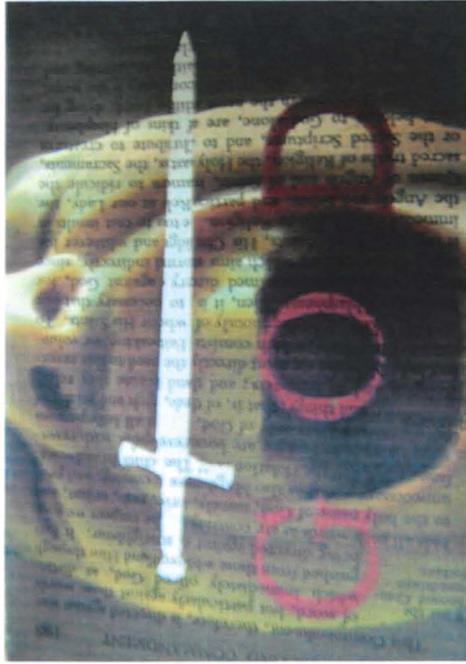
D53
Above left: Accordion fold and red case made of catechism book cloth

D54-D57
Right and below: Details of pages with weapons and overprinted imagery
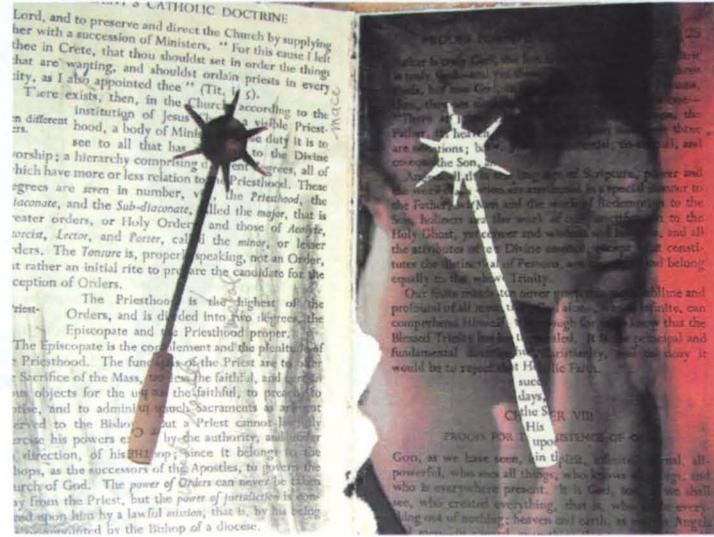
God is on our Side
2004

Venue: Konstepidemin, Gothenburg,
Sweden (July-August, 2004)
Medium: Digital images and screen prints
on doctrinal book pages, paper, ink, blood,
acrylics, pencil, white correction fluid
Dimensions: 16 sheets (48 x 37 cm. each)
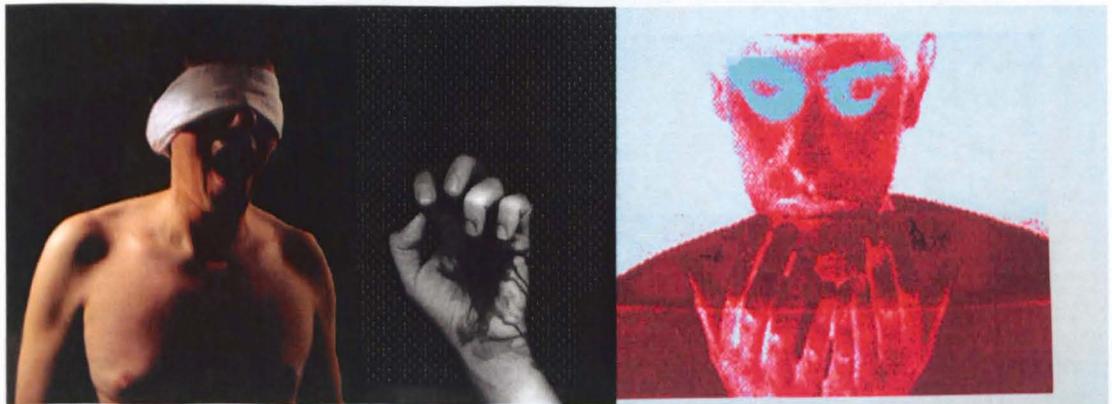
D58-D60

Top: Early overprinting tests

Middle: Television imagery

Bottom: Some of the photographic material that was used in the overprinting process

D61-D64

Left: Working on *God is on our Side* in Sweden

Middle row: Installation of some of the works on two walls in Sweden

Bottom: Detail of a sheet showing use of different media and papers, and obliteration of pages using Abu Ghraib imagery, gun-prints, and paint.

D65-D66
Two sheets with book pages, religious texts, television imagery, gun-prints and blood.

**Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction
2005**

Venue: Malta at War Museum (war shelter),
Birgu, Malta
Exhibition: *Blitz*, March-June, 2005
Organisers: Raphael Vella, START
Media: Pages from catechism, digital and
screen prints, varnish, plaster, wood,
glass vessels, lamb chop in vinegar, book
in red wine, rubber tubes, light
Dimensions variable
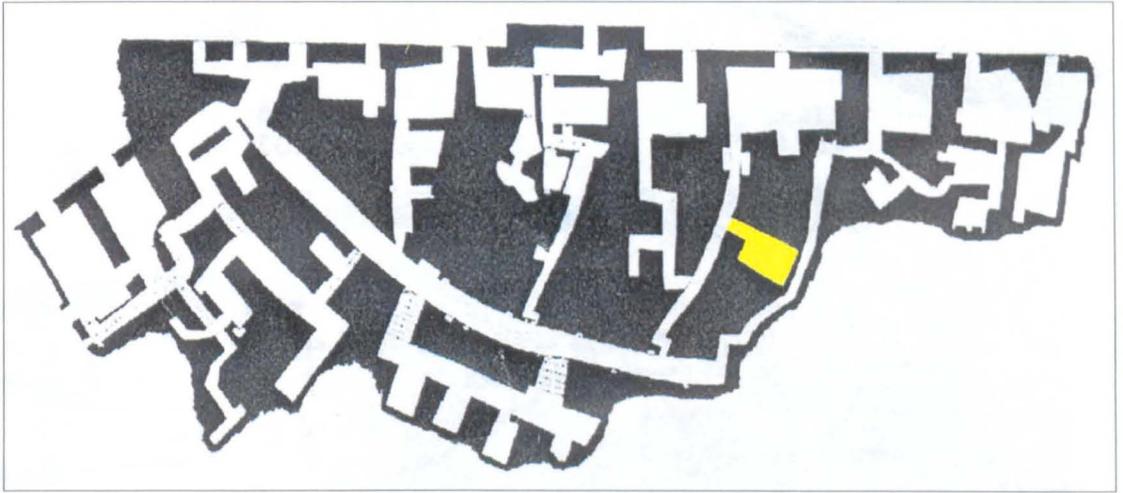
D67-D68
Top: Plan of the wartime shelters indicating cell used for installation (in yellow)

Below: Pre-installation photograph of cell in war shelter
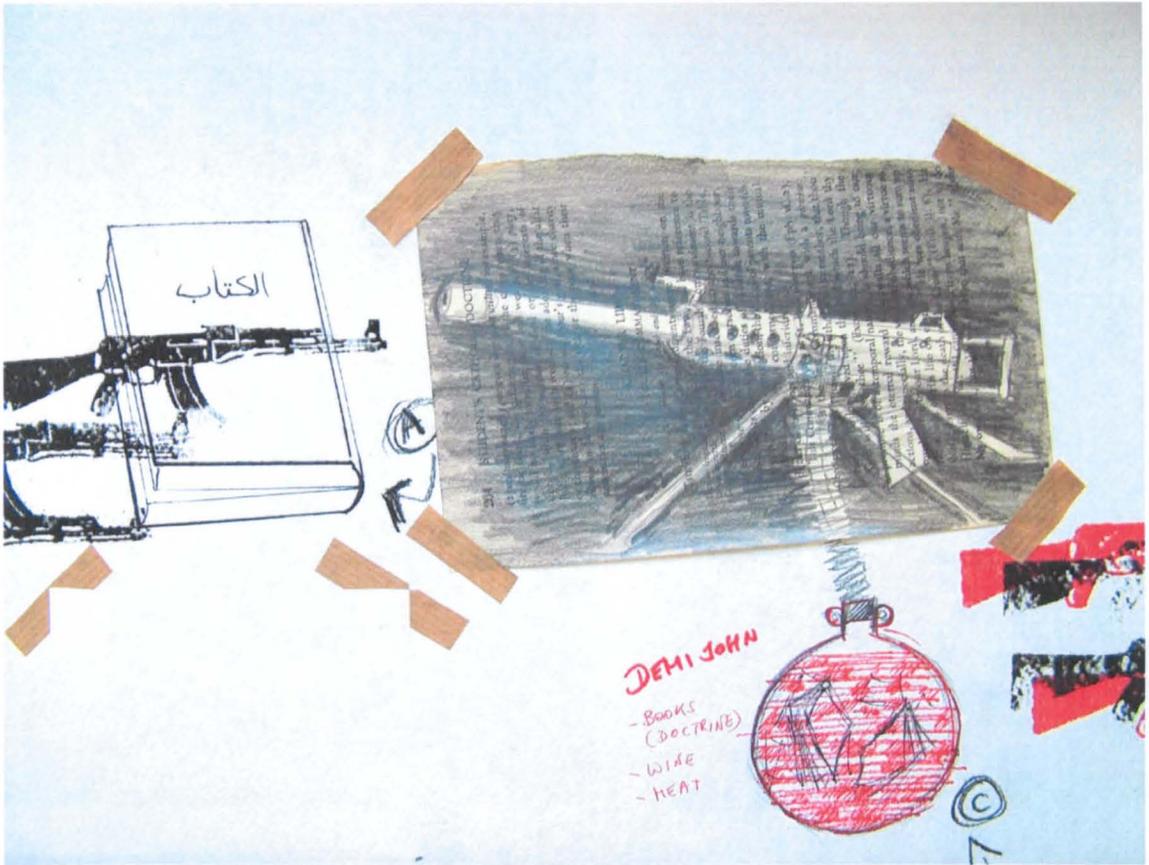
D69-D70
Above: Preliminary sketch

Right: Gun-sculpture in studio prior to installation

D71-D74

Top left and right: 'Sheets' of doctrinal pages with overprinted guns in studio

Above left: Digital impression showing interpretation of the shelter as a book-space

Above right: Detail of varnish used as biblioclastic process, making text on both sides of pages bleed into each other
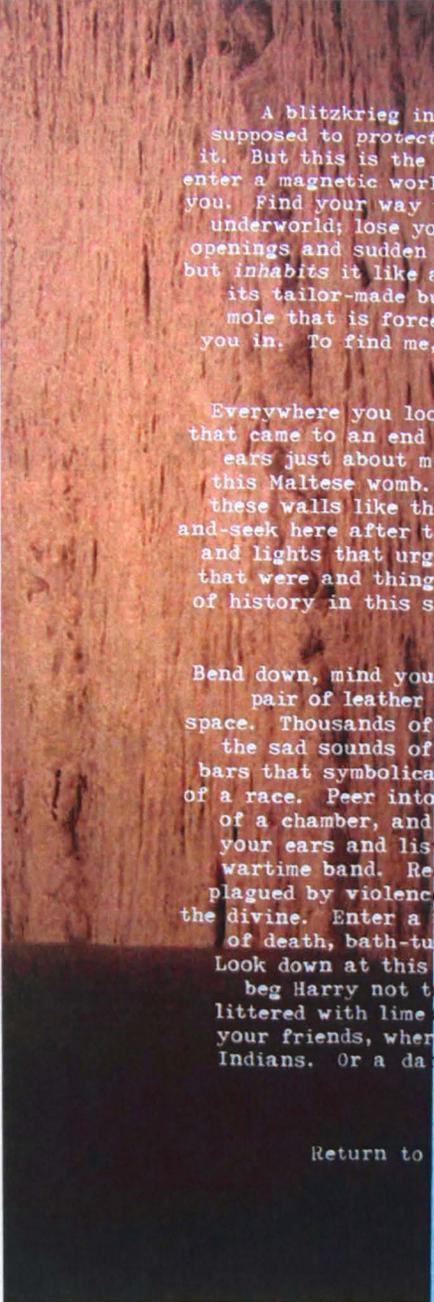
Blitzed War Shelter

A blitzkrieg in a war shelter is a paradox. A shelter is supposed to *protect* people from the blitz, not *expose* them to it. But this is the paradox of contemporary art. Come, come, enter a magnetic world that simultaneously attracts and repels you. Find your way through the dark, rocky intestines of this underworld; lose yourself in this labyrinth of claustrophobic openings and sudden apparitions. Art does not dominate space but *inhabits* it like a mole whose body becomes an extension of its tailor-made burrow. The blitz is art itself, this angry mole that is forced underground to find shelter but invites you in. To find me, you will grope through the black tunnels of my burrow.

Everywhere you look and listen, limestone memories of a war that came to an end sixty years ago present themselves. Your ears just about make out an air raid siren wailing through this Maltese womb. Your fingers blindly follow the scars on these walls like those of numerous children who played hide-and-seek here after the war. Your eyes explore objects, images and lights that urge you to paint a mental picture of things that were and things that could be. These are the three ages of history in this shelter: war, followed by play, followed by art.

Bend down, mind your head. Search. A silent bed topped by a pair of leather boots, a wooden evocation of metaphysical space. Thousands of identical ears that listen attentively to the sad sounds of war. Backlit images of Terezin and soap bars that symbolically perform the unimaginable, the erasure of a race. Peer into those drawers that leap out of the walls of a chamber, and see yourself smashed to pieces. Prick up your ears and listen to the music of war, camouflaged as a wartime band. Read the lessons of your youth, a catechism plagued by violence surrounding a sculptural desecration of the divine. Enter a haunting space replete with the whiteness of death, bath-tubs occupied by anonymous family members. Look down at this little outgrowth wearing a gas mask, and beg Harry not to touch that bomb. Discover a Zen garden littered with limestone bombs. A carpeted room for you and your friends, where you can play draughts with cowboys and Indians. Or a dangerous swing, for children of the future.

Make your way out. Gasp for air.

Return to your TV. "Explosion kills fifty in Iraq".

Raphael Vella

D75
Raphael Vella, "Blitzed War Shelter", text in *Blitz* catalogue (2005), p. 3.

Mass Weapon of Self-Destruction

pages from catechism, digital and screen prints, varnish, plaster, wood, glass vessels, lamb chop in vinegar, book in red wine, rubber, light.

**Calibre** *The Student's Catholic Doctrine*, first edition,
Cartridge The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost
Cyclic Rate of Fire Faith, Hope and Charity
Magazine Capacity The Commandments of the Church
Muzzle Velocity The Sacraments
Weight, loaded Virtues and Vices
Killing Range God is on our Side, our Side, our Side

Raphael Vella
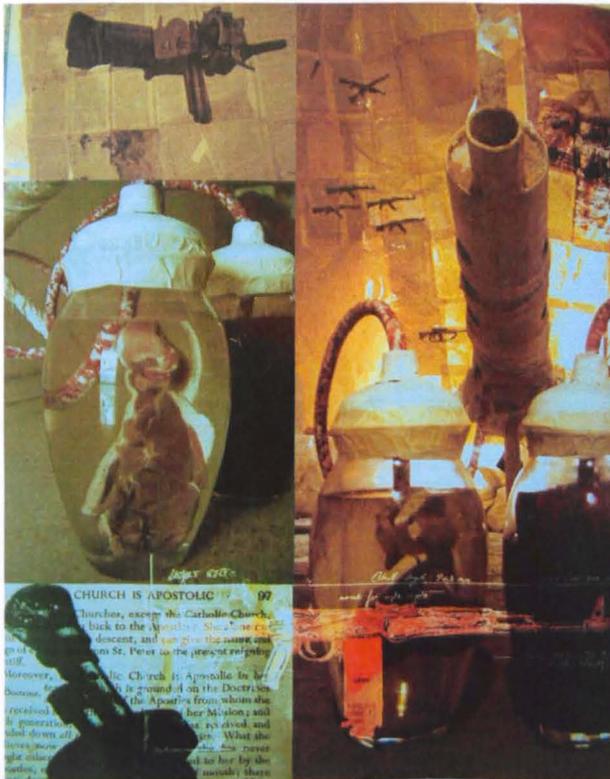
D76-D77
Above and left: Pages in *Blitz* catalogue (pp. 28-30), designed by Raphael Vella

Nihil Obstat
2005

Venue: Caraffa Stores, Birgu
Event: Ktieb għall-Ħruq (A Book for
Burning), April, 2005
Organisers: Inizjamed
Media: Digital prints on doctrinal book
pages, paper, wire, wooden stands,
blackboard, chalk, candles
Dimensions variable

D78-D79
Right: Birgu site prior to installation

Below: Digital impression showing interpretation of space as a 'classroom'

Top collage: handwritten text reads:
"are three degrees in temptation, the suggestion, pleasure in the thought and consent.
First, then, the devil tempts us by a suggestion of evil thoughts"

D80-D83

Top: Collage of marginalia (profiles) and handwritten text found in religious textbooks used in Maltese schools

Middle row: Letter to radio DJ inserted in catechism; image of eye on last page of catechism

Right: Student's drawing next to handwritten notes about 'vices'.

D84-D87
Details of some paper-works with student's marginalia enlarged and digitally overprinted on catechism book pages
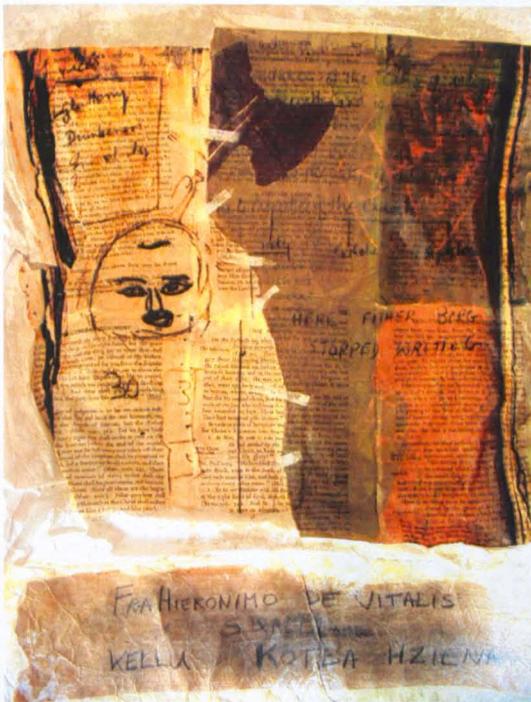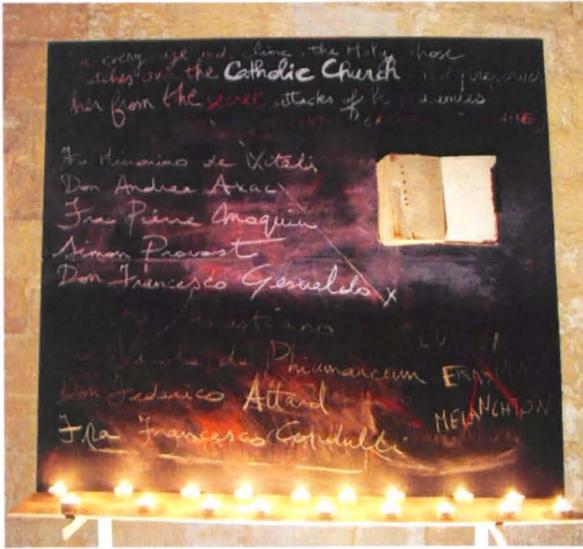
D88-D90
Above left: Blackboard with names of persons persecuted by the Birgu Inquisition during the 16th century for having been in possession of forbidden books

Above right: General view of *Nihil Obstat* on site in Birgu

Right: Detail of paper-works on wooden stands and candles
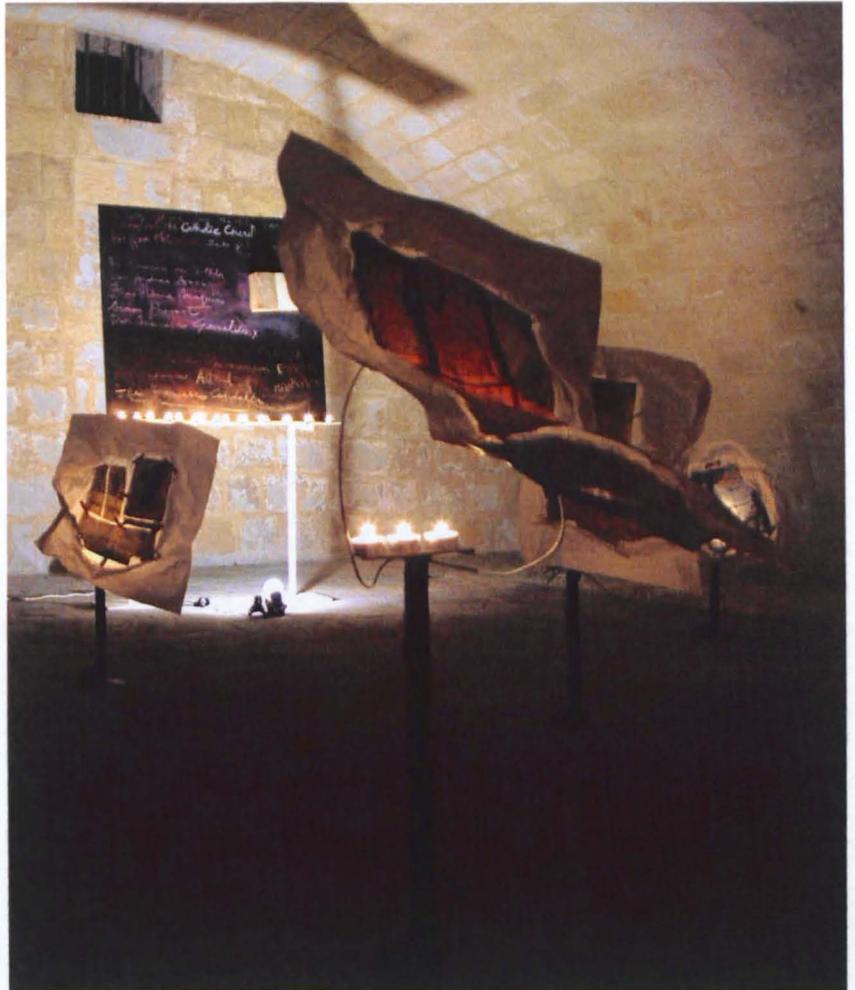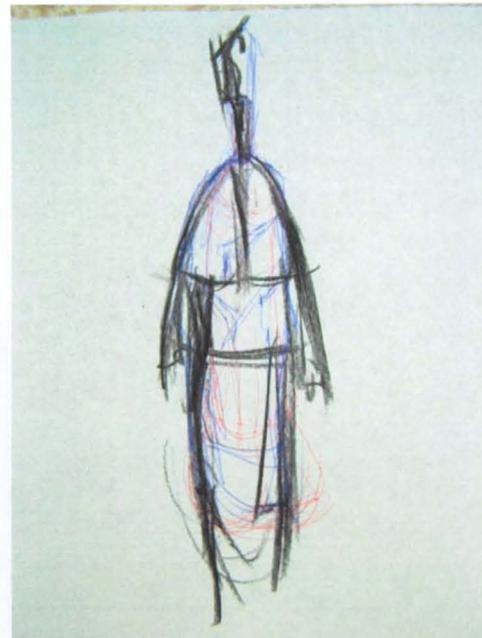
D91-D94
Top row: Small, relief studies in pulp and paper wrapping. These early works (2002) show some of the first experiments with human or monk-like forms covered in book paper.

Bottom row: Charcoal drawings (2006) showing relationship between power and religious institutions: phallic form developing into bishop
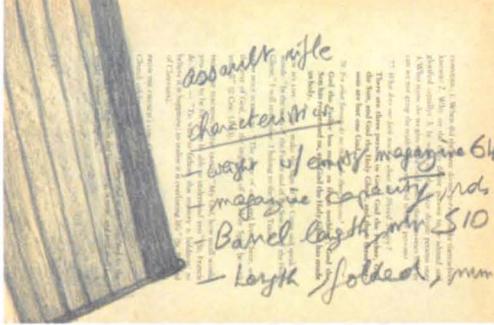
D95
Above: One of the drawings (2005) that were integrated digitally in the bishop's robe

D96-D98
Right: Details of sleeve, front, and back of robe

D99
Magisterium (2006)

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