

**Craft in Conflict: the work of Sumi Perera**  
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First published in *PAGES: New Voices*,  
John McDowall and Chris Taylor  
(Leeds: Wild Pansy Press, 2019), p. 14-21.



*Turn the Page...*, Sumi Perera, 2008

## Craft in Conflict: the work of Sumi Perera

In 2008 PAGES made an open call of international scope, new book works created specifically for the exhibition and to be displayed throughout the length of the refurbished entrance hall of Leeds Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> Entitled, *From Book to Book*, the theme of the exhibition asked for 'a response to books themselves. This could be to the form of a book, to the physicality of volume and content, of paper and printing, of structure and sequence, or may be to reading in general, a distinct piece of writing or the presence of books, whether on home bookshelves, in libraries or in specialist collections'.

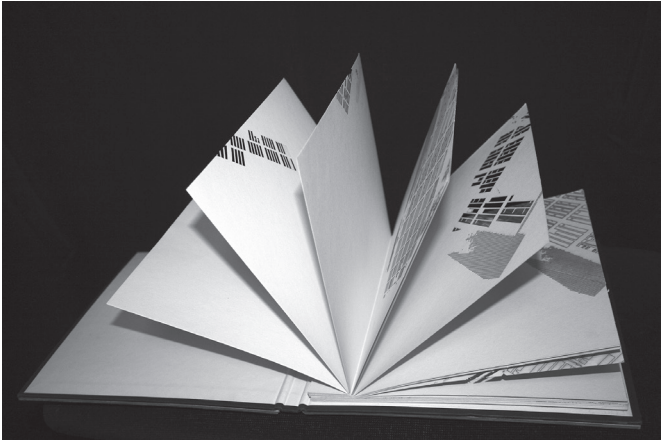
Of the many artefacts from across the globe submitted for selection, one particular book work stood out in succinctly encapsulating aspects of the theme through its apposite use of media and format. This was *Turn the Page...*, an artist's book by Sumi Perera which explored the problematics of the 'page turn' in music manuscripts. What was distinct about this submission was its ability to expose a simple action – that of turning the page, an action which we as book artists continuously present as integral to the genre in creating a clear sequence and narrative – as being equally an impediment as it is a necessity when encountered through music/sound performance.

Accompanied by an audio recording created through the turning of the pages of a collection of different publishers' scores of Beethoven's *Sonata in C - The Pathétique*, the narrative is reflective of the inherent rupture. Using blind embossing and laser cut, what would normally be a visible, printed ink score is fashioned transparent and a mimed playing of the sonata only becomes audible at the points of turning the page. We experience the sound of skin against paper, the flapping of the page as it curls over, the creak of the binding – that point in the musical narrative, where for a briefest of moments the score,

the musician and the audience just might be suspended in time as we realign from bottom recto to top verso. Perera underpins this paradox by the actual fusing of pages and the introduction of different paper types and weights in order to intensify the acoustic characteristics of the medium and its material qualities. Then, as we come to discover in other works by the artist, a requisite *modus operandi* comes into play whereby she hands over the artefact or score to the viewer/reader to re-collate in whatever order and edit however they wish.

Going against the usual structure of the book, that of a beginning, a middle and an end, Perera provides a space for infinite possibilities and multiple authors, creating “modules that can be re-sequenced and re-aligned to develop variable permutations and encourage participatory involvement, to share the final editorial control with the viewer to transform the ever-evolving work”.<sup>2</sup>

These possibilities for variable permutations are no more evident than in her constantly evolving project, *Building Blocks Book*, and its numerous subsequent iterations including *The Negative Space of Architecture* and *The House That Jack Never Built* (2008). Once again we find Perera exploring human interaction, not only with the concepts and her quizzical ideas surrounding architectural and public spaces and how we build between and move within, but also the physical interaction with the artists' books she produces – the rearrangement and reinsertion of pages which allow the audience and participants new opportunities and pathways to proceed. Through the positive and negative space of the page or the type font, the Underground versus over ground, the artist takes us on journeys that are at once fluid and at other times obstructive. In these cityscapes, the U-turn is as common as the page turn – a necessary rupture in a free-flowing narrative.



*Building Blocks Book*, Sumi Perera, 2008



*Subliminal Places*, Sumi Perera, 2017

Participatory involvement is a crucial element in the work *Subliminal Spaces* (2017), a multi-media installation selected for the rural touring exhibition Craft+Conflict.<sup>3</sup> Curated and produced by Dr Karen Babayan in collaboration with PAGES, the exhibition brought together artists from Sri Lanka, Sweden, Syria and the UK who address issues of conflict in the broadest sense, employing a diverse range of traditional and contemporary craft media, techniques and appropriation such as artists' books, printed ceramics, 3D printing and recycled materials. From war zones to rural economies, migration to the environment the show dealt with subjects that may affect us personally and professionally, at home or abroad.

The *Subliminal Spaces* installation emerged from a series of exquisite handmade prints, found objects and paper constructions, and for Perera it touches on the private, local and global. She says, "There are many underlying strands: *Subliminal Spaces* was a reflection of uncertainty but also of survival. The piece originated during the Grenfell tragedy, hence the visible marks of fire and scorching. It contains blue prints of a house we never built in Sri Lanka due to the civil war. Elements of my current house are also there, objects from my kitchen and garden."<sup>4</sup>

This multi-layered work is both structurally and conceptually complex, composed of architectural drawings, laser cut templates, printed surfaces and a variety of curious objects. As each time the exhibition moved from rural venue to rural venue the installation was transformed in response to new environments and space limitations (from community libraries to twelfth century church naves to maritime visitor centres) creating a challenging but creative process for the curators to rethink, re-edit and rebuild the 'narrative'. Through direct engagement or happenstance, each encountered audience (including agricultural workers, ex-mining communities, the localities' school children, the occasional inquisitive rambler or

tourist, and migrant families from Afghanistan, Iran and Syria), each brought to the work an unimaginable range of personal histories, tragedies, expectations and questions.

To understand Perera's working methodologies and her underlying motivations, one might need to be aware of her background as a medical clinician and scientist. In complete contrast to her initial training to become a doctor, Perera makes clear that her artists' books and installations make "no attempt to provide a manual for a subject or theme discussed, provide any answers to a problem or even present a logical and coherent narrative. They are not case studies. In fact, they are organic ramblings of an artist approaching a subject as an 'outsider' with absolutely no credentials, simply reading and researching, garnering facts from books, newspapers, online articles, Wikipedia etc. [...] It is mere play, unplanned and develops with time."

Yet, she states, this freedom to experiment and pursue unidentified lines of enquiry, to put aside the rule book and take risks is "with hindsight... exactly what I was trained to accomplish as a doctor and scientist too... once you gain your license to practice, it is your responsibility to totally free-wheel. You have to learn to assay a patient's condition on the spot... devise your own experiments as a scientist who has to discover something ground-breaking and innovative."<sup>5</sup>

As with the artist, she implies, and so with doctors and scientists who must also learn to "play" in order to deconstruct a situation and rebuild from the ground up, putting aside predetermined and rigid practices and encouraging experimentation and collaboration. For Perera, life is not an open book but one to be rewritten, reinvented and reimaged.

Professor Chris Taylor, University of Leeds



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From Book to Book, exhibition, Leeds Art Gallery, 6 March-20 April 2008. Curated by John McDowall and Chris Taylor. Catalogue (Leeds: Wild Pansy Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Scuola Internazionale di Grafica, Venice, Italy, October 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Craft+Conflict, Highlights Contemporary Craft Tour, 8 September -25 November 2018: The Old Courthouse, Shap, St. Mary's Church, Kirkby Lonsdale, and The Forum, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria; The Maritime Centre, Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, Northumberland; Bowlees Visitor Centre, Newbiggin in Teesdale, The Witham, Barnard Castle, and St. Thomas' Church Hall, Stanhope, Co. Durham.

<sup>4</sup> Craft+Conflict, Karen Babayan (Leeds: Wild Pansy Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Email correspondence between Perera and Taylor, 10 February 2019.