

A BOOK of NOT KNOWING

WHEN WE ARE GOING TO DIE or
GROW UP and of ONLY KNOWING
A LITTLE BIT



FOREWORD / ALF BOGUSKY

CONSIDER this bound book. The format suggests authority, truth, unimpeachable knowledge made accessible wisdom as resource. Printed text and the investment of formal binding lend gravity and persuasiveness to the words contained within. The well-intentioned may unknowingly set into print factual errors; at worst they might represent dreams or aspirations. Excepting levity, would they publish a book of lies?

Books may be made about works of art. Books may be works of art. This book is about art made from books. This book is about an artist who makes artworks from books. The majority of this book is unwritten, open-ended, to be continued. Blank pages invite further inquiry. Will the artist make art from this book?

The artist is most widely known as an art administrator. The responsibilities of this role have made him reticent to place his own artwork in the public forum. He is a private individual and the works stem from personal sources, closer to essence than one accustomed to the scrutiny of the public eye is at ease in revealing. His art exhibits consistent themes: angst, loneliness and frustration tempered with a wry and dark humour. He is not melancholic.

Paradox, enigma and the dichotomous nature of man - these are the topics addressed in Allan MacKay's art work. Transformation, emulation, selective edition and repetition are this artist's working methods. The techniques run consistently through the bookworks, audio tapes and film which constitute this exhibition. The "performance" related events staged by the artist at informal gatherings exhibit this procedure and have gained for him a certain notoriety. A typical event sees him appear seemingly bent on collision with furniture and walls, or plunging precariously down stairs within a hair's breadth of control, speaking as if in another persona and garbed in the strangest apparel. The apparition slathered in vaseline, shaving cream, masking tape, razor blades, mouth obliterated by cotton swabs, is absurd, almost awe-inspiring and slightly horrific. The casual observer might perceive one bent on imminent selfimmolation. These carefully choreographed performances should be regarded obversely as humorous but affirmative professions describing the irony of the potentially divine bound to the patently profane. The quality of play is not to be discounted.

Within his artworks, MacKay consistently emulates, in structure or rhythm and cadence, a format which suggests authority. This "masking" provides the fabric upon which the homiletic idea of the work is embroidered. Some years ago, in the early morning hours at the "Garden" (a Lethbridge hotel pub since tragically, perhaps poetically consumed by fire), I witnessed the artist engage in animated and apparently informed conversation, replete with gestures and nodding acquiescence, with a bleary-eyed drunk stranger. Eavesdropping upon their earnest discourse, I was astonished to find that the man spoke a foreign language in which MacKay was not conversant. Though MacKay appeared to be speaking in tongues, their rapport was evident. Similarly, the audio tapes produced by the artist feature piano accompaniment of his own improvisation, compelling and authoritative, none the less so for the fact that MacKay cannot play the piano, nor any other musical instrument of which I am aware.

Zum Ditter, a film by Rick Hancox in which Allan MacKay plays the starring and only role, further exemplifies this device. Emulating the culture-discourse format of television interview, MacKay assumes the role of host and commentator upon the life of one Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, 18th century composer. Amid the scholarly clutter of a small library, our host begins his lecture predictably enough, but soon falters on the pronunciation of his subject's name. Frustration mounts and as the artist focuses all attention on that name, only guttural sounds emerge. Every strategy is exhausted in the pursuit of the correct pronunciation. Can we ever say what we mean? This agonizing cycle of attempt and frustration becomes increasingly hilarious to the viewer. A surgical neck support, which until this point has approximated the appearance of a clerical collar, pops off. Of course, with this stricture removed, the unpronounceable becomes pronounceable. Would that our souls were as easily made articulate,

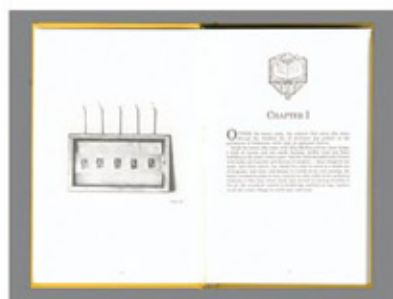
Desecrated - folded, cut, censored, edited - the books themselves are perhaps the most poignant works achieved by the artist. The books are transformed into relics, covered with a thick coating of wax and pigment which obscures all content but that which the artist has allowed us to see. The leaves are coated, preserved but also selectively neutralized. The poignancy of unknown truth. Idealism - Part III is centred by an unlit, pure white candle. An obvious symbol of spirituality contradicted by the pragmatism of "Part III". Lessons unlearned.

The works are enigmatic, as is the artist. A credible well-ordered professional arts administrator masks an apparently intuitive, emotional, viscerally-directed individual. Our dichotomous natures. This book exists as an attempt to provide the reader with an understanding of the artworks and the nature of their creator. It is hoped that it will offer a point of departure for the consideration of the existential issues to which the artworks refer.

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ESSAY / JOHN BENTLEY MAYS



CHAPTER I

OUTSIDE the brown room, the winter's first snow sifts down through the windless sky of afternoon and gathers on the pavements of Saskatoon, white dust on undusted shelves.

Inside the brown, dim room, with Allan MacKay and me, these things: a stalk of incense and one candle burning, neither scent nor flame wobbling in the room's winter quiet. And the cloth-shrouded table littered with books and fascicles and sheaves of imagery - these things he has made. And these others, too, which I've come to catch in a bright net of language, and tame, and display in a book of my own making: the books cocooned in paint or wax, arrayed on other tables in the gathering darkness of this early winter dusk: and, around us darting invisibly in the air, the sounds he created in Lethbridge and laid on tape, hardest of all the room's things to catch now, and tame.

CHAPTER II

Try to find the centre.

Or, if there's no centre to be found, try to find the unseen thread of desiring that links the scattered sheets, the books frozen in wax, the sound-tracks, the books waiting on his shelves for the isolation in wax or paint. (The work in this room does not mark the end of his activity, which continues now, as you are reading these words.)

Or, if there is no thread or centre, decide there is no sense to it all, at all. Decide these works are mere dada doings, this and that, time-killings on other still, winter afternoons in the places Allan MacKay has lived and worked - Halifax, Lethbridge, now Saskatoon.

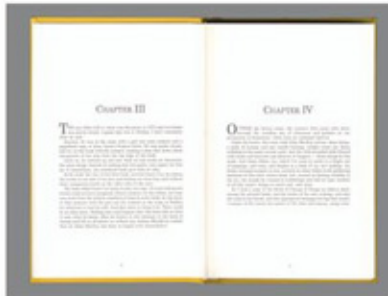
Or decide none of the above.

Decide that these things in the brown room are only things that happened (which make them no less important than things which are made to happen) on the way from there to now. Decide they can't be studied, though perhaps they can be known; and if we know



them, we are knowing what Allan MacKay knows at the time of the making, which is only the little bit any of us know, at the time of any making, of anything at all.

("We usually don't know when we are going to die or grow up, we only know a little bit", said Simone MacKay when she was 6 years old, telling the truth).



CHAPTER III

The way Allan tells it, there was this party in 1973 and everybody was pretty drunk. I guess this was in Halifax, I don't remember what he said.

Anyway, he was in the room with a girl and some scissors and a paperback copy of Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites*. He was pretty drunk, and he cut the book with the scissors, making a deep slice down about one-quarter of the way from the top edge of the book.

Later on, he sobered up and saw what he had made (or destroyed: the same thing). Instead of making him feel guilty and repent for this sin of desecration, the mutilated book gave him an idea.

So he made the text of his first book, entitled *Genet Cut*, by taking the words on one side of the slice and finding out what they said without their companion-words on the other side of the slice.

The book called *Genet Cut* exists in only one copy. Its texts tell secrets Genet could not have imagined: Allan's scissors cut the ribbon, let loose new texts from the infinite numbers of texts in every book, let the story of that moment with the girl and the scissors in the room in Halifax (or wherever it was) be told. And that story is *Genet Cut*. There could be no other story. Nothing else could happen then. His book tells us what it was; what he knew; what he knows in this moment in the book of change each life is, all history is, without any ending. (Should we wonder that all Allan MacKay has done is tinged with melancholy?)

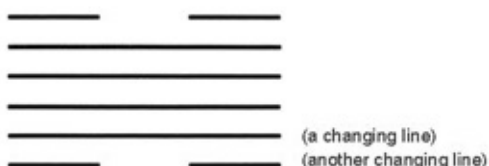
CHAPTER IV

Outside the brown room, the winter's first snow sifts down through the windless sky of afternoon and gathers on the pavements of Saskatoon, white dust on undusted shelves.

Inside the brown, dim room, with Allan MacKay and me, these things: a stalk of incense and one candle burning, neither scent nor flame wobbling in the room's winter quiet. And the cloth-shrouded table littered with books and fascicles and sheaves of imagery - these things he has made. And these others, too, which I've come to catch in a bright net of language, and tame, and display in a

book of my own making: the books cocooned in paint or wax, arrayed on other tables in the gathering darkness of this early winter dusk: and, around us darting invisibly in the air, the sounds he created in Lethbridge and laid on tape, hardest of all the room's things to catch now, and tame.

So I find a copy of the Book of Change (I Ching) on Allan's shelf, among the printed books and the books of his own making, and take the coins in my hands, and (the appropriate homages having been made), I require of the oracle the nature of the time and season, using coins.



("It is favourable to have some goal or destination in view, Success! ... The superior man, though standing alone, is free from fear; he feels no discontent in withdrawing from the world.")

And the hexagram, of resolution into which the first one transformed itself is 45, GATHERING TOGETHER:



("Gathering Together - Success! ... It is favourable to have in view a goal or destination ... The superior man gathers together his weapons in order to provide against the unforeseen.")

CHAPTER V

Every book, a book of change.

The Mohammed Mountain Question, another of Allan's unique books, says: "that which moved Mohammed to the mountain was not the mountain it was the mountain within Mohammed," etc. This could go on forever, turning over and over around the tiny axis of the instant of asking the question.

All of his books could go on forever generating new texts at each instant from the matrix of grammar at the heart of every book he has made.



There are books without words in them. He folds or cuts one page, and that mutilation implies another, or structure of mutilation, sometimes coloured, or inked or covered with Payne's grey (Maritime fog in the paintings he used to do, he tells me; it's Clement Greenberg's favourite colour, he tells me, this mute, damp grey of afternoon.)

He draws a line in a nothing-book; and it becomes the something that is written in various ways throughout the book until the book becomes something which starts and stops, though the limits are arbitrary.

All lines are changing lines. This could go on forever.

ANOTHER VERSION OF CHAPTER FIVE

I open a nothing-book and there is nothing in it except these words: "there wasn't enough reason to stop."

CHAPTER VI

There are books in the brown, still room which are never closed, never opened; held one way, in one moment, by paraffin heated up (sometimes coloured with oil colour, Payne's grey, or with ordinary crayons tossed into the melt), then brushed in a painterly manner on to the book ("my only claim as a painter at this point"), turning it into a mere object (if any object is mere in Allan's world-full of discrete, sad things).

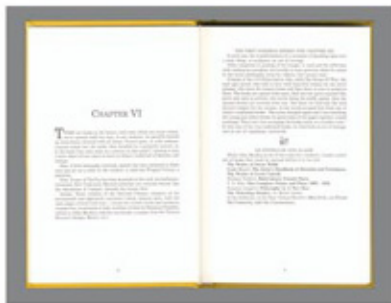
Item. A little philosophy textbook, opened, has been slathered in white wax and set on a table by the window: a table-top Winged Victory; a statuette.

Item. A copy of *The Fox* has been mounted on the wall, its mechanicoterroristic New York-style Marxist suburban art criticism buried, like the obscenities of Pompeii, beneath the frozen flow.

Item(s). Three volumes of the Harvard Classics, thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries I think, splayed open, with the open pages covered with wax - except for certain words and sentences scraped free. (A schedule of daily activities written by Benjamin Franklin, edited by Allan MacKay with his wax brush; a snippet from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*; etc.).

THE FIRST POSSIBLE ENDING FOR CHAPTER SIX:

In each case, the transformation of a container of speaking signs into a mute thing, or sculpture; an act of revenge.



Allan complains in passing of his hunger to read and his difficulty with reading (no paradox); his trouble is most grievous when he comes to the many philosophy texts he collects, but cannot read.

(Visions of the 3-D fifties horror film called *The House Of Wax*: the mad ugly doctor who falls in love with beautiful women he can never possess; who lures the women home and dips them in wax to preserve them. The books are spread wide-open, their private parts exposed (the parts only seen in private, the covers being the public parts), then the opened secrets are covered with wax. But there we find also the mad doctor's respect for his victims. In the words scraped free from one of Allan's vandalized books: "The scene changed again and I was watching the young man deface books; he glued some of the pages together, erased markings. Then I saw him arranging the books neatly in a wooden crate." In this case of the wax-enshrined books, we find both an act of homage and an act of vandalism, entwined).

AN INTERLUDE AND ALARM.

While Allan MacKay is out of the room for a moment, I make a quick list of books that must be rescued before it is too late.

The Works of Oscar Wilde.

Ralph Mayer's **The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques.**

The Works of Lewis Carroll.

Wallace Fowlie's **Mid-Century French Poets.**

T. S. Eliot **The Complete Poems and Plays 1909 - 1950.**

Susanne Langer's **Philosophy in A New Key.**

The Whistling Shadow, by Mabel Seeley.

In the bathroom, on the floor: Samuel Beckett's **How It Is**, and Freud **On Creativity and the Unconscious.**

SECOND POSSIBLE ENDING FOR CHAPTER SIX:

In each case, the transformation of a container of speaking signs into a mute thing, or sculpture. But is the new, mute thing created a piece of sculpture? The answer depends entirely on how it is presented. Like poems, the objects Allan makes occupy an ambiguous, problematic space; they can be read in different ways, which will be determined by the curator, or beholder.

A given work can be a small sculpture, if mounted on a pedestal and lit from above.

Or it can be a mute book. If held in the hands, or laid out on a small reading-table with a reading lamp - if constituted, in other words, in a context of library conventions.

Or it can be a strange specimen of Victorian bric-a-brac, left on little tables around the brown, still room suffused with the scent of incense, merely being there just out of sight while Allan talks to me about, say, what comes back to him about his Prince Edward Island childhood, on cold Saskatchewan afternoons such as this one.

The work moves like that, in its own ways, quietly moving at the edges of what we think art is, or things are in the world as we think it is.

CHAPTER VII

Outside the brown room, the winter's first snow sifts down through the windless sky of afternoon and gathers on the pavements of Saskatoon, white dust on undusted shelves.

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So I find a copy of the Book of Change (I Ching) on Allan's shelf, among the printed books and the books of his own making, and take the coins in my hands, and (the appropriate homages having been made), I require of the oracle the nature of the time and season, using coins.

The first is hexagram 28, PREPONDERANCE OF THE GREAT.



("It is favourable to have some goal or destination in view, Success! ... The superior man, though standing alone, is free from fear; he feels no discontent in withdrawing from the world.")

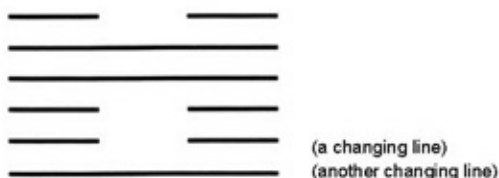


And the hexagram of resolution into which the first one transformed itself is 45, GATHERING TOGETHER:



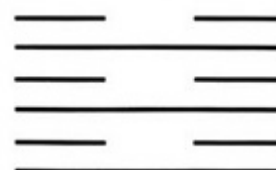
("Gathering Together - Success! ... It is favourable to have in view a goal or destination ... The superior man gathers together his weapons in order to provide against the unforeseen.")

I go back to the oracle again, making the proper homages in my heart, fearful of the loss of love and strength which comes from wrong asking, and draw the seventeenth hexagram, FOLLOWING, from the total inventory of 64 possibilities:



("Thunder rumbling within a swamp ... When darkness falls, the superior man goes within and rests peacefully.")

Which, in turn, generates the hexagram. 63, AFTER COMPLETION:



("After Completion - success in small matters ... Good fortune at the start; disorder at the end ... The superior man deals with trouble by careful thought and by taking advance precautions ... [but this sort of trouble can scarcely last long.]")



CHAPTER VIII

And moving beyond the edges of all we can see, weaving in and out of these visible instants and artifacts of one man's history of doing what he is doing, are these sounds, which are also artifacts.

(Allan gets up to go out and change the tapes; then, I start getting up to change them, when I don't want them to stop, and I want them to go on for a long time.)

He tells me that, when he was a younger man than he is now, still in school, he loved contemplative painting, all the Old Master's kit of scumbling, sfumato, sfumatezza, chiaroscuro. Most of these painterly, sumptuous gestures (though not all) have faded from the art arrayed on the tables and chairs in the brown room - but all of them are there, compounded and more exotic, in the invisible art, heard and felt in the cold afternoon air.

CHAPTER IX

The remarkable audio tapes began to be made one night in 1976, just after Allan moved to Lethbridge, and found that soon both his wife and daughter would be leaving his life there. The tapes, then, emerged from that new aloneness. They stopped being made when he moved to Saskatoon, in 1979, perhaps because the aloneness belonged in Lethbridge, and stayed there. That's all the tapes there are, the Lethbridge ones, that stack he keeps, and plays from time to time, usually when he is by himself.

The first one is a set of timid touches of the piano keys, a small voice beginning to hear itself, and be heard nervous words (the words from Genet Cut, the first book), and so different from the storms of singing and playing that would come, in the loneliness of later nights in Lethbridge.

Later, after Allan had heard his voice, had found whose voice it was, came the tapes telling the drift of traffic and wind through the streets of Lethbridge punctuated by music in the sad jazz night.

Joyce, Genet, a letter of cold report of a sister, dying, recited for the unstopping wind and the piano, talking too (plucked, hammered, stroked) against the wind-tattered silence. An elegaic reading, in one of his voices, his secret characters, of a newspaper report about an Indian named Raymond Drunken Chief - and all the painting is there (the overlay, the complexity of structure), and all the pain is there, and more beauty than in any of his other works of art.

And all this music, the soul's wild war music in these tapes, is there, but cannot be listened to. How could it be? You cannot sit down to that pain, as you sit down to a concert or a supper.

These sounds refuse to be background, or foreground, or anything we know as sounds moving forward into the grounds of our attention. Here again, as with the waxed books, we can only experience with (and at) the edges of ourselves; we must be still with these invisible things heard, and we must wait for the moments of disclosure, of the slow moving of what is there, to our knowing of it.

CHAPTER X

Outside the brown room, the winter's first snow sifts down through the windless sky at dusk and gathers on the pavements of Saskatoon, white dust on undusted shelves.

Inside the brown, dim room, with Allan MacKay and me, these things: small moments of his knowing only a little, which is all he, or any of us, can grasp as we move along the edges, through the long unknowing of our lives here.

