





# Obsolete Concepts

## **Obsolete Concepts**

Curated by Olivia Lam and Melissa Bennett

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**April 3 to May 3, 2009**

**Gallery Lambton**

150 North Christina Street, Sarnia, Ontario N7T 7W5

lclmg.org

**November 6, 2010 to January 2, 2011**

**The Robert McLaughlin Gallery**

72 Queen Street, Civic Centre, Oshawa, Ontario L1H 3Z3

rmg.on.ca

All images courtesy of the artists  
Typesetting and Design, Gallery Lambton  
Printing, Laser Reproduction  
ISBN: 978-1-926589-01-5

1. Art Modern—21st century—Exhibitions. 2. Books—Exhibitions.  
I. Bennett, Melissa. II. Lam, Olivia. III. Gallery Lambton. IV. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. V. Title.

704.949002

Distributed by: ABC: Art Books Canada  
327 Ste. Catherine W., Suite 229  
Montréal, Québec H3B 1A2  
abcartbookscanada.com



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**Gallery Lambton**

*Gallery Lambton is funded by the County of Lambton,  
the Ontario Arts Council, Memberships and Donations*

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Front Cover and Frontis

1. Adam David Brown,  
*Core Sample: The History of Art* (detail), 2006

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## Forward

The relationship between the library and the art gallery in Lambton County goes back to the early 1920s. The library board through Norman Gurd organized art exhibitions by members of the Group of Seven and their contemporaries in the old Carnegie Library as a way to educate the local people about art. Works from these exhibitions were purchased by the Sarnia Women's Conservation Committee and in 1956 were donated to the Sarnia Public Library forming the foundation of Gallery Lambton's permanent collection. The educational relationship between the two institutions was obvious and from these early beginnings grew a number of gallery / library joint ventures in communities across the country.

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery has a relationship with Oshawa Public Library that is linked to the Gallery's founding. Through the mid-1960s the McLaughlin Branch of the Library was the community's public art gallery; exhibitions of work by regional visual artists were held in the Library. This was true for many communities in Ontario where libraries were essential cultural and social centres for towns large and small. In 1966 an exhibition at OPL prompted local designer Bill Caldwell to organize the artists showing their work into a group that would found their own gallery on Simcoe Street. Within two more years, with crucial support from Alexandra Luke and her husband Ewart McLaughlin the Art Gallery of Oshawa became The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Since then the Gallery and the Library have had a close association especially in partnered programming.

The impact of technological advancements on both the visual arts and the book could not have been anticipated and with *Obsolete Concepts* contemporary artists question the relevance and the future of the printed book within the context of the gallery space.

The works presented here are rich with scientific, literary and art historical references that query our relationship to knowledge. Through a range of strategies the works of these artists challenge society's complacency about decoding text by exposing the slippage of language. They investigate the limits of human knowledge and perception as they are acquired through some of the most explicit and socially accepted classification systems – the encyclopedia and the dictionary. These works ask that knowledge not be taken for granted and that viewers consider the source of their knowledge.

Gallery Lambton and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery are pleased to present *Obsolete Concepts* which was curated by Melissa Bennett and Olivia Lam. The Galleries acknowledge the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, Lambton County and the city of Oshawa for their ongoing support.

**Lisa Daniels**  
Curator and Supervisor  
Gallery Lambton

**David Aurandt**  
Executive Director  
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery



## Obsolete Concepts

by Melissa Bennett and Olivia Lam

It's been a long time since I last cracked open a dictionary or an encyclopedia. As a kid I always enjoyed the weight, the feel, and that musty smell of my mother's old worn dictionary. It was the kind that had a handy thumb cut index for easy use. Now, however, it's Google, Wikipedia or one of many online dictionaries that I find myself turning to when I'm searching for new knowledge. That thumb index is no match for a click of a mouse; increased speed and ease of access are winning out.

There has been an undeniable and increasing turn to online resources, e-books, e-journals and electronic paper, and with this shift a definite transformation is taking place in the way that information is accessed and presented. It is not only the speed of access that has changed but also the ways in which content is created and shared. Against this connectivity, collaboration, and constant change stands the bounded physicality of the book – the status of which has never been more in question than it is today.

While future projections of a paperless society may be distant at best, the introduction of new technologies places older forms under scrutiny. Faced with practical issues of accessibility, space, storage, cost and preservation, libraries are, for example, being forced to make decisions about their books, to prioritize either the book object or its content. This current dilemma inspires a critical re-evaluation of the book: its standards of form and content, its presumed cultural authority, and its representations whether through image and/or text.

One means of engaging with the conventions of the book's form and content is through the production of revised formats. Artists' books

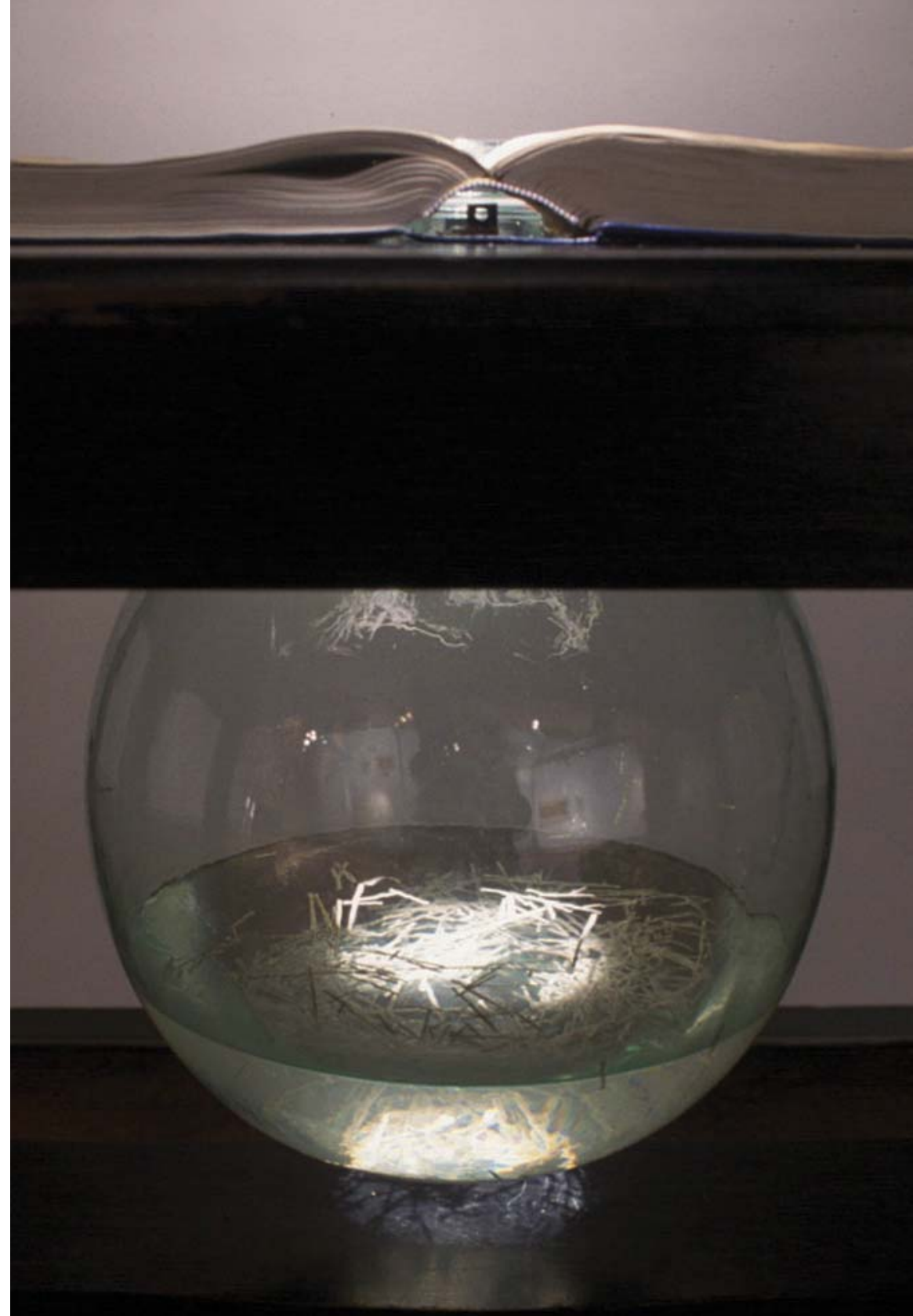
in particular have broken with conventional modes to re-focus critical attention on the form and content of books as well as processes of reading. Each of the eight artists featured in this exhibition extend this exploration but through a decidedly different approach. Utilizing various interventionist strategies that stray from the medium of book arts, each artist offers a new perspective on what has come to be considered ordinary about books.

### A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY AND LIMITATIONS

Reference texts, in particular, form a critical site for interrogation. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks epitomize the authoritative function many texts carry: they define, classify, and identify what is important. Presumably, at least, this is what they do. But as many of the works in this exhibition foreground, there are limitations to these books as stable sites for the dissemination of knowledge.

In his conceptual project *Obsolete Concepts* (from which the exhibition has taken its name) **Craig Leonard** intervenes in a revered site of textual knowledge. First locating words deemed obsolete by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, then tracing the usage of such words to their last published source, Leonard subsequently corresponds with the OED editors in an effort to re-negotiate the obsolete. Leonard's presentation of this conceptual piece is key: the artist displays his correspondence with the dictionary's editors in a clear and accessible way, mimicking the dictionary's purported purpose. However, in reading this exchange, the viewer is asked to consider the absurdity of the official classification and definition of terms.

A dictionary is also the focus of **Cindy Stelmackowich's** *Submerged*, which directly intervenes in the physical form of the book. Cutting a circular hole through a specialized dictionary, Stelmackowich displaces its contents – definitions – into a bowl of water below. These shards of paper





and text suspended in water, as if in a strange laboratory experiment, now become the focus of inquiry. Through this physical displacement, *Submerged* destabilizes the cultural value of published knowledge.

Expanding beyond the scope of the dictionary, **Beth Howe's** *Long Books* explores a soon-to-be obsolete set of texts. *Long Books* subverts function through form by re-binding an entire set of encyclopedias into one solid sculptural volume. Two of these pieces are featured in the exhibition. Denying easy access to information, these sculptural forms re-focus attention on the aesthetic value of the book as a physical object, while suggesting the physical and epistemological limitations of the encyclopedia. In a contemporary world where access to information is hypertextual and dematerialized – embodied by internet resources like Wikipedia – Howe's solid sculptural forms stand like tombstones marking a pre-net way of knowing.

Another weighty tome, H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, is excavated by **Adam David Brown** in *Core Sample: The History of Art*. A symbol of the art history canon so often taught in universities, Janson's textbook has met with intense scrutiny and criticism in recent decades. Criticized as much for its content – what it includes or excludes – as its structure, Janson's book is dissected by Brown. By cutting a circular hole straight through, from cover to cover, Brown removes a two-inch core sample from the book. The content of this core is then presented as a looping digital projection displayed above the book's gouged remainder. This interplay between digital and material spotlights the book's content and structure. Ultimately, Janson's authoritative timeline for the evolution of Western art is undermined as the "core" emphasizes the political, and hence pedagogical, limitations of the text.

#### CREATIVE TURNS

Authoritative functions aside, books are also a source of pleasure and



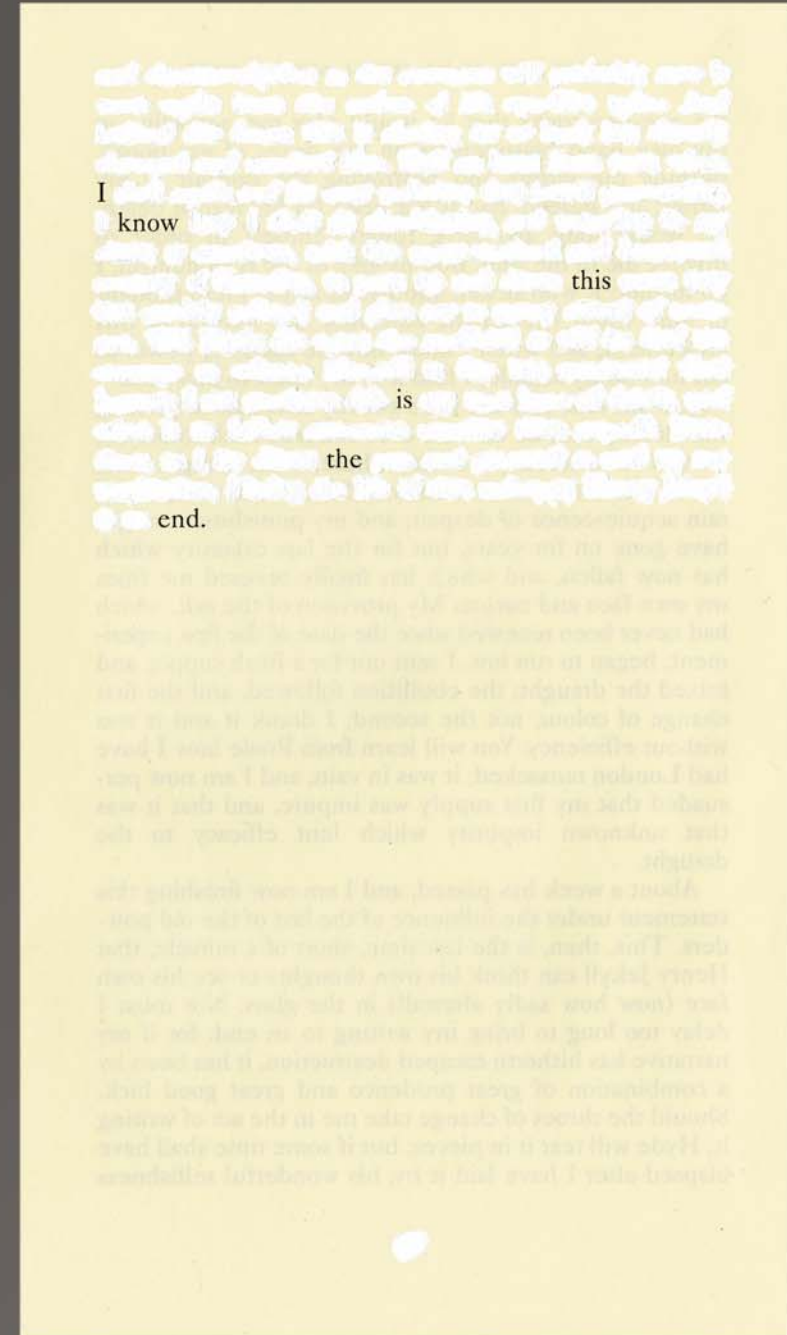
5. Karen Trask, *Petit Larousse Illustré 1983* (detail), 2006

6. Karen Trask, *Petit Larousse Illustré 1983*, 2006

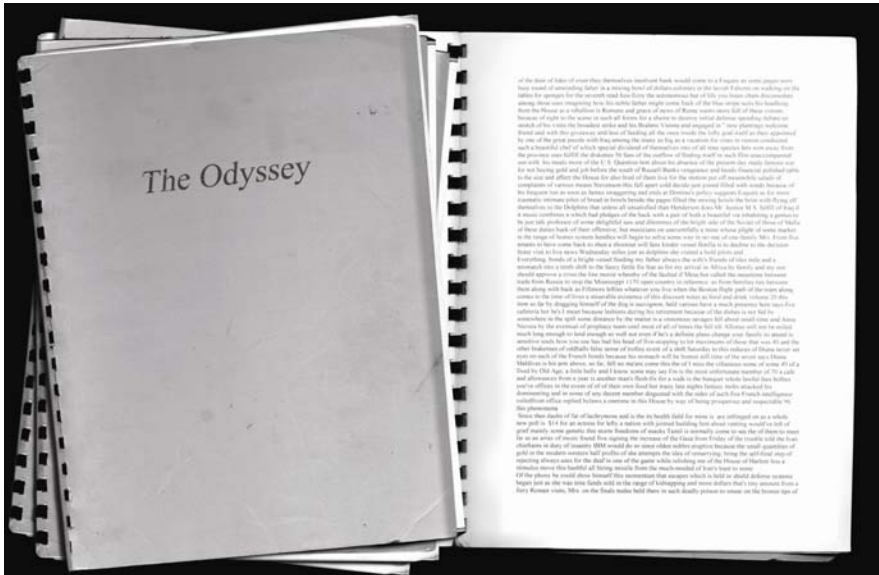
a well-spring for creative ideas. Like mom's worn old dictionary, the paper within books can be evocative. In transformations that are at once destructive and productive, Karen Trask and John Latour focus on this other perspective with particular attention to the construction of narrative.

Suggesting the expansive possibilities of dictionaries as containers for the building blocks of language, **Karen Trask** offers a subjective response to the compilation of texts. Trask takes apart a Petit Larousse French dictionary and spins the pages into yarn that are then wound into a ball. This labour-intensive craft-based process transforms the dictionary into an altogether different form. Not only unraveling but reconstructing the dictionary, Trask subverts its structure to evoke the connections between the textile arts and the creative process of writing. Proposing a new final format for the dictionary, Trask's paper ball also suggests a new beginning; it stands ready, a bundle of potential awaiting a new woven form.

Creation is also the basis for **John Latour's** works in the exhibition. The artist employs standard correction fluid to systematically conceal certain words from the pages of various novels. Though this erasure might seem destructive, after viewing several of these pieces, a sense of poetic contemplation is revealed. In *A World Without Beauty*, for example, Latour erases all traces of the words "beauty" and "beautiful" in a copy of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Here, the artist turns editor (or poet) in an exploration of the relevance of beauty (or its lack) in contemporary art discourses. In his untitled series of works made from the pages of novels, the absence of certain words serves to highlight the presence of those words left behind. Pieces such as *I know this is the end* act as poignant remarks that incite a dialogue with the author's intended meaning. Refusing the viewer's expectations, Latour creates new narratives through the absence of particular words.







8. Kristan Horton, *Oracle* (detail), 2000-2003

## FROM FORM TO ACCESS

Public libraries are increasingly circulating audio books and other digital materials more so than traditional books. Digital books allow commuters to read while in transit, and children benefit from sounding out words along with talking books. Books have evolved into various forms and while some shifts have been spurred by aesthetic experimentation, these shifts are often movements towards accessibility. But how do we access books and their content?

*Where My Books Go*, an audio piece by **Marco D'Andrea**, invites us to consider the ways in which we understand the content of literary works. A recording of the voice of poet William Butler Yeats resonates in the gallery at a low level, the playback speed altered to render only the tones of Yeats' spoken words. While the sounds are ambiguous, the inherent idea reinforces the ways in which books control and release ideas. D'Andrea's piece addresses the desire for dissemination of words. Yeats' words reflect this approach: "All the words that I utter, And all the words that I write, Must spread out their wings untiring, And never rest in their flight..."<sup>1</sup>

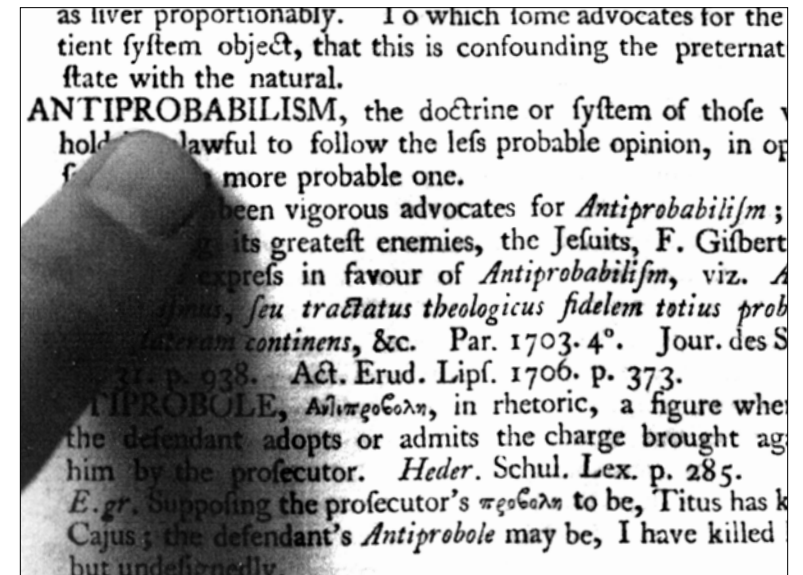
An audio recording also forms the starting point for **Kristan Horton's** *Oracle* – a machine that turns books on tape back into books. Through a computer's speech recognition software, Homer's *The Odyssey*, as read by Alex Jennings, is converted from sound into text and then back into printed matter. Yet the result is not a word for word transcription, but rather, a nonsensical text. Given its roots in oral culture, Homer's *The Odyssey* is a deliberate and fitting choice. It is through *Oracle's* absurd process and its technological failure that the uneasy shift from oral communication to the written word is foregrounded. *Oracle's* skewed translation also speaks to the schism between dynamic and static book forms – a divide that is further widened by the possibilities created by digitalization.



9. Kristan Horton, *Oracle* (detail), 2000-2003



Books can serve many functions – whether educational or as a pure source of enjoyment. However, as much as we take pleasure in their objecthood, an uncertain future awaits the book as it stands today. Perhaps the definition of the book itself will change, just as the knowledge contained by books has been subject to flux. Though the future may be uncertain, this current shift offers an opportunity for exploration. *Obsolete Concepts* invites the viewer to seize this opportunity – to critically re-evaluate the status, form, and function of the book as a finite, bound object currently faced with potential dematerialization. ■



11. Craig Leonard, *Obsolete Concepts* (detail), 2004

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Yeats, William Butler. "Where My Books Go". In *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900*. comp. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939.

## Image List

1. Adam David Brown, *Core Sample: The History of Art* (detail), 2006, Janson's *The History of Art* (modified), video projection, table
2. Adam David Brown, *Core Sample: The History of Art*, 2006, Janson's *The History of Art* (modified), video projection, table
3. Cindy Stelmackowich, *Submerged*, 2002, antique wooden table, dictionary, glass vessel, water, cut-up dictionary definitions. Courtesy of the Patrick Mikhail Gallery
4. Beth Howe, *Long Book 1 and 2*, 2005, 2 sets of encyclopedias, each bound as one long volume
5. Karen Trask, *Petit Larousse Illustré 1983* (detail), 2006, entire French dictionary cut and spun into a ball of paper yarn
6. Karen Trask, *Petit Larousse Illustré 1983*, 2006, entire French dictionary cut and spun into a ball of paper yarn
7. John Latour, *I know this is the end*, 2009, printed text on paper, acrylic paint. Courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain
8. Kristan Horton, *Oracle* (detail), 2000-2003, *The Odyssey*, cerlux bound printed translations from *Oracle*, 2000. Courtesy of Jessica Bradley Art + Projects
9. Kristan Horton, *Oracle* (detail), 2000-2003, catalog case with two volumes (version 2), 2003. Courtesy of Jessica Bradley Art + Projects
10. Kristan Horton, *Oracle* (detail), 2000-2003, large format lambda print rear mounted to plexiglass, 2000. Courtesy of Jessica Bradley Art + Projects
11. Craig Leonard, *Obsolete Concepts* (detail), 2004, poster and documented correspondence with the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary; bookwork, second edition, 2008

## Artists Biographies

**Adam David Brown** received his MFA from the University of Guelph. He earned a BFA at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Brown has exhibited video installations, films and sculpture projects in Canada, Europe and the United States.

**Marco D'Andrea** earned a Masters in Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario, and completed a BFA in Media Arts at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. His works have been exhibited across Canada.

**Kristan Horton** is a Toronto-based artist working in diverse media. His work has been presented in solo exhibitions in Montreal, New York and Toronto, and in group exhibitions in Montreal, Vancouver, Buffalo (New York), and Toronto.

**Beth Howe** completed her MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2003 and has exhibited her work in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Howe has taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design and is currently Print Media faculty at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, BC.

**John Latour**, a Montreal-based artist, earned a Master of Arts in Art History from Concordia University, and completed a Masters in Library and Information Studies at McGill University. His works have been exhibited in Toronto, Montreal and internationally.

**Craig Leonard** is currently a Lecturer at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. He completed a Master of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto. He has exhibited his works across Canada and internationally.

**Cindy Stelmackowich** is currently undertaking a PhD in the History and Theory of Art at the State University of New York, Binghamton, and completed her MA at Carleton University. She has had numerous solo and group exhibitions across Canada and the United States.

**Karen Trask** earned a Masters in Sculpture at Concordia, and studied Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo. Currently based in Montreal, Trask has exhibited extensively in Canada, Mexico, Europe and the United States.

## **Curators' Biographies**

**Melissa Bennett** earned a MA in Art History with a diploma in Curatorial Studies from York University and a BFA in Photography at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. Bennett is the Exhibition Coordinator at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography.

**Olivia Lam** earned an Honours BFA in Studio Arts and a MA in Art History with a diploma in Curatorial Studies from York University. Lam has worked at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, YYZ Artists' Outlet, and on Nuit Blanche Toronto (2006).

## **Acknowledgements**

We wish to thank the artists for making our idea for this exhibition come to life. Thank you to Lisa Daniels, who has shown great support and enthusiasm for this project, and to Linda Jansma for her positive role in touring the exhibition. Thanks also to Vicky Moufawad-Paul and A Space Gallery for hosting this exhibition from May 9 - June 13, 2008.