Read the Unreadable

Cecilia (Runlan) △2 · Week 1 draft

* It is important to note that my chosen reference, *I Read Where I Am: Exploring New Information Cultures*, is a collection of 82 essays. In this writing, I focus particularly on three of them: *Watching, Formerly Reading* by Max Bruinsma, *Reading Surroundings* by Koert van Mensvoort, and *I Read More Than Ever* by Erwin Blom.

From the second unit onward, I have been continuously exploring the dimensions among objects, images, and texts. Through constant iterations, I eventually focused my perspective on reading, exploring how it takes place across different dimensions. And the book has become my central medium. As my visual experiments deepened, I began reading the same book through different material and digital formats, which gradually expanded my understanding of what reading can mean. Today, we access information through screens, which means that the word *reading* has moved beyond its traditional associations with *text* or *book*, becoming instead a new way of perceiving.

This recalls Max Bruinsma's statement: *What we used to call 'watching' seems increasingly like what we once called 'reading'*. In contemporary visual culture, reading no longer only means decoding symbols and constructing meaning, while watching no longer simply refers to receiving impressions and perceiving images. The boundary between them—or the distinction between text and image—is disappearing. They have become part of the same system of meaning production. The normalization of visuality and the ubiquity of digital interfaces have turned every viewer into a new kind of reader. Reading is no longer confined to language, it has become a cross-media form of cognition. We *read* words, and we *read* images.

From this understanding, I developed my inquiry: **How can we understand reading as a multidimensional event that flows between text, image, and interface (space)?**

I see reading as an *event* because it is generative and situated. It is not the mechanical act of turning pages but a process that produces different meanings and effects each time it occurs. When we talk about "reading a book," we cannot simply talk about "reading a book." We must also discuss how we pick it up, how we touch it, how we turn its pages, and how we silently read it in our minds. Reading is not merely an act but a grammar of time, object, and space.

Koert van Mensvoort asks in his essay: *How did we read 40,000 years ago?* At that time, there were no media as we understand them today. But, we were still reading—we read our surroundings, the landscape, and the sky. In other words, reading was never limited to decoding text or image, it has always been a way of perceiving and decoding the world. Wouldn't it be fascinating, then, to trace the movement like *reading text → reading screens → back to reading environments*? It would feel like a return of perception itself.

As I began to redefine what reading means to me, I recalled the project I made in Year 1 for *Methods of Cataloguing*, titled *Unreadable Library*. I was surprised to realize that, a year later, my focus had returned to reading, but now it overturns my earlier understanding. (What a coincidence!) Back then, I explored the *unreadable* aspects of books beyond their content: the folds, stamps, or marks left by previous readers. But now I see that these are also part of what makes a book readable. Just as *the medium is the message*, the context is the content. These traces are readable too. In this sense, our object of reading expands to encompass the entire system of appearances in the world, and reading becomes a broader process of perception ↔ decoding.

However, Koert van Mensvoort also implicitly expressed his uncertainty about the appeal of printed matter in his essay. Similarly, Erwin Blom described print media as a form of constraint and an old authority that should be left behind, one once held by *parties that used to have exclusive rights to reading matter*. I understand this "farewell to print" tone, as digital media now offer faster, richer, and more personalized reading experiences, while new media are often seen as dynamic and decentralized reading spaces. Still, I cannot agree with the idea of fully leaving print behind.

Swiping screens makes our world more superficial. Human life gains depth through thing-relations. Thing-relations bring us together physically and create connections. This connection is what we call *friction*. When reading *Designing Friction*, I strongly resonated with its affirmation of friction's value. The existence of printed matter sustains friction within reading, not only between words but also between people and words, and among people themselves. I experienced this first-hand while reading both the digital and physical versions of my reference book. Each essay in it is short, and I often need to compare ideas across them, which forces me to jump frequently between sections. With the physical book, I can fold page corners or hold my fingers between pages to navigate and interact with the text more directly. But when reading the e-book, the pages are flat, so I can only rely on the table of contents to relocate myself. The friction between me and the book disappears. This experience strengthened my belief that, even in the digital age, printed things remains vital to reading. As *philosopher Miriam Rasch argues that complete removal of friction means standing still*. Reading should not be dematerialized. Perhaps the difference today is that, as designers, we no longer design *books* as objects. We design *reading*, we design *friction*.

Therefore, in this unit, my goal is to design a series of *reading events* on printed media. Through an ever-growing and open-ended collection of these events, I hope to let reading move from text to interface, from content to environment, from the recognition of words to the decoding of the world. And when I print and bind this collection, every audience will, in turn, read my reading, creating endless possibilities for connection.

I chose these three essays as my main references because, together, they reflect the evolution of my thinking about reading: from the sensory and mediatic transformations of reading, to the expansion of its concept, and finally, to a renewed reflection on the act and the medium itself. Although I do not fully agree with all of their arguments, I am deeply inspired by their shared idea of breaking down the hierarchy between content and medium, and of restoring reading as a multisensory and environmental practice. I will continue to see reading as a multidimensional event in which content, context, medium, and information continually generate and flow.

The reason I chose *I Read Where I Am* as my reference is that all 82 essays in the book are responses to the act of reading itself. In a sense, it feels like the authors are *reading reading*. The multiple interpretations of the same act by different people form the dimensions of the book. Through these diverse dialogues—spanning various depths, scopes, and approaches—I can see a kind of grid taking shape. Perhaps this is what I understand as the meaning of triangulating.