Ambivalent Images, Beloved Objects: Building Bridges between Picture Books and the Tangible World

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Ambivalent Images, Beloved Objects

Building Bridges between Picture Books and the Tangible World

Danielle Ridolfi
Above
Figure 1. Jessie Willcox Smith, *Picture Books in Winter*, 1905. Courtesy of the Dowd Illustration Research Archive, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.
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Building Bridges between Picture Books and the Tangible World

ABSTRACT “Ambivalent Images, Beloved Objects” examines how pedagogical theories prioritizing objects and direct sensory experiences in early childhood can be applied to the creation of picture book illustrations. In doing so, it positions picture books as educational tools, and advocates for the importance of using them not to recreate nature, but to connect readers with the tangible world of natural and human-made objects that our digital-driven culture eclipses. It strives towards a unifying pedagogical and aesthetic philosophy that accomplishes what illustrator Eric Carle characterizes as a bridge between the tactile world of objects and the world represented in illustrations.

This exploration builds upon the work of two pedagogues who made initial attempts to unify object-based theories with picture theories—Johann Pestalozzi and Lucy Sprague Mitchell—and uses the threads of their work to weave together a set of recommendations about the types of image-making strategies best suited for strengthening connections between pictures and the tangible world—namely, photography, collage, and tactile enhancements. It also considers the work of 20th and 21st century picture book illustrators who use these techniques, reflecting upon broader pedagogical benefits, including for the author’s personal practice.

This paper challenges practices of pictorial illusionism, arguing for the implicit superiority of nature over an artist’s rendering, and endorsing an “archaeological” approach to art-making that elevates practices like discovery, reconstruction, and curation that lead readers to the tangible world of objects right outside their own door.

“There should be something between the warmth of being held and holding on to a toy, and the more abstract experience of book learning. There should be a bridge between.”
—Eric Carle

In the 1905 edition of A Child’s Garden of Verses, illustrator Jessie Willcox Smith paints a scene of childhood so classic that it has remained relevant for almost 120 years. Adjacent to the poem “Picture-Books in Winter”, a young girl clad in a white dress, her stockings bunching at her ankles, nestles between couch cushions reading a picture book (see Figure 1). With her eyes focused on the page and her mouth slightly agape, she appears thoroughly taken with the experience. Three more books tucked into the surrounding cushions await their turn under her eager gaze. While we cannot see the pictures she devours, the poem provides clues: “Water now is turned to stone / Nurse and I can walk upon; / Still we find the flowing brooks / In the picture story-books.”

Behind the little girl’s head, a window reveals a white landscape with barren trees—winter has come, making the garden where she usually plays inhospitable. She shelters inside the nursery with her picture books, which connect her with the “pretty things” now absent from the garden. Even the patterned couch she sits on offers a surrogate spring. Her absorption in her book precludes engagement with her surroundings—in fact, she has turned her back to the window, paying no attention to the sun rays falling across the wall that promise warmth, and beckon her back into sensory awareness. In this moment, she inhabits only a world of images.

3 Ibid.
Like the child in the book, modern children experience much of their lives through pictures, relying on them as surrogates for remote objects and experiences. “We may see how all things are / Seas and cities, near and far,” continues the poem, all thanks to the ability of pictures to transport the viewer. In fact, pictures have been used pedagogically for centuries for precisely this reason. A visit to any modern classroom will reveal illustrated posters, vivid textbook pictures, and countless digital screens providing visual access to people in other countries, flora on the other side of the planet, and fauna at the bottom of the ocean. Pictures provide an elegant solution for delivering the world to a child. But this efficiency with which pictures can abbreviate nature has contributed to an explosion in their use not just for depicting far-off objects and places, but for representing the entire world, even the world that a child already has direct access to.

Pictures offer visual representations, inferior replacements I contend, of virtually every plant, animal, and object on the planet, constituting what visual culture scholar W.J.T. Mitchell calls a “second nature”—a complete visual world that runs parallel to the world of objects. Picture books help to populate this reproduced world, using engaging illustrations of household objects, animals, and natural wonders to teach children to read, count, and identify colors. This tradition of using picture books to teach began as early as the mid-17th century with the work of pedagogue and theologian Johann Amos Comenius. Comenius’s most notable work, Orbis Sensualium Pictus, is widely believed to be the first children’s picture book. With its over 150 images of animals, plants, and domestic objects, and a title meaning something akin to “The World Around Us in Pictures”, Orbis Sensualium Pictus is the epitome of a parallel visual world—an encyclopedic reproduction.

Comenius created this work in good faith; he believed pictures would help connect children to what he saw as a divinely-created world in a way that words alone could not. But something essential is lost in the translation from object to picture. Pictures compress and flatten complex, multi-sensory experiences into secondary experiences that are primarily about looking. As designer and illustrator Bruno Munari aptly points out, “reality in a work of art isn’t the reality of nature.” Regardless of their beauty and educational intentions, illustrations in picture books, and the words that accompany them, can never replicate direct experiences.

There have been lively debates about representation since Plato decisively cast artists out of his theoretical ideal city. He argued for the superiority of objects over pictorial duplicates, believing that artistic “imitations” were too far removed from an object’s divinely-inspired

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4 Ibid.
8 Munari, Teoremi Sull’Arte, 17.
form. Echoes of this praise for objects over pictures can be heard in the work of pedagogues specializing in early childhood, albeit for more practical than philosophical reasons. Young children learn most efficiently through direct and unmediated sensory experiences. As a result, early childhood educators have long advocated for pedagogy that incorporates direct contact with physical objects. Friedrich Froebel, the 19th century inventor of kindergarten filled his classroom with natural specimens like nuts, stones, and feathers to foster interest in the tangible. And early 20th century Italian pedagogue Maria Montessori designed sensory-rich wooden blocks and letters to fit in a child’s hands, advocating for learning by doing. Since then, scores of educators and psychologists have supported and further refined these ideas. Their neglect of the visual in their educational philosophies reveals a distaste for pictures, and a dismissal of their benefits as educational tools. These opinions create a quandary for picture book illustrators interested in educational aims, particularly those who adhere to this object-based epistemology.

How can illustrators reconcile the importance of tangible objects and direct experiences with their love, in fact our entire culture’s love, of images—a secondary experience—as a means of teaching and communicating?

If the world of images runs parallel to the world of objects, as Mitchell describes, this suggests a certain inability for the two worlds to converge—a resistance to compromise. But picture book illustrator Eric Carle pointed to a solution with his suggestion that “there should be a bridge between” the tactile world of objects and the world depicted in books. This essay will propose a unifying philosophy of image-making for picture books—one that accounts for the importance of contact with objects, both natural and human-made, while also celebrating the exuberance of illustration and its beneficial pedagogical applications. Specifically, I will examine ways of making images that offer more tangible experiences with the objects they depict, with “tangible” referring to direct, and unmediated encounters with both natural and fabricated objects that requires the use of multiple senses.

I will also turn to the philosophical work of pedagogues who made gestures towards an incorporation of pictures in their object-based epistemologies and use their ideas as a starting point. Specifically, I will refer often to the “here and now” philosophy, a set of ideas born out of the experimental Bank Street School, founded by American educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell—to my knowledge one of the only formal educational philosophies that infused object-based lessons into picture books for children. Additionally, I will also frequently reference the work of Johann Pestalozzi, a late 18th century Swiss educator who disavowed the use of pictures in educating children, but whose headstrong followers created thoughtful pictorial tools. While both philosophies left gaps, their ideas can serve as fruitful starting points—seeds for a more integrated philosophy of image-making that bridges the gap between pictures and objects.

In connecting image-making with the work of these educators, I argue for the need for illustrators, particularly those making work for children, to position their own work within theories of education and learning. I am not suggesting that a picture book maker and an educator are interchangeable roles. But picture books, whether read in a classroom or at home, are educational tools and benefit from being evaluated as such. Even books that are deal explicitly with educational topics (e.g., colors, the alphabet) still teach children by passing on subtle philosophies about the world. Professor of environmental science Ian Heneghan

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10 Plato cited Socrates’ metaphor of the three beds, in which a carpenter’s bed is only once removed from the “truth” of a bed made by God while an artist’s painting of a bed is twice removed. Deemed an “imitation”, Plato believed that even paintings highly faithful to reality could never capture certain qualities of an object.
14 The work of educational reformer John Dewey and child psychologist Jean Piaget are two of the most vocal advocates.
16 Marcus, Ways Of Telling, 52.
17 See Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s The Here and Now Storybook (1921) for the fullest account of these theories.
argues, for example, that the multitude of children's books set in gardens and forests are imbued with a subtle encouragement toward environmental ethics even in the absence of a didactic narrative. Even the simplest choices picture book illustrators make send powerful messages. Image-making is a form of education.

However, modern picture book publication is often more aligned with the interests of business than the needs of the child. When image-makers align themselves closely with educational philosophies, their work gets stronger, reinforced by a feedback loop between maker and audience, as evidenced by the picture book illustrators featured in this essay, including Eric Carle, Lois Ehlert, Tana Hoban, and Bruno Munari, who have maintained close educational ties, and in some cases, even created their own pedagogical frameworks. Even for illustrators who do not ascribe to the object-based epistemologies described in this essay, who make work that is purposely not tangible—topics like fantasy and science fiction—this essay can still serve as a reminder to engage in multidisciplinary consultation, which this paper will prompt, and to remain open to ambivalence about images.

There would be far less cause for concern about the images in picture books if we lived in the time of Willcox Smith—if picture books were only occasional interludes in a child’s life otherwise filled with afternoons catching bugs and picking flowers. But instead, we live in a time in which images are the most direct experiences with nature some children (and the adults who care for them) ever get. The modern era is characterized by what Mitchell calls “the pictorial turn” in which images, overwhelmingly delivered today via digital screens, have become the dominant mode of communication.

There is nothing inherently wrong with images, even digital ones—the problem lies in their dominance. When offered at such high volume, digital images preclude a child’s direct engagement with their environment. Even ostensibly educational digital images offer virtually no opportunity for sensory exploration.

“There is something wrong with a society,” laments associate professor of psychology Edward Reed, “that spends so much money—as well as countless hours of human effort—to make the least dregs of processed information available to everyone everywhere and yet does little or nothing to help us explore the world for ourselves.”

Opportunities for sensory exploration of the world are omnipresent, even for children in cities with limited access to nature, but are largely invisible to a culture immersed instead in digital worlds.

The images in picture books are already at a tremendous advantage over digital images—reading, or being read to, is already an engaging sensory experience. Reading often involves the warmth of a loved one’s lap, the tactility of the page turn, and the sonic qualities of recited words. Sound in picture books has been celebrated in picture books since Orbis Sensualium Pictus included onomatopoetic animal sounds in its text. But picture book illustrators should not rely on the vessel of

References:
19 Liam Heneghan, Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children’s Literature (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7–8.
20 Eric Carle (1929–2021) was an American author-illustrator who created over 70 picture books, primarily in collage with hand-painted papers he prepared in advance using various materials like carpet samples, paintbrush handles and broom bristles to add texture. Prior to illustrating picture books, he worked in advertising as a graphic designer.
21 Lois Ehlert (1934–2021) was an American author-illustrator who created over 40 picture books, mostly about the natural world, using a combination of collage and photomontage with photographs of her collections of folk art, fabric and other sewing notions, and natural objects like leaves and twigs. Her 1990 book Color Zoo won the Caldecott Honor.
22 Tana Hoban (1917–2006) was an American photographer who created many photographic picture books, many of which were wordless. She both took photographs on location as well as in her studio, usually involving arrangements of objects that taught concepts like numbers, shapes, and colors. Her 1980 book One Little Kitten won the Caldecott honor.
23 Bruno Munari (1907–1998) was an Italian artist, designer, author, and illustrator who created countless works aimed at children as well as adults, including artist books, sculptures, collages, and picture books. He created his picture books using diverse media but typically always used interactive or tactile elements, including flaps, die cuts, and vellum pages.
26 “Orbis Sensualium Pictus.” The text included such lines as “the frog croaketh” and “the cat cryeth” to integrate sound.
Bridging Pictures and Objects

In the early 20th century, inspired by the philosophies of John Dewey, educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell founded The Bank Street School in New York City, a progressive school that combined education with research. She believed that children learn best when given opportunities to interact with objects of interest. In addition to filling her classrooms with engaging materials, she also encouraged field trips to provide direct experiences with animals and objects—firetrucks, ducks, tugboats on the Hudson—that could only be accessed outside of the classroom. Importantly for the present discussion, she also wrote and published stories for children. Frustrated with the fairy tales that

the codex or the sonority of language to carry the bulk of the work. Despite their beauty and educational potential, picture books still mediate—they provide secondary experiences of the world. In fact, ecologist and philosopher David Abram argues that even the printed words on the page—pictorial symbols at their core—reinforce a turning away from the immediate world. Thus, the images in picture books must make deliberate efforts to guide children back into the tangible world, and are uniquely positioned to do so. They can provide direct links to nature and material objects, offer sensory experiences, and teach observational schemas. I argue that certain image-making strategies, namely collage, photography, and integrated tactile elements, are particularly suited to this task. As I will show, illustrations can do more than visually recreate the world—they can advance a centuries-old mission begun by educators deeply invested in the tangible world to build a bridge between pictures and objects.

27 Heneghan, Beasts at Bedtime, 32.
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The pictures Sprague Mitchell commissioned to accompany the 1948 update to the *Here and Now Storybook*, a collection of her theories and stories, reflect this lukewarm attitude—the drawings are ambiguous and noncommittal, as if uncertain about which details to show and which to withhold (see Figure 4). Sprague Mitchell certainly wasn’t going to allow images to upstage real objects. But she later equivocated, arriving at the belief that “there is room for both picture books and story books in a child’s life” praising the way a picture book allows even preliterate children to “read” a book independently.  

Undoubtedly, Sprague Mitchell’s tolerance for pictures was also influenced by the enormous success of Bank Street trainee Margaret Wise Brown, a children’s author who, along with her cadre of illustrators, published many successful here and now picture books. Many of these books, like *Goodnight Moon* (1947)—a meditative inventory of a child’s bedroom—and *The Important Book* (1949)—a veritable catalog of everyday objects—are excellent narrative specimens of the here and now approach. However, the accompanying illustrations, while beautiful and skillfully made, lacked the pedagogical precision of the narratives. Some of the pictures were volumetric and representational, as if seeking to mimic reality, some were flat and graphic, offering more conceptual depictions of the world, and still others treated illustrations as opportunities for ornamentation (see Figures 5 and 6). This result is not surprising—the here and now theory was originally educational and literary in nature; a cohesive philosophy in regards to images simply was not a priority.

These challenges consolidating an approach to image-making within a philosophy that prioritized object-based learning echoed those seen in the work of Johann Pestalozzi and his followers over 100 years prior. The 1798 founder of a school for children orphaned by violence of the French Revolution was deeply influenced by the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke’s writings on the importance of sensory experience in the acquisition of knowledge. Believing that pictures, contained mythical creatures, fictional places, and concepts too abstract for children to grasp, Sprague Mitchell wrote relatively plot-free tales that emphasized objects and experiences in a child’s vernacular—stoplights, cats and dogs, walks to school, and urban transportation like locomotives and automobiles. She called this philosophy the “here and now” approach because it is grounded in the simple reality of a child’s present moment. Ideally, according to Sprague Mitchell, the physical objects depicted in a here and now story would be physically available to the child during or soon after reading thereby “deepening the experience by giving it some pleasurable expression”. The full reading experience, then, was contingent upon physical contact with the objects.

Sprague Mitchell harbored an understandable ambivalence towards pictures. Her stories were meant to be read in the presence of the objects they described—in her mind, images were distracting and, more importantly, superfluous. The pictures Sprague Mitchell commissioned to accompany her 1948 update to the *Here and Now Storybook* were largely loose and sketchy, despite depicting complex objects like skyscrapers and automobiles.

33 Ibid, 9.
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Above
Figure 5. Leonard Weisgard, illustration from The Important Book, 1949. © Harper Collins.

Below
Figure 6. Clement Hurd, illustration from Goodnight Moon, 1947. © Harper & Row.
While Pestalozzi seems to have never warmed much to the idea of images, viewing them as rather antithetical to his core values, some of his followers did, particularly for situations in which interacting directly with the object of study was not practical (e.g., ancient forests, whales, coal mines). A Pestalozzian instructor could teach students about sheep using samples of wool from a specimen box, but teaching students, for instance, about the process of shearing sheep or their life on farms proved difficult without images. Like Bank Street, Pestalozzi’s team accommodated for images in their theories (albeit in different applications—picture books and educational posters respectively), but the latter group proffered more pointed recommendations about image construction through their systematic development of visual educational tools. Some of Pestalozzi’s followers advocated for hybrid experiences that balanced visual learning with more direct contact with objects. Amongst these tools were pictorial cards that resemble precursors to collage and images that heavily cued children to continue to explore the tangible world in conjunction with pictures.  

These initial attempts by Bank Street and

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37 Ibid, 11.
38 According to one of Pestalozzi’s assistants, a student once challenged the teacher’s use of pictures of windows for a lesson about glass, given that actual windows were present in the classroom that students could observe directly.
39 Carter, Object Lessons, 16.
40 Shaffer, Object Lessons and Early Learning, 35; Carter, Object Lessons, 16.
41 Carter, Object Lessons, 80.
acknowledge the perpetual flux of the here and now. She advised her authors that their stories would need to change over time to represent a child’s rapidly changing material reality.\textsuperscript{63}

It is only natural, then, that the way illustrators make pictures should change over time as well, to reflect our changing relationship with the material world and over-reliance on digital learning.\textsuperscript{44} Some of the object-based image-making methods I will examine feel like echoes of Pestalozzi and Bank Street, while others are more discontinuous. But all are well-suited for strengthening connections between pictures and tangible world in the 21st century.

Photography and Photomontage

Per early childhood educators, one of the most powerful ways to connect children with the tangible world is to provide them with physical objects. Most children are naturally curious about their surroundings, collecting and sorting as a means of understanding their world. The Mayo’s specimen drawers for the Pestalozzi classroom capitalized on this childhood interest. Like wunderkammers\textsuperscript{45}, specimen boxes offered direct access to a sampling of the larger world, and made cautious use of pictures to display objects too large, fragile, or remote to place inside a specimen box. For instance, Allison Caulkins and Louis Prang’s lithographic cards for object lessons featured highly rendered images of sets of objects (e.g., kitchen vessels and utensils) meant to prime a child for objects they would encounter after they left the classroom.\textsuperscript{46} The Important Book (1949) functioned similarly, offering a catalog of common objects—an apple, a glass, and grass—meant to prompt a closer reading of objects outside the book. In both cases, the illustrators leaned heavily on mimesis, straining with their paints and lithographic stones to summon objects. Leonard Weisgard even turned a page of The Important Book into a trompe l’oeil of a kitchen drawer filled with spoons. But for all their skillful beauty, these images are reproductions at heart. Today, photography and adjacent

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\textsuperscript{43} Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Here and Now Story Book, 8–9.  
\textsuperscript{44} Shaffer, Object Lessons and Early Learning, 27.  
\textsuperscript{45} Also called cabinets of curiosity, these precursors to museums originated in mid-sixteenth-century Europe, often contained exotic natural or fabricated objects, including precious stones, stuffed animal specimens, bones, fossils, and human artifacts.  
image-making tools offer new solutions, allowing the pages of picture books to, in essence, contain the objects they depict—to become cabinets of curiosity.

In using photography, picture book makers can sidestep the limitations of rendered drawings and their “counterfeit” depictions of the tangible world.

“A photograph is not a rendering, an imitation of an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it,” Art critic John Berger claims. “No painting or drawing, however naturalistic, belongs to its subject the way that a photograph does.”

Photographs capture imprints of a particular object at a particular place and time—what Susan Sontag describes as “a material vestige” that is “directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” A photographer is captured light contingent upon the physical presence of an object. Photographer Tana Hoban leaned heavily into the notion of photograph as stencil with her photograms in Shapes and Things (1970), images obtained via a process akin to cyanotype in which she exposed objects on photosensitive paper. The resulting graphic silhouettes offer powerful reminders of the object’s presence. This unique ontological duality—the state of being both an image of an object and the imprint of that object—makes photographs particularly suited to picture book illustrators who want to provide direct access to objects.

In much of the work by Lois Ehlert, an illustrator whose picture books heavily feature photographs of collections of folk art, fabric, and natural specimens, her desire to push her personal collection right through the page is palpable. She begins Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf (1991) with a photograph of a leaf taped to a slip of red construction paper, announcing “I’ve been saving this little leaf from my sugar maple tree so I could show it to you.” Drawings would convey only the idea of these objects—photographs honor the specificity of unique artifacts. While a child cannot physically grasp the objects in a picture, owning a photographic picture book is akin to object ownership. “To collect photographs is to collect the world,” says Sontag. And the opportunities picture books provide to group objects across pages highlights the similarities between picture books and museums. Photographic picture books often isolate objects from their backgrounds, analogous to the white walls of museums, keeping the focus on the objects themselves and their visual tactility.

Photographic picture books are indeed an exercise in curation. They approach the entire world as an archive of objects, and curating selections becomes a way to shape narrative. Hoban devoted much of her career to such books, using the viewfinder of her camera to isolate collections of found objects as well as more contrived arrangements in her studio. Groupings of objects on a picture book page invite the viewer to make meaningful connections. Those connection can be as simple as a common color, as in Toban’s Of Colors and Things (1989), or more complex narratives as in Ehlert’s Market Day (2000), a picture book depicting a journey to and from the farmer’s market. Curated objects in photographs can connect to personal narratives as well. “Objects are intricately entwined in our lives,” museum education expert Dr. Sharon Shaffer argues. “They hold memories, represent interests, trigger emotion, and define our personal history.” Thus, seeing very specific objects in photographs (e.g., a specific plastic toy frog that resembles the one a child took to the beach the previous summer) can facilitate personal meaning making amongst readers in a way that less specific drawings cannot. These are what museum curators call “social objects”—items that connect so vitally to the personal that they prompt greater engagement. Social objects are particularly useful for picture books, encouraging children to make connections to their own lives and past (or future) experiences with the tangible world.

Photographs, by definition, allow viewers to see the tangible world in unique ways—they freeze time and offer a longer look at an object than might otherwise be feasible. Crops, extreme close-ups, and die cuts that

51 Sontag, On Photography, 3.
52 At the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome’s 2022 Hoban exhibit “Looking Is a Game”, visitors were invited to curate objects like Hoban by arranging their choice of colorful objects inside a light box frame.
53 Shaffer, Object Lessons and Early Learning, 17.
54 Ibid, 24.
past the birds
that perch in the trees,
past the snakes
that sun
in the breeze,
isolate certain elements of the photographs encourage new intimacies with familiar objects and promote what designer Jenny Odell refers to as an “observational eros”—a celebration of tangible objects via close and mindful observations of their details. The Important Book (1949) illustrates this observational schema narratively with long breathless passages lauding the simple beauty of objects like apples or snow. “The important thing about snow is that it is white. It is cold, and light, it falls softly out of the sky, it is bright, and the shape of tiny stars, and crystals. It is always cold. And it melts,” Brown observes. The goal here is not to convey a narrative, but to luxuriate in sensory delights.

Illustrators can also use this effect pictorially by drawing attention to overlooked details. Munari’s book From Afar it was an Island (1971) features photographs of stones he collected at the seashore. Disorienting scale shifts and crops encourage readers to adopt previously unthinkable perspectives guided by Munari’s inventive commentary (e.g., that a tiny rock might actually be a large island scaled by Swiss mountain climbers). “Stones are a world to discover, a world of shapes, colours, textures, protrusions and ravines; if you look long and hard,” Munari explains. Hoban likewise encourages observational shifts in her Look series by using cut-out pages to temporarily crop ordinary objects in ways that render them alien. The goal is to show viewers not only where to look, but how, so as to gain new insights and perspectives. Such strategies can impact behavior outside of the reading context as well, encouraging children to approach their next walk outdoors with more mindfulness and observational fascination.

Photographs are not the only way of injecting the trace of an object into an illustration. Physical imprints of objects offer another interesting visual solution, including processes adjacent to photography, like cyanotypes, screenprinting, and relief printmaking. Munari’s workshop-esque picture book Roses in the Salad (1974; see Figure 25) features a series of relief prints made from sliced fruits and vegetables. The striking prints belie the humble objects that produced them, and create, according to Valeria Tassinari, a “museum in a vegetable patch.” These prints bear witness to a past presence, offering viewers direct connections even to objects that

57 Bruno Munari, From Afar It Is An Island (Mantova, Italy: Corraini Edizioni, 1971), 4.
58 The Look series includes several books with geometric die cuts framing Hoban’s photographs, including Just Look (1996) and Look! Look! Look! (1988).
59 Tana Hoban recalled reading an article about a Bank Street experiment in which children, who previously reported seeing “nothing” on their walk to school each day, were given cameras. With instructions to take photographs, the children recorded pictures of objects of all sorts—rivers, construction sites, food stands. The simple addition of an observational tool yielded behavior change.
Feature 1. The Necessity of Exploration in the picture book *When the Dark Clouds Come*

Making pictures of the natural world should require the illustrator to interact with that world, but too often, this essential step is skipped. The easy availability of stock photographs means that even illustrators who value drawing from life often rely on digital specimens. And born-digital illustrations lack even a connection to tangible drawing tools. Images, an already-mediated experience, become even more mediated under these conditions. I value the image-making strategies described in this essay because they are contingent upon contact with the tangible world. The only way to begin is to go for a walk.

To create the collage illustrations for *When the Dark Clouds Come*, I gathered found materials like fabric scraps, string, and photographs of surfaces like tree bark and speckled concrete. I also incorporated relief prints and texture rubbings from natural objects like oak leaves, flower stems, and even banana peels. Although I composed these elements on the computer, the most important work occurred outdoors. I allowed my discoveries to drive the work, not beginning to make until I had collected a large pile of materials. My illustrations were a call-and-response with the natural world. Margaret Wise Brown engaged in a similar process when she paddled around Manhattan in a canoe, visited a Long Island farm to pick potatoes, and spent afternoons watching bugs crawl. She understood that to write about the sensory joys of childhood, she needed to collect them. Her vivid prose, filled with sensory beauty, is analogous to my collaged materials—both are imprints of a lived experience. Creating in this way models the act of exploration for readers. I want to inspire children to look for crickets in their backyards at night and fallen leaves after a thunderstorm. With collage, I can show them how.

*Gary, In the Great Green Room, 67.*
no longer exist. Texture rubbings can serve a similar role and are ideal for capturing environmental objects, like Munari’s rubbings of concrete and manhole covers, or objects not conventionally associated with art-marking, like Ehlert’s use of a cheese grater for texture. While the indexical object is not always clear to a viewer, texture rubbings become like fossils embedded in stone, intriguing precisely because they reference a mysterious but very tangible object. The mystery invites engaging guessing games and fosters a curiosity about the tiny textural worlds that children ordinarily overlook.

Collage

Collage is another powerful technique that allows an image to retain not only a trace, but a physical remnant of the reference object. Fifty years before Picasso and Braque formally introduced collage to the fine art world, educators had been experimenting with collage without naming it as such. Pestalozzian proponents Oliver and Boyd created pictorial learning cards that contained detailed pictures of a scene supplemented by samples of related materials (e.g., an illustration of a whale was paired with whalebone and spermaceti samples attached to the card; see Figure 14). These cards provided a practical solution for teaching children about abstract or inaccessible places and things while retaining a connection to objects. While not integrated into a single composite image like most collages, the picture and object functioned as a single unit on the card. This cohabitation sent a powerful message. According to historian Sarah Carter, “the collage produced by pasting flat leaves or a silk cocoon onto a card implicitly argues for the impossibility of a picture, a mere representation, to capture the necessary qualities.” Picture book illustrators who use collage, then, capitalize not only on its visual exuberance, but its ability to quietly advocate for objects.

Unlike other forms of image-making that recreate the tangible world, collage results in an image that physically contains tangible objects. Collage involves the pasting down of materials like paper or even three-dimensional objects, thereby fusing them to a flat surface. The resulting image becomes what art historian Rosalind Krauss describes as a “species of material” when referring to artist Robert Rauschenberg’s collages. The

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61 Carter, Object Lessons, 71.
62 Ibid., 78.
64 Ibid.
Ambivalent Images, Beloved Objects

Ehlert’s *Snowballs* (1995) is an excellent example of this technique (see Figure 16). Each component object remains legible so that children can “read” the collage on either the macro level (as snowmen) or the micro level (as component objects—twigs, knitted fabric, buttons—with their own sub-stories). Close observation of such collages constitute what Leonard Marcus calls “an adventure in seeing” for young readers—an adventure that keeps viewers in a constant state of interactivity with the tangible world.

Scouring for collage materials occasionally results in the ambiguous find—tile fragments, pieces of wood, unreadable papers. But even these objects whose origin and history is unknown to both the image-maker and viewer still foster tangible connections to the material world. Incorporating ambiguous objects in a collage, according to Munari, requires the creative reconstruction of an unknown past. He used some of his collages as opportunities to construct so called “imaginary objects” by composing collages in ways that reflected educated guesses about the material’s identity. While sometimes prioritizing whimsy and creativity over scientific

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66 Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image.”
discovery (see Figures 26 and 31), these “imaginary objects” highlight collage’s fundamental reverence for the material world as a source of knowledge.

Constructing a collage, according to Munari, is not altogether unlike the reconstruction of bone fragments in a natural history museum—a process of arranging the material world to better understand it.69 Similarly, illustrator Leo Lionni likened his collage picture books, often centered on animals and nature, to terrariums—self-contained “miniature worlds” composed from specimens from the larger archive of the entire tangible world.70 Collages in picture books offer readers a child-sized world to inhabit, in which they can ponder not just what the objects in the collages might be, but how they are interrelated.

Collages offer visual reconstructions not only of their source materials but of the moment in which the artist discovered them. A found-object collage is a mirror of a precise moment. It is contingent upon the materials present at the time of its inception and thus, can provide clues about the maker’s location and identity. Making a collage with found-objects requires spontaneity—an improvisational relationship with one’s surroundings. Perhaps the best example of this philosophy—what Carle calls “der zufall” (chance or coincidence)—is Lionni’s picture book Little Blue and Little Yellow (1959), which he reportedly created with scrap paper on the spot during a train ride with his grandchildren.71 While charmingly crude (see Figure 28), Lionni’s torn geometric shaped papers become a historical record of a memory, just as compelling and articulate as a textual memoir.

Indeed, collage is more than image-making—it is an archival practice. And like any historical artifact, collage communicates the values and philosophies of its maker, and of the larger culture. The presence of found materials in a picture book illustration communicates to generations of children that the ordinary, mundane, material world that surrounds them—a world they may ordinarily overlook—is aesthetically and semiotically compelling, laden with creative possibility, and worthy of note. Collage elevates the tangible world, giving it a fighting chance of being remembered.

69 Ibid, 20.
Feature 2. Tiny Tangible Worlds in the City

“Everyone remembers with pleasure the best moments of childhood: sun-warmed stones against bare knees, a freshly-broken branch with its bark stripped off and sticky with resin, swallows diving over the river, the violet melancholy of the evening that, among the shrieks of bats, postpones play until the next day.”

—Bruno Munari, Fotocronache, 1997*

These are my favorite moments from childhood also—sensory experiences that live just beneath the surface of memory. I grew up in a small town adjacent to a state park, and spent weekends at our family cabin overlooking the river. But it’s grown harder to maintain a connection with the natural world now that I live in a city. Bruno Munari was well acquainted with this dilemma as well, and in 2022, I traveled to Milan, the city where he lived and worked, to take cues from his practice of finding nature everywhere.

My apartment was steps away from the Bosco Verticale, a residential tower with a scaffolding of tree-lined terraces boasting over 900 mature trees. It was a veritable arboretum, but cloistered several stories up, the trees taunted me each time I walked below. This building quickly became a metaphor for the experience of an urban nature-lover. I understood then that to access nature in the city would require creativity and a willingness to look in unexpected places, a philosophy that permeated Munari’s work.

Through his picture books, Munari invited readers to examine the patterns on stones and the bumps on an orange peel—to inhabit the tiny worlds that exist everywhere. These cues became my trail guide. As I breezed passed Milan’s cultural icons clogged with tourists taking selfies, I instead observed the weeds that sprouted up through the cobblestone, the sparkling granite on gravestones, and the tiny lizards scrambling over sun-baked stone walls. I even found a four-leaf clover. I think Munari would be proud. He taught me that nature is everywhere—even in the city. You just have to know how to look.

*Munari, Fotocronache, 31.
Artist books are powerful objects for turning a viewer’s attention to materiality. However, given their often intricate, fragile constructions and expensive production values, they tend not to be created with children in mind. Pop-up books, frequently marketed to children, are a notable exception, but a pop-up is still an inherently visual experience—children can admire it as sculpture but have no role to play in its function.

Children need books they can touch and manipulate to fully experience them as objects. While many books contain tactile or novelty covers, a reader is more apt to notice the materiality of a book when unique materials are integrated into the book’s pages, or even the narrative itself.⁷⁵

Munari’s Prelibri (1980), a collection of twelve square books constructed of materials like felt, wood, and plastic, provide a striking example. With no words, and only simple shapes and silhouettes for pictures, these books cue children to “read” only the materials. Even subtle materials, like textured paper, have the power to convey a sense of intimacy and invite involvement with a book.⁷⁶ While words and illustrations could easily be integrated with tactile books, restraint with the pictures focuses the reader’s attention on the materiality. Scaling back on text and illustration does not negate the possibility of narrative. In fact, highly tactile books allow the reader to construct their own narrative, driven by their real-time experiences.

Another powerful method of connecting a picture with the tangible world involves a sort of tactile mimesis—creating pictures that mirror the sensory qualities of the objects they represent. Die cuts mimic the experience of looking through windows or traveling through caves. Flaps mimic the mystery of opening up doors or cabinets. Carle described this technique as creating “a toy you can read, and a book you can touch,” which capitalizes on children’s innate desire to manipulate objects.⁷⁷ But the most fruitful applications for illustrators come when they apply interactive features to the pictures directly. In The Very Hungry Caterpillar (1969), die cut holes through the illustration turn the page into a green leaf chewed through by the titular caterpillar. Similarly, Munari’s Nella Nebbia di

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74 Gary, In The Great Green Room, 165.
76 Nodelman, Words About Pictures, 48.
77 Marcus, Ways Of Telling, 52.
with the objects it depicts, the child becomes not just a reader, but part of the book’s world. Poking their finger through a die cut hole, a child can actually become a caterpillar instead of just looking at a picture of one.\textsuperscript{79} Such interactive features place the reader at the center of the experience in the book, particularly when no illustrated human surrogates are visible, and prime them to take a more active and exploratory role in their own tangible world (see Feature 3 for an exploration of the

\textit{Milano} (1968) capitalizes on the interaction between its illustrations and vellum pages. Tactile elements can also be infused directly into the image, including embossing or embellishment with materials like sandpaper or fabric.\textsuperscript{78} When an illustration begins to share features with the objects it depicts, the child becomes not just a reader, but part of the book’s world. Poking their finger through a die cut hole, a child can actually become a caterpillar instead of just looking at a picture of one.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} Well worth a mention, but outside the scope of this paper, are picture books designed for children with limited sight, which feature Braille and tactile pictures. Such books can be useful even for sighted children, offering them glimpses into life with limited sensory abilities and tuning them into other senses. \textit{The Black Book of Colors} (2006) by Menena Cottin and illustrated by Rosana Faria offers a stunning example.

implications of including human characters in illustrations within an object-oriented framework).

The most notable limitation to the book-as-object approach is a practical one. The addition of unusual paper stocks and processes adds cost, making such projects less feasible for many commercial publishers. Unfortunately, profit is often prioritized above educational quality in the commercial book industry. However, even books that do not feature unusual materiality can offer object-based lessons. Megan Lambert’s Whole Book Approach encourages reading all picture books to children with the objectness of the book at the forefront. She encourages investigative procedures, including removing the book’s slip cover to examine the cover and binding and examining routinely overlooked material, like front matter and end papers. While this approach favors visual literacy, it could easily be adapted to highlight a book’s tactility.

Additionally, postmodern picture books, particularly those in which self-referentiality elevates the objectness of a book, offer interesting opportunities to connect children with the tangible. The Stinky Cheese Man (1992) provides a classic example in which Lane Smith’s illustrations feature such subversions as a character in the book appearing to rip out and invert the dedication page. In such books, argue Hammond and Nordstrom “readers can never become lost in the story because they are constantly reminded that this is a constructed book.” Even though these books tend to have standard printing formats, they call attention to their structure, thereby encouraging children to examine other books as objects more closely as well. And, as I will soon argue, using pictures in such a way that readers do not “become lost” in picture books is a critical component of creating more tangible experiences.

81 e.g., how design elements in a book like hierarchy, color, and crop communicate information about the narrative.
Above

Figure 21. Bruno Munari, illustrations from *Nello Nebbio di Milano*, 1968. © Corraini Edizioni. In this picture book, vellum pages mimic the appearance of fog in a city. Each page turn obscures the previous page’s imagery and upcoming illustrations can be seen through the haze of several layers of vellum. The center spreads feature bold, neon colored papers to depict the transition from the fog into a circus tent at the center of town.
Most contemporary picture books feature plucky human protagonists, or anthropomorphized animals. Such characters serve a variety of functions—they can invite personal identification, foster empathy, and usher readers through difficult emotional content. But I felt deeply ambivalent about the prospect of adding humans to When the Dark Clouds Come, my picture book about a summer storm. Each page turn brings changes to the environment of the book—the sky flashes, creatures flee, and rain drums on the roof. In essence, the storm is the protagonist, and I feared that a human would steal the spotlight.

Children’s literature critic Perry Nodelman affirms that children perceive humans, when present, to be the most important part of a picture—a counterproductive effect for books that seek to highlight other aspects of the tangible world. Putting humans in pictures requires readers to live vicariously through the actions and emotions of another instead of driving the experience themselves. Tana Hoban stopped including children in her photographs for precisely this reason. “I don’t want to pin down just who the child of the book is,” she argues; “I want readers to put themselves in the book”.

I am not arguing for the elimination of human-centric books. They can be particularly powerful for marginalized communities. The power of The Snowy Day (1962) is a function not only of Ezra Jack Keats’ engaging collages, but of the inclusion of Peter, one of the first non-caricatured African American characters in a children’s book. But offering picture books without humans is an alternative way to create accessible environments. In When the Dark Clouds Come, I struck a compromise by offering only hints of a human presence—a clothesline, scurrying umbrellas, an empty swing—implicitly arguing that humans are secondary to the narrative—that the story could be happening to anyone, most importantly, to you.
photographed objects from their backgrounds or abstracting objects through dramatic crops. This is no coincidence. Techniques for the faithful representation of reality are more hindrance than help to the illustrator interested in the tangible.

In his poem “To Any Reader,” Robert Louis Stevenson unwittingly cites the core problem of illusionistic images in picture books. He refers to such images as “windows,” referencing the way in which they reproduce nature so well that they become false portals to the tangible world. He warns readers who may be seduced by Willcox Smith’s pictures of children frolicking in nurseries and meadows, “But do not think you can at all, / By knocking on the window, call / That child to hear you.” While ultimately for Stevenson, this poem is a lamentation on the fleeting nature of childhood, there is another potential reading. Stevenson’s words unwittingly highlight the false beliefs that illusionistic pictures may promote. The depicted objects seem so real that a child believes he or she can almost reach out and touch them—lured into a false sense of intimacy with environments that are actually quite inaccessible. Illusionistic images create what professor of art and American culture studies and visual culture theorist D.B. Dowd calls a “simulation of immanence”—the use of elaborate artifice to create a feeling of immersion. These illusions wow even adult viewers. So when a complete, and often aesthetically stunning, replica of the tangible world exists within a picture book, offering colorful simulations of reality, what need does the child have to seek out the real thing? Such is the risk of pictorial illusion.

An image-making strategy like collage or relief printmaking, on the other hand, actively inhibits a sense of depth or illusionism. Collage, for instance, embraces transparency about its identity, eagerly revealing to viewers that it is a picture—a flat plane with colors and textures applied—and not a window to a world of depth. Unlike the Willcox Smith picture of a child reading (see Figure 1), an illustration of similar subject matter from Beatrice Alemagna’s collage-based picture book Child of Glass (2019; see Figure 24) uncouples itself from illusion. The child’s head is not a volumetric sphere but a plane of

The Case Against Illusionism

So far, I have focused primarily on how choice of artistic media can support a picture’s function. While I have brushed up against the problems of illusionism in illustration, I have spent less time thus far discussing how images should look in an object-based framework—their color, line, and shape. While the appearance of images is only one factor of several in the creation of tangible experiences, appearance can support (or hinder) purpose. Indeed, when illustrators take a more tangible approach to images, the formal qualities of those images tend to coalesce. Taken together, the images I have held up so far as examples of tangible pictures, while composed using diverse processes and media, eschew illusions of depth. Most largely contain flat, graphic depictions of objects and reduce forms into simple shapes. Even the books that use photography, a highly mimetic device, often employ graphic devices to interrupt pictorial illusionism, like isolating

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84 Stevenson, A Child’s Garden of Verses, 105.
85 Ibid, 105.
87 Nodelman, Words About Pictures, 74.
gridded collage clippings and naive marks that announce their flatness, like doodles on a notepad. Not all objects are faithfully recreated—the girl’s facial features have been reduced to simple lines, her body a rather featureless shape, and the orange field of swirling lines is recognizable as a bedspread only through the context clues of the thin black bed frame. The picture is legible, but leaves intentional gaps that can only be filled through interactions with the physical versions of these objects. While such illustrations draw viewers in with engaging color and form, the picture plane offers an obviously impermeable boundary that, unlike illusionistic pictures that transfix and lure inward, gently deflect viewers back into the tangible world.

Additionally, because of their aspirations of fooling or “taking in” the viewer, there is a fundamental power imbalance embedded in illusionistic images. Consider the intentional trickery of a trompe l’oeil painting or the sly airbrushing of images in advertisements. Even at their most anodyne, when the goal is not to delude but to dazzle, illusions require a show of technical ability that the viewer does not possess. While drawing is a human activity, simulations of light and atmospheric perspective “are not tools of the citizen-amateur,” says Dowd. “These are the tricks of a magician.”

When a picture book illustrator uses illusion, the already wide power differential between illustrator and child is further widened. Children will be wowed, but likely not motivated to action. And inaction would truly be a fatal flaw. Encouraging children to engage in creative acts—to follow the example of picture book illustrators who engage with the tangible world—is the desired outcome.

Illustrators can close this power gap by selecting accessible image-making strategies, like collage and texture rubbings, and non-professional media, like crayons, pencils, and humble found materials. Using accessible processes transforms children from the alienated “other” that Mitchell describes into an educated reader and burgeoning connoisseur of pictures, armed with a knowledge of and vocabulary for conversations about the art they see. Likewise, using materials likely found in a child’s home eliminates any

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90 Dowd, Stick Figures, 24.
Ambivalent Images, Beloved Objects

bars to entry for creative mimicry. Art critic Walter Benjamin’s warnings about the loss of a picture’s aura via reproduction are already of little concern to an illustrator quite supportive of mass production of their images for use in libraries, schools, and homes. Seeing children mirror the pictures and processes from a picture book reveals a book’s success in coaxing readers outwards.

Picture book artists can lean into this egalitarian approach to pictures not only by choosing accessible processes, but by making those processes more transparent through instruction. Instead of heavily guarding the authenticity of their work, illustrators for children should demystify art by serving dual roles as both illustrators and art educators. Publishing child-friendly autobiographical books and process guides, as Carle, Ehlert, and others have done, is one way to guide readers toward creative acts. Unlike traditional autobiographies, these books read more like inspirational workbooks, suggesting specific materials and offering detailed how-to photographs of techniques.

Additionally, picture book illustrators can double down on their dual roles as artists and educators by working directly with educational institutions (see Feature 4 for a case study of the lasting impacts of Munari’s collaborations with educators). Education can take many forms, from the establishment of formal pedagogical methods and organizations to disseminate them (the Bruno Munari Association in Italy and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts are notable examples) to smaller, albeit impactful, activities, like teaching art workshops or testing dummy books in schools. This sort of close collaboration between illustrators and pedagogy is rare, but highly fruitful, fostering multidisciplinary efforts amongst illustrators, librarians, teachers, and parents.

Art as Archaeology of the Present

Collectively, the image-making strategies recommended in this essay and their adjacent pedagogical activities coalesce in a unique philosophy that prioritizes discovery, collection, and curation over raw creation. Such practices define creativity “not as invention of something new but as revealing the unobserved aspects of what already exists.” This philosophy lies in stark contrast to many ideas coming from fine art, which prioritize creative genesis and originality. It resembles more closely the practices of field researchers digging for artifacts and museum curators reconstructing and displaying them. In fact, Munari gave artists the explicit advice to “act like an archaeologist,” arguing that all of the data left to us, both natural and fabricated—from stones shaped by eons of geologic activity to scraps of yesterday’s discarded newspaper—are worthy of artistic consideration.

Just as an archaeologist might craft a reproduction of a porcelain urn or a skeleton from individual shards or bones, so does a collage illustrator, for instance, craft entire compositions inspired by one found piece of paper. But in contrast to assembling skeletons, making pictures involves creative agency. Illustrating in this framework is a unique combination of observation and imagination, making an archaeological approach particularly well-suited to image-makers who revere objects just as much as pictures.

While archaeology implies an examination of the past, it also requires a mindful observation of the present. Modern culture is in dire need of anchors to the present moment. The causes of distraction are diverse for both children and adults—over-reliance on technology, the isolating qualities of digital images, and what Jenny Odell has called the cult of capitalist productivity, which promotes the false belief that spending time watching clouds or collecting stones is time wasted. And very often, even when we do allow ourselves, and our children, a moment of idyll time, a lack of practice with the skill of simply doing nothing leaves most to fall back on old distractions.

Speaking in 1971 of the rocks he collected at the Italian seaside, Munari laments: “a lot of people on these beautiful beaches read comics and listen to the radio seated on all these unique pieces they never notice.” This effect is even more pronounced today. The present, as in the “real”, tangible world, is so remote in modern culture, Mitchell argues, that it warrants sustained study—a “paleontology of the present”. Picture books by Carle, Munari, Ehlert, and others, have heeded this

95 Tassiniari, Who On Earth Is Bruno Munari, 10.
96 Cheating Time, 10–11.
97 Odell, How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy, xi.
98 Munari, From Afar It Is An Island, 5.
The book is enhanced by, but not contingent upon their completion. Just as Coppola’s Windows didn’t suggest, but required participation, it is worth considering how to construct picture books in such a way that they are not possible to finish without active exploration of the world outside of the book. To truly become archaeologists of the present, children need to do some of the digging themselves, ideally, right in their own backyards and communities, the spaces most chronically overlooked. Picture books themselves are also important artifacts, relaying information about the values and practices of the cultures that produce them. A growing recognition of their importance in scholarly study has given rise to the establishment of graphic history.

However, the goal for an archaeological imagemaker should be to cue their readers to not only look closely at the pages of books, but at their own worlds. Useful models for how to accomplish this can be found in public art projects. In her book, How To Do Nothing (2019), Odell cites Eleanor Coppola’s 1973 project Windows, which directed viewers to certain San Francisco buildings at specific times to observe what they saw. The buildings’ windows became framing devices for a slice of the present, encouraging a deep observation of an ostensibly insignificant, yet tangible, moment. Coppola could have taken photographs of these windows to hang in a gallery—instead, she required viewers to go and look for themselves.

The construction of picture book experiences can foster similar behaviors. Ehlert often gestured toward this by inserting activity instructions or scavenger-hunt like charts at the backs of her picture books—but such activities are merely suggestions. The book is enhanced by, but not contingent upon their completion. Just as Coppola’s Windows didn’t suggest, but required participation, it is worth considering how to construct picture books in such a way that they are not possible to finish without active exploration of the world outside of the book. To truly become archaeologists of the present, children need to do some of the digging themselves, ideally, right in their own backyards and communities, the spaces most chronically overlooked.

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100 Odell, How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy, 5.

101 See Snowballs (1995) for an example; the back matter includes a diagram of objects used in the book, educational information about snow, photographs of children building snowmen, and a popcorn ball recipe.

102 For instance, a book about the night sky might include a die cut viewfinder instead of illustrations and encourage children, along with a parent, to see how many stars they can count if they hold up the viewfinder to the sky. I hope that this example is generative. Solutions will require multidisciplinary brainstorming and iteration.
Above

Figure 27. Eric Carle, *Homage to Paul Klee’s Angels* 10, 2017. © Eric Carle. Carle created this series of non-narrative collages using the detritus in his studio—trash, shipping labels, cardboard boxes, and paint samples. The “scavenger mentality” that Carle demonstrated in this work is an excellent example of an archaeological approach to art (see footnote 70).
Our connections to the tangible world are fragile. Our culture operates more on virtual commodities, like images and ideas, than physical. Images and ideas are powerful, necessary tools capable of teaching and inspiring curiosity, but they should not replace engagement with the tangible world, particularly for children. But there are warning signs that such replacement has already begun. *Goodnight Moon* (1947) has been parodied countless times, typically involving modern updates to the objects in the “great green room”, making these parodies particularly precise gauges of material culture. The 2011 parody, *Goodnight iPad*, provides a truly dismal appraisal. The family’s belongings have become pictures on screens—a baby giggles at a digital image of a rattle while a father reads the newspaper on an e-reader, the physical papers relegated to the waste basket. It is what Guy Debord feared in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) when he lamented that “everything that was directly lived has been reduced to a representation.”

Archives along with adjacent graduate programs, of which the Illustration and Visual Culture MFA Program in the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art at Washington University in St. Louis is a recent example. Design scholars position the close study of visual objects as a legitimate, and effective, method of studying history. Thus, picture books exist not only as objects of education and entertainment, but as artifacts that will inform future generations about current values, conceptions of childhood, and social and environmental challenges. But the picture books that feature the image-making strategies I have discussed in this paper create even richer artifacts. Embedding found objects, texture rubbings, photographs, and other direct traces of the tangible world in books creates a fossilized present, like a time capsule, accessible to future generations for whom these objects are only memories. Such preservations are more important than ever given the tenuous nature of our relationship with the material world, and the precarity of the natural world itself.

Tenuous Connections

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moved away into a representation.\textsuperscript{106} But perhaps not all hope is lost. In the 50th anniversary version of \textit{The Very Hungry Caterpillar} (2019), the editors at Philomel praise Carle’s interactive books as early precursors to apps—a dubious comparison given the chasm between Carle’s goals and those of electronic media. However, Carle’s books were never, in fact, replaced by screens—the physical codex remains too popular.\textsuperscript{107} Books might be the one material object our culture refuses to let go of, making them potent points of intervention—tools for illustrators ready to fill them with tangible experiences.

Our connections with the natural world are also precarious. While nature-related picture books remain popular, children actually go outdoors less than they did a generation ago, and when they do venture out, it is most often not the unstructured play that allows for acts of discovery and exploration.\textsuperscript{108} Children’s contact with the animal world is also impoverished, with zoos being their primary opportunities for interaction—a context that Berger argues so marginalizes animals that it is no longer an authentic experience, but rather an “epitaph” to a lost relationship.\textsuperscript{109} Even encounters with local animal inhabitants have been lost for children; research demonstrates that children are better able to identify Pokémon characters than native species near their home.\textsuperscript{110}

Sadly, a schism exists between humans and the myriad organisms we share space with.\textsuperscript{111} Pictures of animals in books and commercial products like toys and decor have exploded, straining to fill this void. The desire to preserve, at least pictorially, is one reason Mitchell proffers for the unprecedented popularity of images of the dinosaur in modern visual culture.\textsuperscript{112} While pictorial representations can connect viewers with a material past, they can never compensate for categorical losses in our connections with the natural world—and certainly not for the loss of entire species. As environmental destruction and extinction events due to climate change and other human-related factors continue, these tensions will grow. Image-making can build bridges between the image and the tangible world, but it will be nearly impossible to foster tangible connections with spaces and creatures that no longer exist for anyone, anywhere. Such are the challenges that illustrators will face in the future.

\textbf{Building Bridges to the Future}

Picture book illustrators can serve powerful roles in the education of children, not just in the type of content they select, but in the very posture of their work. Illustration can script the behaviors that children engage in both while reading and long after they close a book. The little girl in Willcox Smith’s illustration for “Picture-Books in Winter” is deeply immersed in the experience of looking. While we cannot see the picture in her book, we can imagine that it is just as beautifully and carefully

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[107] Charles Spence, “The Multisensory Experience of Handling and Reading Books,” \textit{Multisensory Research} 33 (2020): 902–28; Some museum exhibitions, including “Sensational Books” at the Bodleian Libraries in 2022, are celebrating the multisensory aspects of books, including their sounds and smells.
\item[109] Berger, \textit{About Looking}, 21.
\item[110] Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 33.
\item[111] Odell, \textit{How to Do Nothing}, 122; Odell argues that we lack a fundamental knowledge of our bioregion—a geographical area defined by ecological systems and native species.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Feature 4. Case Study at La Fattoria delle Ginestre

Munari argued that traditional schools turned to pictorial methods of teaching too soon, before a child had exhausted their needs for tactile exploration. Therefore, at La Fattoria delle Ginestre, a small Munari Method school in Montebello della Battaglia, Italy, teachers use picture books as a springboard to more tangible lessons.

The day of my visit in June 2022 began with a reading of Munari’s picture book *Mai Contenti* (1945). Afterwards, the teacher led the children in their own book-making project. They discussed *Mai Contenti*’s texture and flaps, brainstorming similar ways to manipulate their paper. They crumpled their paper, tugged it between their hands, scraped it across the rough tabletop, rustled it near their ears, and ran their tiny figures over its surface like a chorus of insects rubbing a summer song. Each child then created a “book” with their crinkled folio, some with unique folds, tears, or additions of string. The teacher offered minor technical assistance when needed but largely allowed the child’s work to be self-directed. The day ended with a walk through the woods with the goal of finding natural objects with textures similar to their paper. The children returned with crisp leaves, stalks of wheat, and reports of textured tree bark graciously left intact.

To an educator or parent, such a process of pairing every picture book with a set of associated activities and sensory explorations may feel daunting or laborious, but it is well worth the effort. Children, who possess an almost insatiable desire for sensory input, will be eternally grateful. And what better way to finish the story in a picture book than by living it?

*Bruno Munari, I Laboratori Tattili (Mantova, Italy: Maurizio Corraini, 1985).*

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**Above**

*Figure 30.* Photograph from La Fattoria delle Ginestre, 2022. © Danielle Ridolfi. At the end of the book-making activity, the teacher strung the students’ books across the room on a clothesline, elevating the humble work into an art exhibition and inviting contemplation and discussion.
rendered as the painting itself—mimicking the delicate springtime garden the girl longs for. But this illustration and its associated poem suggests that a closer relationship with nature merely requires a deeper look at the perfect simulacrum of an artist's picture. Such posturing in picture books is analogous to what Dr. Elee Wood calls an "over-privileging of the visual image" and a turning away from the tangible world. But when used differently, pictures can cue readers to explore the world outside of the book instead of getting lost in simulation.

For centuries, educators and pedagogues have argued for the importance of direct, unmediated sensory-based experiences with the world over pictorial representations. But pictures have a power that should not be overlooked—a power to communicate complex stories and extend a child's vernacular beyond the fairly limited scope of their immediate surroundings, particularly when paired with words in picture books. A compromise between the world of objects and the world of pictures is needed. Carle ventured,

"There should be something between the warmth of being held and holding onto a toy, and the more abstract experience of book learning. There should be a bridge between."

Sprague Mitchell's here and now theories that prioritize everyday objects and the experimental picture-objects of Pestalozzi's pedagogical descendants provide something of the foundation of such a bridge between pictures and objects. Picture book illustrators, like Carle, Ehlert, Munari, and Toban have given it further form, fleshing out image-making approaches contingent upon the tangible world. But creating true connections between pictures and objects requires more than just a set of illustration techniques and media—it involves a constellation of values and practices both aesthetic and philosophical, all connected by a belief that contact with objects should not be lost in our world of images. Let us briefly review each of these practices and values in turn.

Material Contingencies: Images should emphasize and rely upon materiality, including but certainly not limited to collage, photography, photomontage, imprints or rubbings, and the addition of tactile and interactive features. These image-making strategies not only embed objects in images, they also are contingent upon the image-maker's physical contact with these objects. Such pictures assume that sensory exploration of the world is beneficial not only for children but also for illustrators.

Flatness Over Illusionism: An image should not strive for an illusionistic recreation of nature. Such illusions monopolize a reader's attention and serve as rivals to, instead of connections with, the objects they represent. Instead, images that are transparent about their flatness draw the viewer’s attention to their tactile surface and material origins. The avoidance of illusionism also promotes an egalitarian power structure with children and assumes that motivating children to create, not dazzling them with creative genius, is the desired goal.

An Experiential Stance: Picture book illustrators should strive to create experiences more than just stories—participatory and multi-sensory experiences with opportunities for a child to explore, discover, or manipulate. Ideally, picture books can also cue children to notice ordinarily overlooked details and teach mindful observation of the present moment. Such a stance argues for the child's need to construct knowledge through sensory exploration.

An Archaeological Approach to Art: Instead of treating illustration as a means of artistic invention, illustration should be used as a tool to discover, frame, and elevate the objects that already exist. Image-making practices like collaging with found materials, recording objects through texture rubbings, and photographing textures, are more aligned with the activities of an archaeologist than traditional fine art. Such practices assume that the tangible world is far more interesting than an artist's recreation, and invite broader definitions of art.

While the philosophical practice described above offers myriad creative possibilities, drawbacks exist. The production of picture books is contingent upon the values of groups with conflicting goals, including illustrators, publishers, librarians, and parents. Adults fully mediate the production of picture books, and too often overlook the educational, psychological, and emotional needs of children. And many image-makers struggle to acknowledge the need to think more expansively about illustration. Munari's assertion that the Mona Lisa wants to flee her canvas back into the real world is more than just a playful quip—it is a testimony to an ambivalence towards representation that some picture book makers silently share.
But such pictorial ambivalence—such willingness to acknowledge the limitation of images—rarely finds its way into modern picture book scholarship. Picture book reviews tend to offer overly-doting examination of pictures with little critical analysis, and many picture book conferences prioritize publishing over purpose. The siloed approach and the sentimentality that permeates the discussion, blunts opportunities for creative growth.

Despite the challenges, the benefits of a unified practice of pictures and objects are far-reaching not only for illustrators, but for other professionals using pictures in the education of young children, including children’s museum curators. There are many parallels between picture book illustration and museum practices. Both contexts have the shared goal of connecting children with objects, whether in museum cases or embedded in the printed page. As such, curators can benefit from applying the current pedagogical practices to their settings by offering tactile reproductions of objects of interest, encouraging closer observation through unusual magnifications of exhibited objects, and leading the child back into the tangible world through adjacent art projects or activities. Educators can also embed such activities into their classrooms, modeling for students how the ideas embodied in a picture book can be acted out. Children’s librarians and parents interested in object-based epistemologies can similarly draw upon the current philosophies, using the list of characteristics described in this essay as a selection rubric for picture books.

Occasionally, Munari left his collages intentionally incomplete, willing future viewers to build upon the reconstruction he had begun (see Figure 31). He even left a space for the name of his future co-artists. Munari relished in the fact that each person’s result would look different, driven by their particular place and moment in the world. “Participating is important,” he said, referring both to the artistic process, and to life itself. The most powerful images are contingent not only upon the image-maker’s contact with the tangible world, but also the viewer’s direct participation in it. Illustrators do not have to choose between their allegiance to pictures versus objects. Creating pictures that highlight the best of both—pictures that require looking, collecting, discovering and making—ensures that we will never lose touch with the tangible.

Munari readily acknowledges the limitations of art: “Every means has its limits / music is blind / painting is dumb / sculpture is paralytic / but all of them try craftily / to make themselves complete.”

“If Leonardo’s Gioconda had legs, she would leave art and return to reality. Reality in a work of art isn’t the reality of nature.”

“Every means has its limits / music is blind / painting is dumb / sculpture is paralytic / but all of them try craftily / to make themselves complete.”

115 Bruno Munari, Teoremi Sull’Arte (Mantova, Italy: Corraini Edizioni, 2003), 17.

116 Ibid, 25.
117 Cheating Time, 29.
Above
Figure 31. Bruno Munari, *Ricostruzione teorica di un oggetto immaginario*, 1976, collage and mixed media, 44 x 34 cm. © Corraini Edizioni.
Bibliography


THE TANGIBLE WORLD BEHIND THIS WORK

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Figure 32. Danielle Ridolfi, illustration from *When the Dark Clouds Come*, 2023. © Danielle Ridolfi.