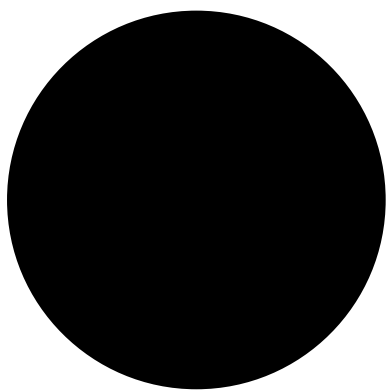


# **an oracle on a tomato, ubiquitous rectangles**





# What a book can be, or, Rafael Domenech’s Guide to Surviving the Future

Giampaolo Bianconi

Books are as historically contingent as anything else. They didn’t always exist and they won’t exist forever. At least not as bound volumes of printed papers. They already multiply into thousands of black onyx screens, some even made to simulate the dull properties of a simple page. Their future forms are endless and unimaginable: ribbons of nucleic acid containing libraries to rival Alexandria, fragile projections unfolding against unstable screens, a novel printed on a water bottle. But from here and now, if we are to ask what a book is and what a book can be, Rafael Domenech’s practice provides a series of compelling answers.

A book is an object, for one, and Domenech’s work is full of objects, some of them more directly related to books than others. Sometimes they are actual books, in the sense of being bound pages that can be flipped. Sometimes they have a special place for a large rock to sit, like a cup holder for a piece of nature, and sometimes they have legs, like a table that can be flipped on its head. Sometimes they have the quality of hardware, something that can elegantly fold in and out of a wall and hold its contents in a way reminiscent of modern design and mechanical book-fetching devices from ancient libraries. They become other objects, too: folding screens lined with carved wooden letters, hanging light sculptures that glow with soft controlled explosions of language. A recent one reads: “When information brushes against information.” Even works that hang flat on the wall can be folded up like books, sent flatly in the mail or transported in a backpack like you would carry whatever you’re reading around the city. In Domenech’s work, books become more than objects: they become enveloping spaces, spaces where one can dwell in a book.

Domenech knows that reading is an active and reciprocal process, in which readers create texts as much as they are created by texts. And his works conceive of books as active through their transformation into space. In this way he makes exhibitions as books, not only through the inclusion of archival materials or interminable heaps of didactic texts, but through the aesthetic transformation of the form of the book into a spatialized experience. In architectural pavilions, foldable paintings, and textual interventions in real places, reading becomes as communal an experience as moving through a city. One doesn’t simply look at an exhibition of Domenech’s works: one reads it. And one reads it by moving through space and time.

It is not just the exhibition that Domenech has been able to imagine as a new form of book. His use of readily available construction materials like plywood and plastic mesh wouldn’t appear out of place on any street corner where a building is newly built or renovated. For Domenech, if an exhibition can be a book it is only because the exhibition provides a microcosm for the potential of urban space itself. If you think about a book as something other than a private, individual, interior space, if you imagine it as a communal experience that can be had together—as Domenech does when he turns the book into a space in his exhibitions—then it is not such a great leap to imagine that a city could be a book, too. Cities are places, ideally, where forms of life are shared and experiences generate meanings from the interaction between people and communities in common spaces. As Domenech might say, “When information brushes against information.” And if that vision of city life is something you see in the book, then you want to bring the book into the city, too.

In the exhibition “Notations from Somewhere” at HUA in Berlin, Domenech enfolded the city in the creases of his expanding publication through a series of gestures. At a Späti on Potsdamerstraße, the ceiling tiles have been carved with text reading: “There is no longer an elsewhere.” At Hopscotch Reading Room on Kurfürstenstraße, a community space and bookstore, one could find a number of books—none of them for sale—that Domenech had rebound in wood and cardboard, fastened with an elastic, and nestled back into the shop’s overflowing

shelves. If a visitor was lucky enough to find one they could just take it home. Finally, for months before Domenech’s arrival in Berlin, he mailed a series of posters to be dispersed through the city, which were then photographed and turned into a book.

If there is no longer an elsewhere, how can these notations be from somewhere? For some artists this question might lead to an embrace of rote formalism: the need to preserve art’s specialized elsewhere within the limits of painted canvas, behind the museum’s flimsy protective stanchions and the manicured hedges of great wealth. But for Domenech this has a different meaning: when he brings his notations from somewhere and the book of his art unfolds through the city like an enormous Jacob’s ladder it has the potential to obliterate art’s elsewhere in its creation of new, shared forms of language. More than anything, Domenech’s work provides a framework in which we can imagine an escape from the interiority that characterizes the conjunction of the book (especially the novel) with the formation of the liberal, individual subject that—seen today—appears so exhausted to continue much longer.

If humanity is to survive any of its current calamities, or to imagine the possibility of surviving all of them, then it will require new forms of communal life to emerge from a culture that, in the West, has struggled to leave behind the liberal subject. But if we can imagine, as Domenech does, a new kind of book emerging today, a book that is written in public and can be read together in domestic spaces as much as throughout the city or the country, a book that changes everything it touches into a book, a book that exists in space and helps to create a new kind of subject that can survive the twenty-first century, then we might be able to survive. It would be the most beautiful realization of what can happen when information brushes against information—what multiple bodies can do together—and it’s no coincidence that Domenech has brought these words to life in a light sculpture: because the sooner we hear what we have to say, the sooner we have a chance at the warm light of hope that emanates from his creations.

*This text was originally written on the occasion of Rafael Domenech’s exhibition “Notations from Somewhere” at HUA Berlin in 2020. Some changes to the original text have been made for this publication.*

**Giampaolo Bianconi** is a Curator at Museum Brandhorst, Munich, where he organized *Site Visit*, a month long series of installations, artist talks, and workshops focused on how artists work with site as a material in their work. Prior to working in Munich, Bianconi worked at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he organized numerous exhibitions, performances, and screenings while expanding the museum’s collection. His writing appears in catalogues and publications including *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and *Rhizome*.

**Rafael Domenech** (b.1989, Cuba) graduated with an M.F.A. from Columbia University. His work has been exhibited at SculptureCenter, New York; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge; Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City; The Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York; The Bass Museum, Miami Beach; Phillip and Patricia Frost Art Museum, Miami; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York; Artium Museum, Vitoria, Spain; and Hua International Gallery, Berlin, and Beijing. He has been the recipient of awards from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Tulsa Artist Fellowship, and the Cintas Foundation. His work can be found in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Pérez Art Museum Miami; The Bass Museum; The Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation Collection, Miami; The Bronx Museum; and the Great Meadows Foundation, Kentucky, among others.

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