

BARRY SHELTON'S INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 20 of THE COLLECTED BOOKS

It's probably not a coincidence that this twentieth volume of Richard Denner's works is set to go to press here in the year twenty-twenty—one of those little symmetries that seem to arrive out of observation of any archive but might just arrive out of pareidolia. The need to recognize such patterns defines human intellect, and our greatest intellectual achievements (both literary and scientific) have been in recording, organizing, and interpreting our observations of patterns, and these observations give us understanding of virtually all of our collective behavior generally referred to as culture. For example, you seem to be reading the introduction to a book right now, but the word “book” would indicate a certain cohesion that this volume simply doesn't have. This is really more a nested hierarchy of documents in mixed and ever-shifting genres, fitted together by way of sheer ontology, because Jampa, as the curator and printer of this archive, brought them into being here alongside one another. You'll find pictures of paintings about poetry, you'll find prose about paintings of text, collages of collages, Blakean illuminations, and books about books about books about books.

The title of this volume is *The Collected Books of Richard Denner Vol. 20*, a title which ties these pages into a tradition of literary canon-crafting reaching all the way back to Ben Jonson—the artist organizing and authorizing his own canon. Yet, many of these books aren't “by” Richard in the traditional sense of the word either. You might say that some of these are records of events, while others are participatory or collaborative projects; for example, he is the subject rather than the author. You might think of this not as a collection of books by R. Denner but rather books collected, harvested, manifested, and by him. He once told me that he thought of this archive as some sort of mystical machine that was his duty to observe. He says that “rather than beginning with the manuscript, I begin with the book. I initiate the writing process by visualizing the completed form the manuscript of my telling will take.” Above all, this collection shows a profound respect for the book as a physically present object of art, a thing worthy of contemplation in itself, not simply a blank vessel for raw black text, but a full realization of the aesthetic possibilities that inhere in the book as a human technology.

--Barry Shelton

(January 2020)

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