Constructive Destruction: On Arturo Herrera's Books

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Arturo Herrera's new series *Books* is at the same time bibliophile and bibliophobe; it destroys that which it simultaneously transforms into an aesthetic object. For each book Herrera designs a stencil, which he prints cover to cover onto every page with a silk screen. Sometimes he stains parts of the pages or paints on them, but mostly he simply applies the pattern of the stencil. This pattern, whose shape can be either geometric or organic almost covers the entire sheet, but is usually transparent enough so that the book's text and images interact with the stencil, thus creating different configurations on each page. Even though the text becomes largely illegible, it maintains a powerful presence. Most of the books Herrera treats in this way are small and old, valueless paperbacks, purchased for little money at flea-markets and used book stores. Transforming them into what is more often than not a beautiful and precious work of art, Herrera revalues these books but only by rendering them at the same time useless by obliterating their content.

This dual dynamic of destruction and construction has long been a guiding principle of Herrera's varied artistic production, in which printed matter has always played a central part. In *You Go First*, his important 2002 series of one-hundred untitled collages, a page from an illustrated book serves as a foundation for the layering, assembling, and combining of bits of cut out and discarded paper. In the process, Herrera in some cases transforms the original page to the point where the final product no longer betrays its starting point, while in others he plays with it wittily to create a surprising new image that partially incorporates the original. Though the illustrated pages employed for *You Go First* mostly came without text, in several works of the mesmerizing *Boy and Dwarf* (2006) series spreads from a notorious Berlin tabloid provide the bottom layer. Herrera covered the daily with paint and colored paper, only to ultimately retrieve it by cutting the contours of the boy or dwarf into the superimposed coats. Perception of the tabloid thus continuously shifts. It simultaneously reads as negative background space, signifier of volume, and simply as newspaper. In recent works from 2012 such as *Let Me (2 elements)*, *Arabella (2 elements)*, and *Hill (3 elements)*, Herrera also incorporates bits of printed paper in collages made from countless seemingly randomly arranged paper scraps that he tore

up, stained, and/or printed upon. But this is a purely structural deployment of textual material. The text snippets are so small and hidden that they do not elicit the impulse to read but merely serve as reference to writing and as such contribute to the overall gestalt in tandem with all the other fragments.

This formalist use of printed matter as a tautological signifier of itself recalls Picasso and Braque's incorporation of bits of newspaper in their pioneering collages of the 1910s. As in early collage, but unlike in Dada, Herrera's text fragments do not really provide an iconographic clue. Instead, they exist as just one item in the mix. Writing contributes to the composition on par with all the other bits of paper, drawing, and color stains. At times, however, books constitute the structural and visual focus. In one work from *You Go First*, Herrera used the yellowed cover, front and back, of a German 1950s discount edition of Mozart's libretto for *Così fan tutte*. Compared to most works of the series, his interventions here are minimal. Herrera placed some small paper snippets underneath the opera's title and drew the black outlines of an amorphous shape but otherwise left large parts of the sheet empty and the writing unobstructed. This very much remains the cover of a book, slightly altered and abused, to be sure, but not deprived of its identity or reduced to a mere tautological sign of itself in a larger configuration.

Judging the book by its cover, Herrera dispensed with the pages of *Così fan tutte* and transformed it from an object into a two-dimensional image. In *KFA (28 elements)* (2012), however, he reversed this approach and turned his attention to the inside, thereby applying a process that in many ways comes close to that of the new series *Books*. Its 28 elements consist of collages Herrera made from the photocopied pages of a German 1970s karate manual. In contrast to the 2002 *You Go First* series, however, the scraps, stains, stencils, and geometric patterns do not play with the graphic configurations on the pages, transforming them into surprising, new images. Herrera now scarcely composes. Instead he intrudes. His interventions appear to cut randomly into both text and illustration, apparently without any guiding formal concerns. While Herrera often combines stencils, paper fragments, and stains, he never obliterates the pages of the manual, owing to the transparency and faint application of the geometric patterns with which he covers each page. Yet, precisely because the manual still maintains a powerful presence, Herrera's interventions appear all the more aggressive and destructive. The identity of these pages is in limbo, as perception is torn between the impulse to read them like a book and to consider them as abstract images.

What contributes to this instability is the fact that all the pages of *KFA* comprise one work, consisting of 28 elements. The facsimile sheets thus stay together, and the book looks like it has been dismantled into separate elements. From here it was a small step to the new series *Books*, in which the tomes remain bound entities. And yet this seemingly simple decision prompted a whole new set of concerns. To be sure, the perception of individual pages still shifts the same way, even though Herrera's interventions by now have become rather minimal. For many books he applies only one stencil, whose shapes and patterns, furthermore, rarely cover the entire page. Yet, because the sheets are bound their status as book pages is now unambiguous. Herrera's new series, then, no longer engages with the hybrid nature of images in collage as a modernist practice. In fact, it seems difficult to even call these images collages and not only because Herrera here abstains from gluing bits of paper onto the pages.

Precisely because Herrera now so clearly deals with books, attention shifts to the changing ways in which this endangered species signifies in the twenty-first century. Indeed, in many ways *Books* is bibliocclastic. Herrera destroys the books by obfuscating their content. In a few cases, he even glues the pages together by dipping the books' unbound side into thick paint, sealing them for good. But what might appear to be a metaphor for the obsoleteness of the printed word in our digital age is actually much more complex. By rendering these tomes useless, Herrera also highlights the dissociation of exchange from use value in what Karl Marx called late capitalist commodity fetishism. According to Marx, the fetish transforms the subjective value of an object into a commodity that people believe has objective and intrinsic value. In fact, Herrera's books come in groups of ten in beautifully crafted, linen-covered wooden containers. He arranges the books not according to thematic or formal criteria but strictly according to size so that they create two piles of equal height in each box. Presentation thus trumps use and content.

This cancellation of practical value even extends to Herrera's selection of books, all of which are old and cheap, used copies that the previous owners seem to have discarded only all too happily. While some are clearly dear to Herrera, in particular the opera scripts and art books, he seems to have chosen the majority—such as the outdated manuals for china paint and faded catalogs of orchids—for aesthetic reasons or simply because they were at hand. By depriving them of their designated

purpose, he only drives the nail into the coffin of these already obsolete commodities. And yet by doing so, he ultimately facilitates their resurrection. Herrera's transformation of the books is in fact a transubstantiation that grants them a second life as works of art. His approach is thus opposed to that of pop-culture appropriators like Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach. The latters' presentation of basketballs and high-end sneakers as works of art relies on the desirability of these commodities. Eliminating their actual function allows Koons and Steinbach to (cynically or, if you prefer, ironically) suggest that commodity fetishism is independent of use value. Herrera, by contrast, rescues unwanted objects from oblivion by turning them into artworks.

One could perhaps sense a touch of nostalgia in this preoccupation with objects that today are considered obsolete but in the past have been treasured. In fact, most of the books are from the 1960s and 70s. Their undeniable patina testifies to a time so removed that by now any connection to the present is cut off. The passing of these books' historical moment seems definitive; a bygone era that cannot be recuperated and instead has become the subject of archiving in precious boxes. Herrera's technique accentuates the historical distance by going back even further. In a time when the digital replaces the mechanical, his returning to manual printing with silk screens seems almost archaic. As a gesture without a future it may easily be (mis-)understood as sentimental.

It is, however, precisely the manual process that ultimately inhibits any feelings of nostalgia. Herrera's interventions are often crude and violent. The stencils invade the pages, oblivious of their layout. Herrera also does not always place them carefully on the paper, causing an irregular application of paint with smudges and blurred contours. Combined with the stains with which Herrera contaminates many pages—and which recall both heavy use and the mold and water marks infesting books when they get stored for years in humid basements—the color smears even lend the volumes an abject aspect. The contrast with the immaculate preciousness of the boxes could not be any bigger and further draws attention to the fact that Herrera had to destroy the books in order to rescue them. The palpable traces of these violent acts, then, also preclude any nascent nostalgia—of feeling sorry, that is, for the unbridgeable distance that divides us from an uncritically idealized past.

By thus reactivating the books in a way that neither denies nor romanticizes their past, Herrera creates spaces of ambiguity. *Books* oscillates between destruction and construction, the obsolete and the fetish, the precious and the abject, utility and aesthetic contemplation. It triggers critical awareness about both history and art without pretending to provide any easy answers or denying the cruelty of time marching on. Herrera actually put it best some time ago in a 2005 conversation with Josiah McElheny published in *Bomb* magazine: "My work tries to discourage a specific message. It tries to free a place up, to clarify through ambiguity." Perhaps, then, the epistemological value of Herrera's project resides precisely in its creation of critical spaces that enable us to experience this paradoxically illuminating quality of ambiguity. Just as destruction is always also constructive, Herrera's new series asserts that it is a simple truth that there are no simple truths. ■