

Tauba Auerbach: Dimensional Slippages

By Karen L. Schiff

How can our multidimensional world be conveyed by a flat surface? Tauba Auerbach has explored this question in artist's books and print editions over the past few years through diverse strategies for representing the spaces between two and three dimensions. Many of her most successful prints deliver spatially disorienting surprises similar to those of the breakout paintings she showed at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, in which two-dimensional surfaces seemed wrinkled into funky three-dimensional textures. Auerbach had folded, rolled, and/or scrunched up each canvas, smoothed it back down and highlighted the residual topographies by spray-painting contrasting colors from different directions; then she stretched the canvas flat again. The results showed two-dimensional shadows of physical events. Auerbach claims she does not want her recent works in print to “just take what I’ve been doing with my paintings and do them in print form.”¹ Still, her print projects, like her paintings, offer stunning visual ruminations on the spatial illusionism of art in general.

The six etchings of *Mesh/Moiré* (2012)—the most recent of her projects with Paulson Bott Press—resemble Auerbach’s Biennial paintings, though in the prints the palette is more muted and the textures more finely grained. The images record patterns of visual interference between two grids slightly out of alignment, each made by pressing tautly stretched mesh into etching soft ground. The two plates were then printed in different colors, one over the other, and the interaction of the two rectilinear patterns produced the illusory moiré effect of ripples. Because the interaction between the two layers changed dramatically with even the tiniest shift in registration, each print is (delightfully) irreproducible.

The three *Plate Distortion* aquatints done a year earlier resemble mountainous terrain seen from above and illuminated by a strong yet ethereal moonlight. Auerbach made them by aquatinting and crumpling pieces of copper foil, which were then etched and flattened onto a plate for printing. In the *Fold/Slice Topo* series (also 2011), topography is rendered



Tauba Auerbach, *Mesh/Moire II* (2012), color soft-ground etching, image 31 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches, sheet 40 1/2 x 30 inches. Edition of 40. Printed and published by Paulson Bott Press, Berkeley, CA. ©Tauba Auerbach.

schematically, as if going from the satellite to the standard view in Google Maps. The multistep process involved slicing intricately folded paper into parallel strips that were then unfolded and reassembled on the plate; alternate strips were removed and the remainder used as stencils for aquatinting the plate. This process produced bands of flat color to represent the changing elevations in Auerbach’s original

folded forms.² To perceive the illusion, the viewer must imagine the three-dimensional “landscape” through which the image presents a horizontal slice. The *Fold/Slice Topo* series is a labor-intensive study in graphic symmetry—unlike the *Plate Distortion* experiments in unpredictable geomorphic forms—but the symmetry is not absolute, so the highly deliberate process avoids looking mechanical.

Auerbach's recent book works exploit the codex form to investigate the zone between spatial dimensions. In a book, each page is a two-dimensional plane, but the pages together form a three-dimensional sculptural object. And a book page, like a topographical map, is a flat surface that launches the reader into a complex imagined world. Maps distill three-dimensional physicality, but a book typically uses language to open up fantasies that have no specific material dimensions.

Auerbach's 2008 book, *50/50*, served as a seedbed for subsequent projects. It is built from 50 sheets of paper, each printed on both sides with a different computer-generated geometry in equal proportions black and white. Though the patterns suggest the binary data of digital codes, and black ink on white paper always signals reading, the pages contain no text. The high contrast produces an optical effect of pulsing light, and many patterns undulate like Op Art paintings or Altair Design coloring books. Black and white seem to switch positions between foreground and background, then suddenly assume the complete flatness of graphic design. This flipping between two and three dimensions echoes the basic conditions of any book: a page of printed text can be seen as visual pattern on the paper's surface, or as the gateway into the depths of an ideational world. In Auerbach's work both possibilities stay active.

The half-and-half conceit is embedded in all aspects of this book: the spine is half black and half white; one cover is black book board, the other is white; the title is die-cut into both covers and the publication information is embossed on the inside of both covers because printing these few words in contrasting ink would have thrown off the perfect ratios. Which is the front cover—the black or the white? Which way is up? The book's contents are equally accessible from either side regardless of how the book is shelved or held. Indeterminacy permeates the object and evokes the act of reading, in which we lose touch with our physical environment and swim in an imaginative zone beyond language, reminiscent of the limitless, prelingual "oceanic feeling" that Freud analyzed as a non-egoic contiguity between the subject and the world.³

Auerbach further extended these ideas in tiled floor installations, but with a random distribution of parts, so the alternation of colors creates visual static instead of illusion. Some viewers might see it as

a twist on bathroom tiling, an eccentric adaptation of a quotidian space, while others might find the pattern so assertive and vibrant that they can focus only on the flat floor, while the dimensionality of the room around it escapes notice. (These

information whose variety is bounded by systemic rules.

The book Auerbach introduced at the 2011 New York Art Book Fair approached dimensional ambiguity from quite a different angle, through the populist form of



Tauba Auerbach, *Plate Distortion III* (2011), color aquatint etching, image size 34 x 24 1/2 inches, sheet 44 x 33 1/2 inches. Edition of 35. Printed and published by Paulson Bott Press, Berkeley, CA. ©Tauba Auerbach.

patterns were also employed in the etchings *50/50, Random (Fine)*; *50/50, Random (Coarse)*; *50/50, Zoom In/Zoom Out*; and the related color etchings *A Half Times a Half Times a Half (Fine)* and *A Half Times a Half Times a Half (Coarse)*; all 2008. Auerbach dramatizes the ubiquity of electronic data by filling the visual field with binary

the pop-up book. Each of the six slim folios of *[2,3]* (2011) opens into a large, densely colored, three-dimensional structure: gem-like polyhedrons, nested pyramids, a honeycombed sphere, a ziggurat that rises 18 inches tall. With the dense, saturated colors of its die-cut pages, it is like a meeting of Platonic solids and Romper



Tauba Auerbach, *Fold/Slice Topo I* (2011), color aquatint etching, image 36 x 27 inches, sheet 45 x 35 inches. Edition of 35. Printed and published by Paulson Bott Press, Berkeley, CA. ©Tauba Auerbach.

Room. Speaking about the project, Auerbach explained her interest in the transition between dimensions, but implored readers to skip over the part when the shape is unfolding. The comma in the title [2,3] does suggest a mathematical set of two discrete numbers (or dimensions), rather than the impenetrable infinities that lie between, but fascination lies in the transition: how does flatness transform into fullness? At what moment does the second dimension recognizably shift into the third? What is the reader's experience while opening a folio, or when lifting any book cover?

Auerbach's *Filing System*, made with Ribouli Digital the following year, explored this question succinctly: a manila folder opens to reveal a second folder, sliced at various lengths in 1/4-inch increments. The slices are folded and mounted so the reader experiences a pop-up surprise, this one with more delicate colors and proportions than the pop-ups of [2,3]. This "filing" folder is not for filing, and the "system" is not obedient (unless Auerbach is referring to her system for filing or slicing the folder into strips): we read books to encounter the unexpected.

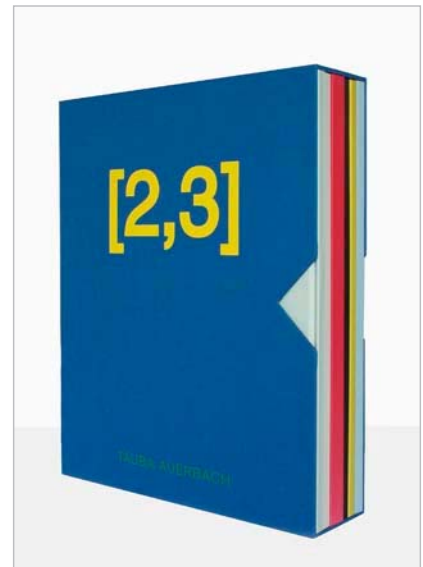
In a statement about the title of her exhibition that same year at John McWhinnie (at Glenn Horowitz Bookseller), "A Book Is Not An X," Auerbach goes beyond her own claim (in a 2010 article on Carsten Nicolai's work) that "a book is an X-axis, the format is almost always linear; the content, bound in a prescribed order, marches single file."⁴ In its echo of Magritte's "This Is Not a Pipe" (and Michel Foucault's later exegesis of Magritte's title), Auerbach's title further suggests that a book cannot be constrained by any conceptual category (represented by the variable "x") at all.

Two digitally printed books at the Horowitz exhibition make this point with lucid elegance. *Marble* (2011) and *Wood* (2011) document stages in sanding a block of the title materials: each page reproduces a scan made as the materials' inner surfaces were revealed—a two-dimensional slice of the three-dimensional thing. Opening the book is like dissecting the object. How rare, to peer into the

interiors of such solid chunks of nature! Turning the pages, one could trace the progress of veins within the stone or knots in the wood: physical mutations become narrative plots.

The stone and wood chosen by Auerbach are visually striking, and open up a variety of cultural and historical interpretations. Both materials refer to moments in the history of textual production: ancient tablets were made of stone, and medieval tablets were made of wood. The word "book" itself probably derives from the Germanic root for beech (in medieval times, people would write on beech tablets or directly on these tree trunks—as they sometimes still do). The wood slices further point to the origin of most contemporary book paper.

Marble cannot help but bring to mind the practice of paper marbling, which historically has decorated both endsheets and paper edges of finely bound volumes. (In the original 1760–67 edition of *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne inserted two pages of Turkish marbling into the text, calling them "the motley emblem of my work!"—erratic patterns that summed up his ideas about vitality and variety in life and literature.) In *Marble*, as in *Tristram Shandy*, the pattern alters as you proceed from the recto to the verso of the page: though ultra-thin, the slice is thick enough to admit change. The reader must imagine the spatial and temporal gap that lies between by holding in mind both sides of the page, seen at different moments in time. Auerbach extends the pattern, in this book as in *Wood*, onto the edges of the





Tauba Auerbach, **Wood** (2011), digital offset printing on Mohawk superfine paper with hand-painted edges, 17 x 9 1/2 x 2 inches. Binding by Daniel E. Kelm and Leah H. Purcell at the Wide Awake Garage in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Edge painting by Tauba Auerbach and Ioana Stoian. ©Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.

text block, again asking readers to turn the book to see one surface after another.

Another book in the exhibition, *Float* (2011), used printed shapes on clear plastic pages to dramatize the changes from one page to the next and to make the book's dimensionality more palpable. Within the text block, some images were reproduced repeatedly from page to page, giving them depth the way repeating a square through space will yield a cube. In other cases, each page presented a slice of an image that only appeared to "float" whole when the book was closed, and the viewer could see through all the pages and view the aggregate image of the floating object.

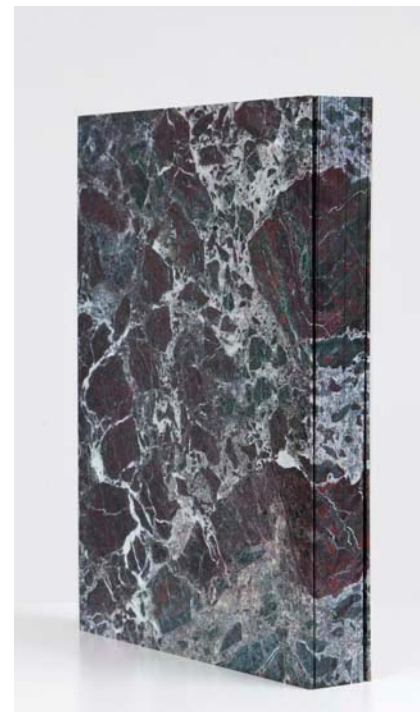
In *Compression System (Marble)*, done for the New Museum this past year, Auerbach again began with a digital scan of stone, and as in *Float* she dealt with the data in terms of layering. This time she investigated the digital context more

deeply, creating a paper analog for an electronic image file. Just as a jpeg compresses data into a manageable file size, Auerbach "compressed" the visual information of the printed scan by folding it, origami-style, into a flat form that is smaller than the original print. The folds themselves, appearing as rows of repeating triangles, are like bytes of data, each containing a section of discrete information that contributes to the overall image. Here, the jagged edges of the 50/50 computer patterns meet the engineering ingenuity of [2,3], as well as the visual source material of *Marble* and the intricate paper manipulation of *Fold/Slice Topo*.

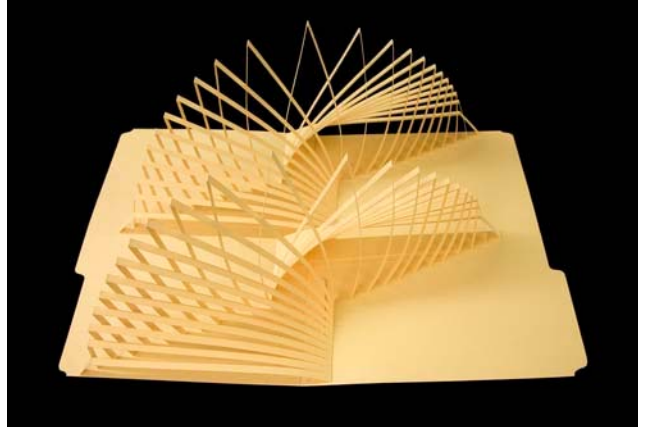
To engineer the complicated folds of *Compression System (Marble)*, Auerbach mined the history of the book arts to learn about the origami of tessellation (a term that has applications in computer graphics and the mathematics of higher dimen-

sions, as well as in art history, to describe the visual pattern of interlocking repeated geometric units). Though the paper folding revisits the canvas folding Auerbach has used to create many of her paintings (reproduced in another 2011 book, *Folds*), the visual quality of this print is entirely distinct from the paintings. It falls somewhere between the *Mesh/Moiré* and *Plate Distortion* series, with their mesmerizing fields of color and delicate compositions determined partly by chance. Though the source image is a slab of stone, *Compression System* resembles the "big, blue marble" of the earth seen from space, echoing the bird's-eye view of the land in both the *Plate Distortion* and *Mesh/Moiré* prints. It offers a vaster vision, however: resembling not just the planet seen from the sky but the sky itself. Colored cloud formations skitter across a blue expanse, and the digital frame of reference hints at a virtual dimension that extends the sky beyond any mappable location. While the *Mesh/Moiré* prints translate the atmospheres of Auerbach's paintings into prints, *Compression System (Marble)* is atmosphere alone. Space has lost all dimension; we can only breathe it in. ■

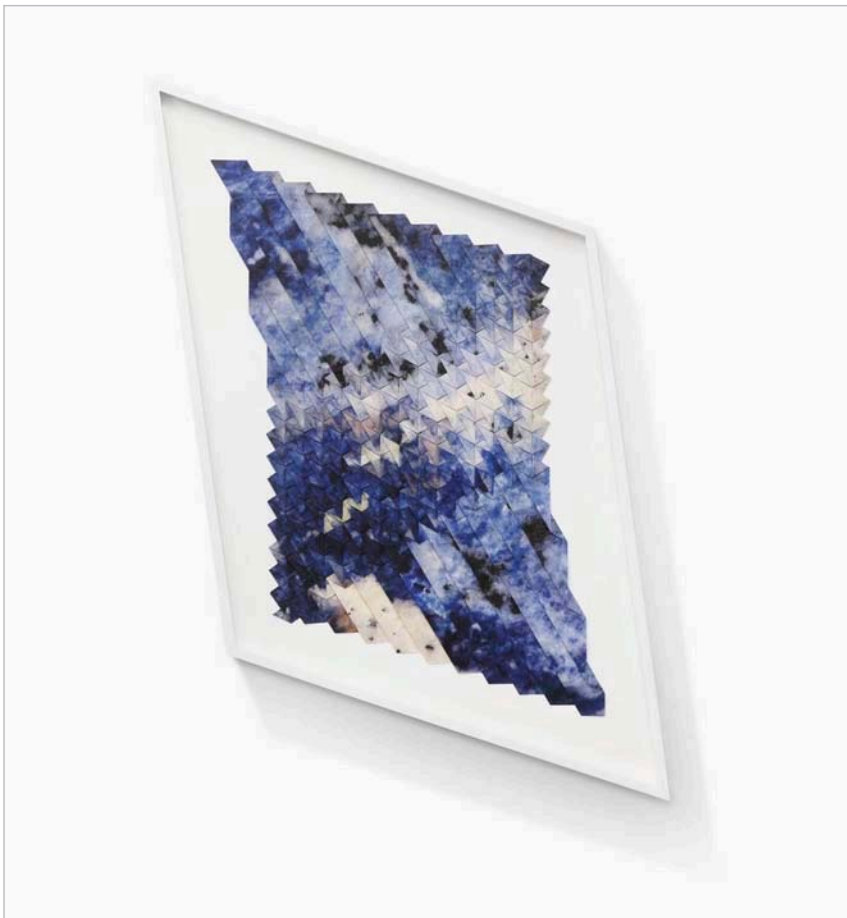
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Left: Tauba Auerbach, [2, 3] (**Gem**) and [2, 3] slipcase for six volumes (2011), paper, ink, binder's board, glue, fabric and screenprint. 20 3/4 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches closed, dimensions variable when open. Edition of 1000. Published by Printed Matter, New York. ©Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photos by Chelsea Deklotz. Right: Tauba Auerbach, **Marble** (2011), digital offset printing on Mohawk superfine paper with hand-painted edges, 17 1/4 x 13 x 2 inches. Binding by Daniel E. Kelm and Leah H. Purcell at the Wide Awake Garage in Easthampton, MA. Edge painting by Tauba Auerbach and Leah Hughes Purcell. ©Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy of Glenn Horowitz Bookseller and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Gary Mamay.



Left: Tauba Auerbach, *Float* (2011), polycarbonate, acrylic, brass, UV-cured ink, 12 1/4 x 10 1/4 x 2 1/2 inches. Edition of 8. ©Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy of Glenn Horowitz Bookseller and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Jenny Gorman. **Right:** Tauba Auerbach, *Filing System* (2012), digitally trimmed and hand-assembled manila file folders, 11 3/5 x 8 1/2 inches closed, 7 3/4 x 17 3/4 x 11 3/5 inches open. Edition of 35. Printed by Andre Ribouli and Jennifer Mahlman, Ribouli Digital, New York. Published by Rite Editions, San Francisco as part of Artists & Editions, 2013, in honor of Steven Lieber. ©Tauba Auerbach. Photo: Jennifer Mahlman.



Tauba Auerbach, *Compression System (Marble)* (2013), pigment print on Asuka paper, CNC-scored, hand-creased and folded tessellation, 25 x 19 inches. Printed by Andre Ribouli and Jennifer Mahlman, Ribouli Digital, New York. Published by Lisa Ivorian-Jones for the New Museum, New York. ©Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

Notes:

1. Tauba Auerbach, interview, OKTP newsletter, 1 Jan 2012 (Berkeley, CA: Paulson Bott Press), 1.
2. For the artist's own detailed descriptions of these technical processes, see *ibid.*, 2–3.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 11.
4. Tauba Auerbach, "Out of Order: Tauba Auerbach on Carsten Nicolai's Grid Index," *Art forum* 48, no. 5 (January 2010): 35–36.