Read Like Water

*Everything is everything else.*

The box containing *The Way to Be Empty, I* reminds me of hay. That’s why I choose it. I have been particularly homesick this week and the dried grass pressed into the book’s box by the artist, Sun Young Kang, reminds me of the pattern of hay that gets left on the back of my pants when I stand up from a bale. The box itself is shaped like a book, with the edges jutting out like the front and back of a hardcover; yet where there should be pages, there is only pressed grass against a neutral background. [Fig. 1a] There is no break in the box’s design; there is no title and no author, no glimpse nor hint of its interior.

When I pick up the box, the first thing I notice is the surprising softness of its surface. “Soft” does not come to mind when I imagine hay; I imagine straws of it snagging to my socks and pricking my feet with each step. This strange box is soft and comfortable against my fingers, which trace the reliefs made by each individual blade of grass. The weight of it in my hands is lighter than I expected. Nothing clunks around the inside of the box when I turn it over, which leaves me only more curious about its contents. I lift the lid.

We were asked to interrogate the books, and so that is what I prepare myself to do. An introduction to the book is printed on a hand-cut piece of okawara paper that floats weightlessly in my hand. [Fig. 1d] The simple font states:

>This book is composed of 108 pages, each with a different combination of words evoking a sense, an aspect of time, a characteristic of the heart, and an emotional
preference. Each page constitutes one of the 108 Buddhist “desires.”

6 senses:   eyes ears nose tongue body mind

3 aspects of time:   past present future

2 characteristics of the heart:   pure impure

3 emotional preferences:   like dislike indifferent

6 x 3 x 2 x 3 = 108

After setting the introduction page aside, I see that the artist has cut a long, winding path into the book’s pages. [Fig. 1c, Fig. 1b] It unfurls before the reader like a road that reaches towards the horizon and vanishes to a point at the top of the paper. The cutout of the path is largest on the first page, starting at the desire embodied by “Body Past Pure Like.” As I turn the first page, and then the second and then the third, I notice that the artist methodically progresses through each possible combination of the words listed on the introductory page. The farther along in the book I get, the smaller the path of accumulated desires becomes until the last page, which is blank. This represents the state of mind, or emptiness of mind, that can be achieved once one has traveled the path to the empty page. I recall the title of the book, The Way to Be Empty.

Turning to the last leaflet in the book reveals an explanation from the author about the meditation through which book guides the reader:

The significance of the number “108” in Buddhism represents the number of mental conditions that common mortals have and must overcome to reach enlightenment or nirvana. It also represents the relationship between those mental conditions or objects we perceive through our senses and the typical
response we have to these phenomena known as 108 desires.

It is only the ending of the book that catches me off-balance: “What are your desires? How are you embracing them in your life?” I am taken aback by the questions that stare back at me from the soft pages of hand-cut paper. Like a cop in a low-budget TV police drama, I freeze when I realize that the suspect, in this case the book, is interrogating me. I had only prepared myself to ask, not to respond. I walk away that day with more questions swirling around my mind than there are answers, and the author’s inquiries make me wonder if those questions had really come from the book or if they are buried in us all, deep underneath what it means to be human.

What throws me off-kilter is the image of the book and its contents I had subconsciously built in my head before I even opened its box. I think back to my home and to the horses who trained me more than I ever trained them, and how one of the first things that I learned is to not anticipate what a horse will do. Anticipation stiffens the body, preparing it for something that may or may not happen. It is not a fluid state of being. When I was young, I was riding around our sand ring with my mother standing in the center, supervising. We had set up a small cross rail in the middle of the ring that I was planning on jumping. I lead my horse towards the jump at a canter, and in anticipation of the jump, I leaned forward. The shift of my body weight stopped the horse in his tracks and sent me flying over the jump and hitting the ground on the other side. My mom rushed over. After making sure that I was all right, she told me what had happened; “You jumped before your horse did.” That much was obvious to me; I was splayed out on one side of the jump, and my horse was eating grass on the other. “Next time, jump when he does.”

When I revisit the book on the second day, I do my best to forget what I had gleaned from it a few days prior. Instead, upon opening it for a second time, I allow myself to ask the
book questions when I don’t understand its intended impact. My fingers inquire about the meaning of each of the 108 desires and their manifestations; the book answers back with cues that are as soft as the okawara it is printed on. For each page, I imagine the feeling it shows in words. When I think of the state of being, or desire, I attempt to remember a specific time that I had experienced it in my life. When I turn the page, I let this memory fade from my mind for the rest of the meditation and I go on to the next page. I would go through every page if I had the time, but I do not. I meditate over the last few pages and finally turn to the blank one that stares back at me, feeling comfortable and content with an emptiness of desire. I have completed the meditation.

I turn the page one last time and am again faced with the two same questions that I was met with on the first day; “What are your desires? How are you embracing them in your life?” I hadn’t allowed myself to ponder these questions at the beginning of the meditation, in order to keep from anticipating my own answer. Now that I am faced with the questions for a second time, I allow myself to think anew and not be led on by what I feel the answer should be. By letting the book lead me through its ritual with subtle cues and inferred questions, I had prepared myself for the final meditation. I let the book communicate with me by letting my mind wander the path the pages guided me down and reflecting on where those desires exist in my life.

One of the very first things I remember learning is that horses are animals who use space to communicate. Some trainers, like my mother, use tai chi to communicate physically with the horses. To ask for more space, we ask for them to yield resistance; this is not the same as pushing. We touch a pressure point to ask a question; the horse asks what that question is. We answer their question; they answer ours. This exchange can be done through shifts in body
weight that can resemble the currents of water, never stagnant, surging and shrinking in a tidal pool of energy. The process is as fluid as the martial arts that it is practiced with. The same process happens in reverse when it is the horse that asks for space. Either way, communication flows equally from both sides. Interrogation is like pushing; it is a question or series of questions from one party followed by an answer or series of answers from another. Communication is a series of questions being asked and answers being given by both sides.

There were questions I had for the book that I found did not result in any concrete answer yielded from its hollowed pages. There were desires I could not imagine, desires I could not forget, many questions I could not interpret, and one that will sit in my brain for the rest of my waking life: “How are you embracing [your desires] in your life?” It’s something that I can always ask myself. Within the book lies an animation that is born from its ability to invite interaction with the reader even when the book is not physically present. Its memory may linger with me forever, spurring on endless churning currents of questions and answers in a tidal pool of energy.

*Everything is everything else.*
The number 108 is created with a different combination of fourteen words- evoking a sense (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind), an aspect of time (past, present, future), a characteristic of the heart (pure, impure), and an emotional preference (like, dislike, indifferent). Each combination constitutes one of the 108 Buddhist “desires or agonies.” My working process is a meditation, as is the experience I want to give to the reader. The act of cutting 108 pages and printing 108 different combinations of 14 words is one that empties my mind of desires. As readers turn the pages, they participate in that meditation, similar to the Buddhist practice of repeating vows 108 times and telling 108 beads. The path of piled desires or agonies gets smaller and smaller until finally the reader reaches the emptiness at the end of the path, the last page.

2005, closed size: 7 1/3 x 10 1/3 x 1 ½, page number: 108 + 3, 1 sheet of description, edition size: 10 + 3 A.P., hand cut, transfer print on Okawara, Coptic binding and Banana leaf covered clamshell box