

Information Visualization and the Interpretive Frames Offered by Artists' Books

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ABSTRACT

This poster describes a work-in-progress workshop to facilitate guided exploration of a curated collection of artists' books for students in an information design and visualization MFA program. Specifically, this collaborative workshop aims to interrogate them through several different lenses: the materiality of data, intentionality of form, and the nature of interpretation. These lenses are explored through activities that invite the students to apply information visualization design thinking to their engagement with the books. This workshop presents one model for how library collections may be leveraged as a focal point for new pedagogical experiences across campus.

CAMPUS CONTEXT

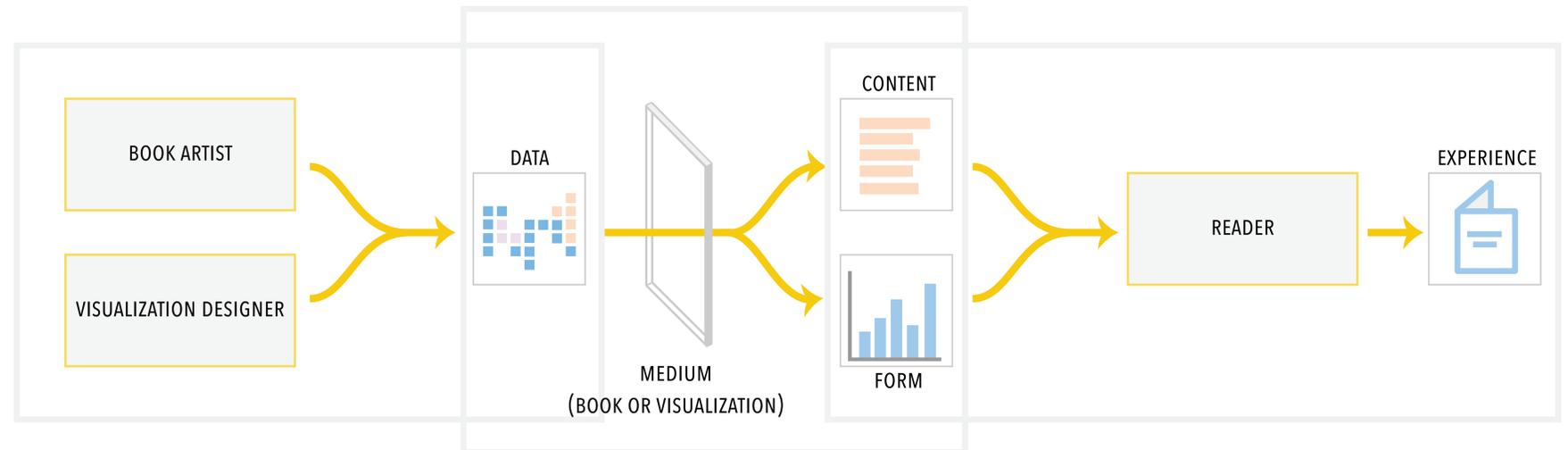
At Northeastern University, there are many campus populations that practice or do research in information design and data visualization. These include the Northeastern University Visualization Consortium, the MFA program in Information Design and Visualization, programs in the School of Journalism focused on data journalism, and visualization research focus areas in the Khoury College of Computer Sciences, to name a few. Together, such initiatives offer diverse and interdisciplinary understandings of visualization that highlight the field's unusual importance on campus.

We define information visualization as the use of visual encodings to represent information (data) in a way that facilitates exploration, discovery, and analysis. In the majority of visualizations, those visual encodings are conventionally digital; in contrast, artists' books provide a tactile and physical medium of communication, through which it becomes possible to rethink established modes of production in visualization and its digital forms. We propose here the concept for a workshop that uses exploration of artists' books to interrogate the relationship between digital and tactile media of storytelling through the lens of data visualization. Designed for students in Northeastern's MFA program in Information Design and Visualization, this workshop uses as inspiration the book *After Reasonable Research...* by Miranda Maher, which can be interpreted as a data visualization in artist's book form.

INFORMATION VISUALIZATION CONCEPTS AS INTERPRETIVE LENSES

To connect the students' own disciplinary knowledge to artists' books, this workshop explores our engagement with artists' books through interpretive lenses that are based on foundational concepts in information design and visualization. These concepts, as defined in the diagram at right, include the materiality of data, issues of form and representation, and the nature of interpretation. In this way, we can think of visualizations and artists' books as questioning the relationship between content and form in parallel ways.

The first interpretive lens considers the materiality of data and the signature of the creator, asking how book-as-form mediates our access to the knowledge presented within them and how that mediation is negotiated by the artist. The second lens considers intentionality of form, exploring how artists' books interrogate the book form as mediator of its content and our experience of it. The final lens considers the nature of interpretation, examining consumptive versus performative modes of reading the book. In the same way that studies in information visualization critique the fixity, authority, and permanence of a given visualization, these lenses ask the same of the book.



Signatures and materiality of data

Usually, the signature of the creator is detached, through a screen or device. But with the book medium, how might a signature of the creator be surfaced? How do artists' books play with the materiality of data, both figuratively and literally?

Intentionality of form

Why a book, especially when considering other technologies that could be chosen? What is lost in translation when the artist chose a book for this particular communication? What makes a book a book? When is a book no longer a book? How do artists' books play with those definitions?

Nature of interpretation

Artists' books play with consumptive versus performative modes of interpretation. How do those two modes differ, and how are they expressed through the book form? What does it mean to think of the book as an articulation between content and form?

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Introduction

- Brief history and definition of artists' books, with representative examples
- Rationale for this workshop and introduction of interpretive lenses

Small group exploration

Break up participants into small groups, each analyzing a different artist's book selected by the instructor.

- Start with analysis of the artist's book
 - What are the data?
 - What are the visual encodings?
 - What conventions of design are utilized?
- Based on the above analysis of the artist's book, have each group translate the book into a visualization by sketching out with paper and markers a mockup of a new digital imagining of the book. Each mockup should enable a new or different way of engaging with the data inside the book.

Group discussion

Each group will share their visualization and report on the following questions and interpretive lenses:

- Materiality of data: What is different about the experience of the data in the artist's book in book form and its visualization equivalent?
- Intentionality of form: What does it mean to think of both book and visualization as object, content, idea, and interface?
- Nature of interpretation: In thinking about the book across the above conceptions, what is gained and lost in our understanding of the book by translating it into a visualization form?

OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By the end of the workshop, participants should be able to interpret artists' books through several lenses that leverage their understanding of key concepts in information visualization, in turn encouraging them to examine how they play with convention and form in their own work and creative practice. In the future, this workshop could be expanded to involve participants creating artists' books of their own. This workshop models one interdisciplinary example of using artists' books for new pedagogical purposes in information design and visualization curricula.

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