

dispersed holdings,
"Reading Room"

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A one-day reading residency offered a valuable occasion for sustained inquiry into a basic problem: the unread book—and, by extension, the more general problem of “not reading.” The full range of human activities, with the unique exception of reading itself, can of course be understood as “not reading.” But our focus on the 19th of November was on a narrow and slightly paradoxical subset of the universe of non-reading activities, to wit, what might be called “mindful” not-reading. Which is to say, we took up, across the day, the condition of the non-reading subject in bookish and attentive contemplation of unread books.

“Unread book” is a capacious category, and one worthy of consideration. Most books spend most of their lives not being read. Indeed, not not-being-read, for the vast majority of printed books, is a vanishing flash of the (reading) eye bursting upon a slow eternity of sealed vigil. From a book’s perspective, not being read is the ubiquitous, durable, quotidian norm; being unread is *status quo* for the books of the world. Similarly, most of us who retain a relationship with the printed book and who are committed to reading as a significant element of life nevertheless read much

less than we do not read, and are likely to survey a library (even our own) that contains significant numbers of books that have not been read recently – and probably quite a few that have never been read at all.

One does not read different books for different reasons, and attention to this matter can be used to generate a kind of card catalog or indexing system of some value in navigating the general problem of not reading. Such an exercise opens way to an annotated bibliography of affect, imagination, aspiration, fear, and intimate relation. As part of our residency, then, the two of us spent a portion of the day preparing call slips for all the unread books we had collected for the occasion, and sorting them in stacks that reflected overlapping taxonomies of guilt, indifference, obligation, and strained sociability. Subheadings included, “Books given to me by people who asked me to read them; I did not” and “Books I have ‘investigated’ (read reviews and / or spent time online researching author or context), and with which I therefore feel ‘familiar’ despite never having opened.” A special section of our non-reading room was devoted to books with uncut pages, of which we had

amassed a touching number. We also spent some time on the vexed liminal category of books begun but not completed, and these were for a time arranged in a spectrum corresponding to the depth to which they had been plumbed before being set aside. (Cards indicated recollection of the reason the book was put aside: “Final dog-ear is on page 136 of 149 total pages – felt manipulated; wasn’t sure where we were going.”)

These activities were propaedeutic to our ultimate aim: to conceive, draft, and enact a series of “Protocols for Sustained Attention” particularly suitable to a durational encounter with an unread book (or book one had the intention of not reading). A full report on our efforts, together with an account of the theoretical premises and historical precedents from which such modes of attentional exercise derive, lies beyond the scope of the present brief, but we transcribe, below, a single draft protocol suitable for use by those wishing to take up or extend the investigation.

* * *

Protocol

(For two people and two unread books)

Each person begins with his or her unread book in-hand. A table or suitable space is configured upon which the books may be placed. In addition, an adjacent location must be arranged in advance where both individuals may comfortably recline.

Phases should be of roughly equal lengths, determined in advance, and not less than seven minutes. Phase changes may be marked by a bell, if desired.

Phase I

Both persons enter the appointed room or location, in silence, carrying the unread books. These are placed on the table, side by side. The persons arrange themselves as they wish in relation to the books, and regard them in a spirit of longing for what they contain.

Phase II

Each person picks up his or her book and reclines, placing the book (closed) on his or her body in a manner that feels suitable. The eyes are closed. While

attending to the weight of the book that sits upon his or her body, each person imagines reading the book. At the close of this phase, each person marks his or her place in the book, using a small strip of paper or dog-ear, or other indication.

Phase III

The two persons exchange books. Each person now reads either the left- or the right-hand page that was marked by his or her partner. (It is also possible that the page is regarded, but not read).

Phase IV

Carefully, the two persons place the two books on the table or surface, and contrive, each person holding only the book he or she received in Phase III, to cause the books to be interleaved, in the manner of a shuffled deck of cards. Contemplation ensues.

Phase V

The books are left like this for a suitable period, after which each person may recover his or her unread book.