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Paper Presentation: Reconfiguring Objects, Reconfiguring Meanings

Abstract

This project takes up the intersection of medium and content as a place where they can radically reconfigure one another. The entire process is a sort of unlearning; the habitual use of paper is disrupted. Physicality and meaning merge and emerge. Readers' doings interact and transform both the meaning and background – the content (meaning) that traditionally would be simply re-presented via sheets of paper (background). Troubling just a small, habitual action leads to remarkably different modes of knowing and being. Action, object, meaning, reader and author (re)form tentative self-altering assemblages. These assemblages spiral out in new directions, moving beyond the confines of authorial intent. (Re)new(ed) configurations of self, meaning and object spring forth, opening themselves to different vectors. In order to explore these possibilities, I ask that you print out this article double-sided and cut/fold/etc. as instructed.

What we take up here are “transversals”, “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). The paper takes advantage of the possibilities afforded because it matters in both ways, as object and as meaning (Butler, 1993). When we refer to “the paper” here, we intend this double-meaning. The content of the “paper” (as a written article) is intersected by the medium of the paper (as a physical object) on which it is printed. This project takes up this intersection of medium and content as a place where they can radically reconfigure one another, taking up possibilities that are normally suppressed. For example, rather than implementing safeguards to preserve linearity (binding, page numbers) and readability (clean paper, printed in a straightforward manner), this project plays with the possibilities of using paper in other ways.

The processes in this project are a sort of unlearning; the common use of paper in an academic journal is disrupted. The embedded assumptions of habit (paper merely carries content) become apparent and questionable. Troubling the act of reading leads to remarkably different modes of knowing and being. We look, touch, and manipulate the paper as something capable of transformation of form and content. Physicality and meaning merge and emerge. Readers’ doings interact and transform both the meaning (content) and the background (material). Action, object, meaning, reader, and author (re)form tentative self-altering “assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) that spiral out in new directions, moving beyond the confines of authorial intent. (Re)new(ed) configurations of self, meaning, and object spring forth, opening themselves to different vectors.

This project follows lines of thought from James (1907/1978), Peirce (1955), and Whitehead (1929/1978) to Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) to Latour (2005), Pickering (1995), Massumi (2011), and Barad (2007). As suggested in their thought, I try to avoid one of the primary problems -- starting with the idea of the material and the conceptual as separate entities. Reality is much more interesting than that. Paper and the meaning printed on it are not so easily separated. The “material-discursive” (Barad, 2007) interventions that appear here intentionally explore how meaning and matter can mutually develop one another in surprising and unforeseen ways. Because they are both material and discursive, the explorations do not fully work as just mental exercises, so I invite you to actually take the scissors and the oil and the hole punch to the page to see what unfolds.

There is some assembly required. The effort you put in as a reader is an important part of the exploration of the connections between the material and the conceptual. I do not propose that the paper lives separate as an object in a “world without us” – the term that Bennet (2016, pp. 58-59) uses to describe the view of the object-oriented ontologist work of theorists like Bogost (2012), Harman (2010), or Morton (2013). Instead I embrace a “world with us” (Bennet, 2016, p. 59) where “both people and things matter, and are found to be entangled co-constitutively” (Bennet, 2016, p. 69). Paper, people, and content are a messy mix. They constitute an “assemblage” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987), an “apparatus” (Barad, 2007). The parts and relationships can be “intra-actively” (Barad, 2007) reconfigured. For example, in one of the following exercises the reader cuts up the paper with scissors and shuffles the pieces of text. The paper as a non-linear material (as separate sheets are shuffled) simultaneously enacts non-linear content (as words are shuffled). In the shuffling, paper, people, and content are re-generated differently. The former linear relations and the elements (paper, people, and content) of those relations become something new -- something unexpected and unpredicted from

within the original relationship. The assemblage morphs and opens to include an element of chance, an element of mutual reconstitution, previously excluded. Now we have sheets and hands and mouths and words that intra-act in a way they didn't before. A hand can now change the order of words. A sheet can now segment sentences that were previously sequential. A paper can now change the motion of the hands. A mouth can now speak newly mixed phrases. A meaning can now shift with the re-ordered assemblage. To shuffle is to simultaneously change the effective attributes and relationships of the assemblage of people, paper, and content. We cannot shuffle if the elements do not allow it, but the elements are not reconfigured without the act of shuffling. By shuffling we enact different "affordances" (Gibson, 1977) and relations, and these different affordances and relations enact shuffling. By cutting across the prior enabling-limits with other enabling-limits, a new composition is manifested. It may sound complicated stated in this way, but these re-configurations happen continually in the everyday. After all, in this case all it takes is some scissors and some shuffling. Other similarly quotidian reconfigurations are created through the other explorations included below. They are simple exercises, and yet they open our eyes to alternative "plateaus" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987).

In "paper mediator", the reader looks at the use, care, and longevity of the paper. The reader writes a note to self, notes with a friend, and a manifesto to be published to the world. The paper is temporary and contingent or permanent and essential, or somewhere in between.

In "paper games", as described above, the reader explores the reconfiguration of the sequence and contents of the paper. The paper is cut into a bunch of loose sheets that take on a random order on random sides. The paper is non-linear.

In "paper (un)folding", the paper is explored as an interactive sequence. The paper is something to fold and unfold. The paper takes on layered, temporal, sequential dimensions that differ from typical flat prints.

In "paper shadows", the reader experiments with marks on the paper as translucent and overlapping. Holes are made to see through; oil lets light through; folds and water affect the texture and radiance. The paper is composed of overlays, casting markings from one to the next.

Note: If you are reading this online, print out this article double-sided and then cut/fold/etc. as instructed on the following pages.

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Paper mediator.

Cut this out. Write a note to yourself in this space. Place it somewhere where you will find it later.

Cut this out. Write a note to a friend in this space. Hand it to them and ask them to write a note back to you here. Continue until the conversation ends or the space is full.

Cut this out. Imagine what you write here will be copied 1 million times and distributed over the next 1000 years. Write something important. Read it to someone out loud. Hang it on your fridge.

Paper mediator (back side).

Note to yourself (continued).

Note to a friend (continued).

Manifesto (continued).

Paper games.

Before beginning a new game. Cut the paper into the card size pieces. Throw the double-sided cards in the air so they flutter and land on random sides. Shuffle the deck. Pass out papers to each person until distributed. The first player chooses a card (sheet of paper). The player reads that card out loud and follows the instructions. It is then the next players turn (or the first player goes again if there is only one player). This is a game like make-believe is a game. (There is no winner.)

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| When we play the game, we see the consequences of that rule unfold, create a space. And, as we wrote the rule, we can write corrective ones. We step out. Time out. Or, let's start over. And while playing we bend the rules, or don't follow their intent but rather their letter. Or we do things the rules hadn't thought of. | Role play and game play are connected by this simultaneous inhabiting and altering of borders, of something in construction, both real and not, enacted and yet somehow not – as the <i>other</i> rules have been suspended. In those rules, we wear outfits rather than costumes. Our actions have consequences. Our words have meaning. | A rule is an operation applied over and over again. | Speak some meaningless babble. |
| All at once. It has already begun all at once. This game, this life. Life is something of an accumulation. Like the small pieces in front of a downed tree on the river. | Was that last card a rule, an action, or just something to read? | Follies. | Ad lib. |
| Somebody said they don't like it when people ask too much of them as readers. | Read every third word on your next card now. | (I don't like this tone, this self-pleasantry, this I-am-so-amused-with-myself. It always fails to deliver.) | Modify this card somehow. Blue skies? Blue skies yes, and snow this morning, in May. And now looking out it is gone, a white dusting vanished. To green. White and gray to blue and green. And last night, with a broken yellow, a steam on the inside of the rain windowshield. This is how it ends. Or so I thought. And yet not yet. |

Paper games (back side).

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| <p>But I mean it to be a modification. This moment, of reading, as an action that affects other actions. Of course, all text does, to the degree that a reader engages it, but instead these are playful modifications, temporary, tentative, to see what happens. Sticks and rocks placed in a small stream. These are episodes. Displacements.</p> | <p>Everyone read your next card now, simultaneously.</p> | <p>Write your own rule.</p> | <p>Insert ref list here.</p> |
| <p>Whisper read your next card now.</p> | <p>What new plane did that take up?</p> | <p>I am already leaving this. I already left this. I know how this ends. It doesn't ever go anywhere.</p> | <p>Tell what time you woke up this morning. Did you have coffee? Tell anything else about your morning.</p> |
| <p>To play, we take up a space and alter the rules that construct that space, while within it. In frame, out of frame.</p> | <p>Is that flotsam?</p> | <p>No one asked for a preface.</p> | <p>Let us start then, with the conditions out of which this game arises.</p> |

Paper (un)folding.
Cut out, then fold and unfold the
example piece here following the
“Fold #” numbered sequence. Unfold.

Step 1:

Mountain fold
(fold away from you)

Valley fold
(fold towards you)

After doing this one, get a blank sheet
of paper and create your own folding.
Fold the sheet, then type, write,
and/or draw across or under each
fold.

←Fold #6

←Fold #2

Fold #3 →

←Fold #5

Unfolding the paper.

←Cut

And what does this look like unfolded anyway?

the folds.

←Fold #1

←Fold #4

Something about the layers.

Inviting you in.

Markings on the page.

You unfolded the fold.

Paper shadows.

Cut the paper into the equal size pieces. Use the papers to experiment with light. Hold them up to a bright light or the window. Vary the order in which they overlap using paperclips to both attach them together and leave a small gap between the sheets.

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| Put drops of oil (any oil will do) on this sheet. | Hole punch this sheet. Create a pattern, or punch randomly. | Fold and unfold this sheet to make creases. |
| Cut holes in this sheet with scissors. | Crumple up this sheet and re-flatten it. | Make a pattern or random marks with a pen on this sheet. |
| Put drops of water on this sheet. | Write or type on this sheet in order to make a pattern. | Make up your own modification to this sheet. |

Paper shadows (back side).

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| | | |
| Fold | Hole punch | Oil |
| Marks | Crumple | Cut holes |
| Make your own mod. | Wrtie/type a pattern | Water |