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May 31, 2013

Casey Gardner

## *Body of Inquiry*

Limited edition of 57 letterpress printed copies. Berkeley: Set in Motion Press/Still Wild Books, 2011. 6 pp. Paper \$1200.00



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[CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2013.56](#)

“What is alive anyhow?” This is one of the simple, troubling, and eternal questions posed by Casey Gardner’s artists’ book, *Body of Inquiry*. Her response is anything but simple. Partly inspired by the Musée des arts et métiers, a labyrinth of scientific instruments and investigations in Paris, Gardner creates a complex multi-layered work combining the museum, her elementary science classes, technical facts, and an anatomical model called Torso Woman with her speculations on life, science, and death. The result is truly surprising.

In the colophon Gardner states that “this book has been on my mind for quite some time.” Gardner tackles an issue no less than the fundamental one—where is the break between life and death? This is a question that has troubled us all, or will, and one that as the Curator of the Book Arts Collection at the University of Washington Libraries I have tried to bring together a “body” of work to explore. That group includes artists known for explorations in this field: Susan King, Joyce Cutler-Shaw, Maureen Cummins, and Tamar Stone, among many others.

When I first saw *Body of Inquiry* at the College Book Art Association annual conference in February of 2012, I did not know Gardner’s work. I was struck by the piece exhibited in a vitrine and spent an hour asking everyone if they knew the artist. Charles Hobson took on the mission and emerged from the crowd with Gardner in tow. She had another copy of the book with her, and I had the opportunity to handle it for the first time.

Like many artists’ books, *Body of Inquiry* has the patina of whimsy with a more difficult interior of deep probing and pain. Once the reader is seduced by form and presentation, the realization of content creeps in, changing the color of the piece. The book’s full title mimics the historical texts of old, and is too long to quote in full here, but continues in part, “scientifically capricious, yet unequivocally misleading.”

The book’s shape references an elementary school science project poster session, albeit a very sophisticated one. It is a standing triptych, letterpress printed on both sides. The “body” at the central core allows the reader to explore further and further into it, moving chest, lungs, and other parts aside to get to the central point. Gardner adds the complexity of a series of six pages and eight flaps to this body, each with text. Like many books in this field, a textual description does little to convey the work, and I suggest seeing the excellent photographs of the piece at <http://casey-oona.com/body-of-inq.html>.

Many artists’ books are the antithesis of today’s technology; they are measured and slow. These books evoke the methodical practice of their making. I am sure that Gardner’s project took years to conceive and produce—perhaps since her fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, Mr. John P. Sullivan, to whom the book is dedicated, sowed the seeds long ago. His approach of making “learning an immense fantastical tale” has not yet worn off. There are at least five passes through the press on most of the sections of the book, with as many colors plus blind embossing. This small edition of fifty-seven copies explores deep and sobering issues through wit and charm, clever text, and strange, often beautiful images. But Torso Woman is at the core of the piece in more ways

than one.

Many of Gardner's images of scientific instruments are taken from "late 19th and early 20th century laboratory catalogs," which are combined with her own elaborate drawings. Her fantastical captions for the real devices are paired with factual text explaining her drawings. A strange historical object is labeled "an unaccountable injector" with the description: "Extract of inconceivability to mingle with churlish inner ducts of deep seated disenchantment." Her delicate drawing of sperm that looks like wild strawberries is paired with text about the 3.2 billion letters in the coding of DNA.

The questions and speculations Gardner poses are ones that we, too, have had on our minds for a long time. We watch our early years of invulnerability and confidence shift to suspicion, uncertainty, and inevitability. Our hold on life switches from solid to unstable. The historical instrument image that Gardner calls one of the "Prisms of Infinite Reflection" is described in part as that which, "Refracts levels of reminiscence through interchangeable lenses of relief or regret." The "Prophylactic Hand of Fate" is "a gauntlet for frictionless deflections of the stealthy hand of destiny." The piece touches me without relying on predictable triggers: there is no story of the fifty-year-old teacher who goes to a conference and dies of a massive heart attack before goodbyes can be said; no heart-wrenching tale of the book artist without health insurance dying needlessly—just the seemingly unanswerable questions "how?" and "why?"

The puzzlement of how living things work has fascinated people for most of recorded history. For centuries that fascination has been put into books. Seeing in Bologna both the actual artifacts and the original wood blocks of Ulisse Aldrovandi, one of the founders of the modern study of natural history, gives Gardner's book historical context for me. Aldrovandi tried to put the entirety of the living world into a series of books from 1574–1667; one can see both the compulsion and folly of such a task but also its inevitability. Although Aldrovandi died in 1605, this magnificent project continued to be published so that his vision would be carried into the future.

There are classic images of the twentieth century that seem to capture the moment between life and death: Eddie Adams's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing Nguyen Van Lem during the Vietnam War and Robert Capa's famous photograph from the Spanish-American War, *The Falling Soldier*. Whether the latter is documentary or art, it still conveys that moment powerfully. We are fascinated by "last words"—especially of the famous. Gardner's *Body of Inquiry* is not autobiographical in any obvious way but gives a sense of completion—a quest come to successful conclusion. Gardner, inspired by *Torso Woman*, set off into the unfamiliar country of the body and the cosmos. Here she found a reverence for the senses, the balance of truth and mystery and an understanding that science and poetry are part of the magical.

The best artists' books resonate in the way a piece of music does at first hearing—offering a new sound but still familiar, making us nod in agreement, hearing our own internal voice in the sounds. *Body of Inquiry* is a text-rich piece, an entire jazz concert rather than just a simple song. Gardner's book could just be "looked at" and be found charming and ambitious. If really read, in the end it leaves us sober and thoughtful but glad to be alive.

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