

Veronica Bailey Hours of Devotion

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Over the past five years Veronica Bailey has carefully explored several collections of texts through photography. After winning a Jerwood Photography Award in 2003 for her series of photographs taken in the library of Ernö Goldfinger and Ursula Blackwell (*2 Willow Road*), Bailey worked with the Lee Miller Archive of letters at Farley Farm (*Post Script*, 2005). More recently Coutts & Co commissioned Bailey to photograph its library, resulting in the series *Hours of Devotion*. The bank's Old Staff Library is comprised of mostly nineteenth century publications addressing topics as diverse as poetry, science, religion, history and economics. Immersing herself in this world of leather-bound books, Bailey was inspired to trace British culture through the years. Ultimately she produced 20 visually stunning and thoughtful images, five of which are reproduced here.

Bailey explains, "When I go into an archive it's a question of what I can reveal; it's about balancing the voices of those no longer with us with my own voice." When beginning work on this project, she was eager to learn about the library's first benefactor. Angela Burdett-Coutts, the granddaughter of one of the bank's modern founders, built the library around her own book collection during the 1850s. Bailey constructed a narrative of Burdett-Coutts' life, employing common threads in the collection as clues to decipher the young woman's interests and concerns. Through her photographs, Bailey shares the contents of an otherwise closed space and invites the viewer to make his or her own connections with the past.

Bailey highlights the craftsmanship and handsomeness of the Coutts books: the bindings have weight and the contrast between covers and pages provides dynamism. She has photographed each book so that we see both the general mass of the pages together and individual pages. As a result, we get a feel for the thickness of the papers while at the same time seeing the marbled pattering along the edges. Worn corners speak to generations of handlers. Bailey has said she was drawn to several texts which contained passages annotated by previous readers. We are thus reminded that, as attractive as the books may be, of equal importance is their shared history. Bailey deliberately chose a selection of books that balance visual splendour with interesting content, and that are imbued with vestiges of past readers.

Bailey transforms books into artefacts. Consequentially she draws our attention to them in a new way. She provides the titles of the books (as the titles of the photographs), but rarely gives us any text. Moreover, she teases us by allowing the pages to fall open in several examples, but the letters are still indecipherable. In *Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (c. 1880-9) the viewer is drawn into a kind of tunnel of text where the pages part to reveal print framed by red boxes. However, even the words on the margins are barely legible and sentences fade

into darkness. Because a book functions as something to be read, perhaps it is our inability to do just that which attracts us to Bailey's photographs. These nineteenth century volumes are to be admired for their construction as well as their content.

In both subject matter and aesthetic *Hours of Devotion* builds on Bailey's previous series. The images in all three bodies of work depict the textured or coloured edges of pages in books and letters. They emphasise verticality and address the sculptural possibilities of working with paper. In *2 Willow Road* Bailey experimented with scale, cropping the photographs and using a white background to create more abstract, formal imagery. Working with letters instead of books in *Postscript*, the flexibility of the pages meant that they could be manipulated into more organic, sometimes sensual, shapes. The framing of the books in *Hours of Devotion* is more straightforward. Their contents are serious explorations of pertinent subject matter, such as *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England Vol. 1* and *Lectures on Art*, and the volumes themselves are heavier, with leather bindings and many hundreds of pages. As a result, they are accorded monumental treatment.

Bailey has a clear enthusiasm for books and the practice of collecting, but also for design (she earned a MA in Communication Design at Central Saint Martins). Her photographs are not simply images on paper, but objects which are beautifully printed and mounted and/or framed. The photograph as an object interests Bailey. Just as the books she photographs are not two dimensional, the deep frames she has chosen lend these works a three dimensional presence.

Hours of Devotion is representative of an interest among art historians in archives as more than physical spaces. Archives organise or document in a straightforward manner, but as Bailey's work demonstrates, they also provide a tangible link with past owners of objects and information. The books Bailey captures are not unknown texts read by anonymous people, but titled works that are part of a larger library, which is telling of its proprietors and the time during which it was compiled.

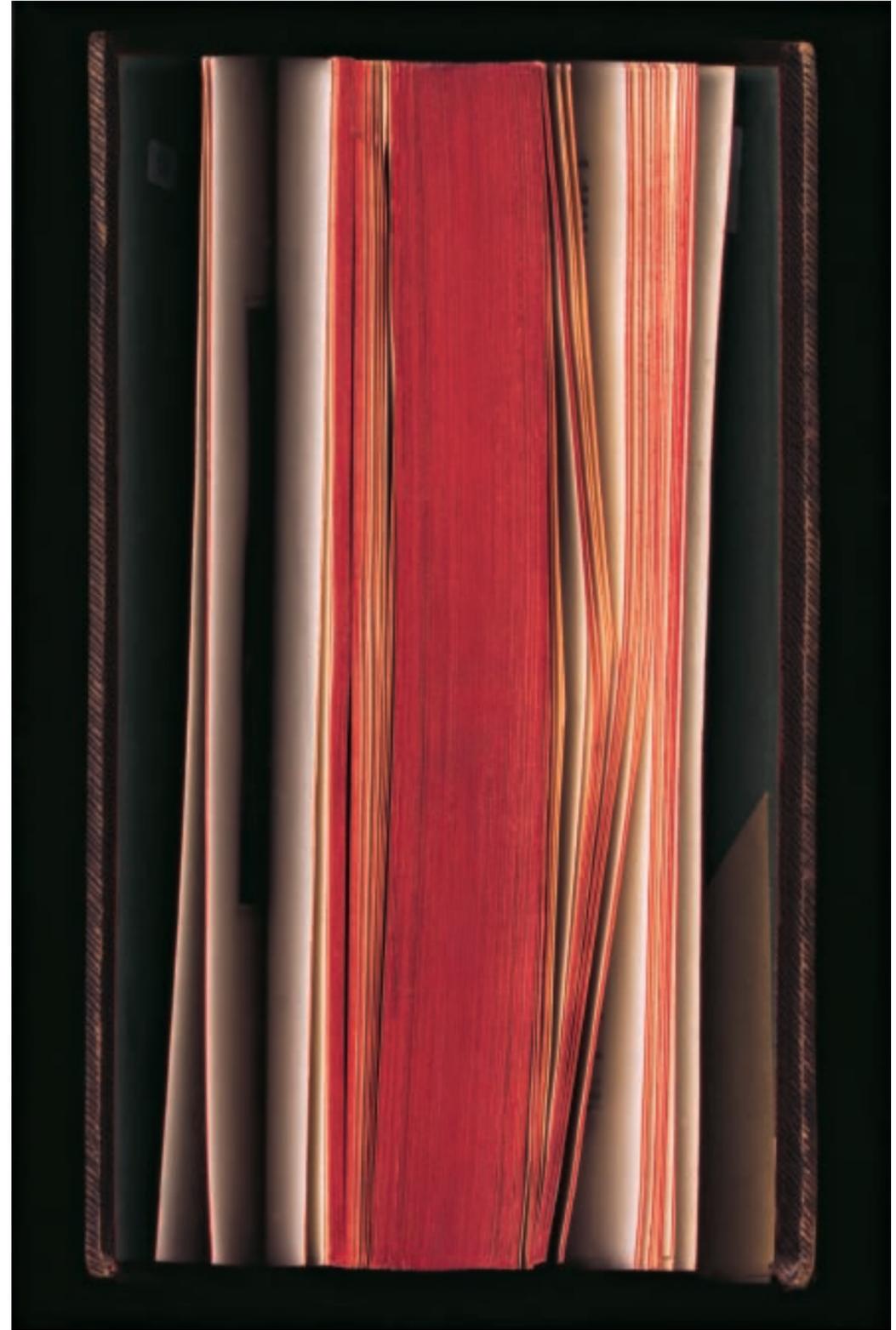
The photographs Bailey made during her time spent in the Coutts library are the physical evidence of her discoveries, and as a collection they form a beautiful and evocative archive of their own.



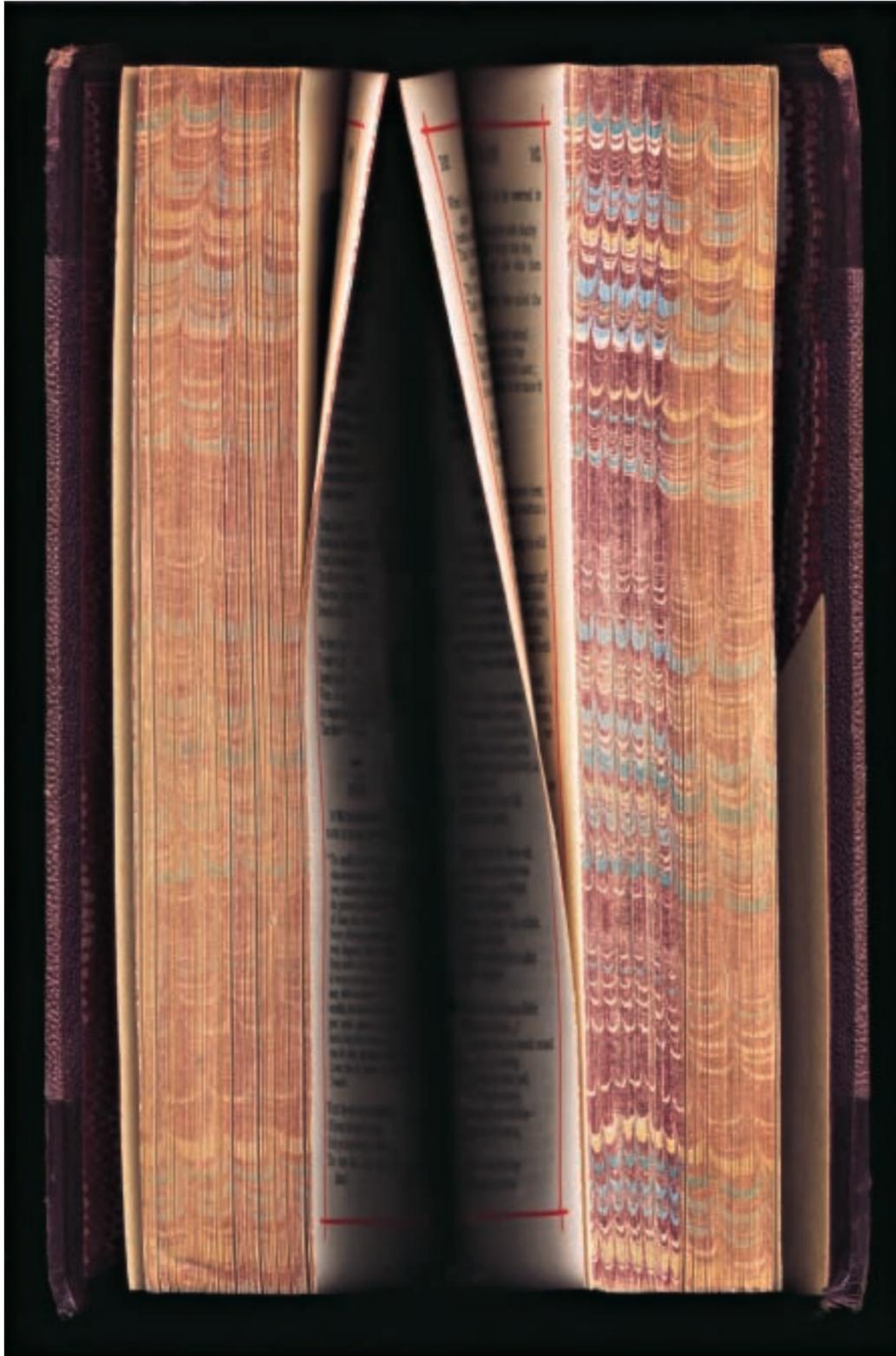
Lectures on Art, Henry Weekes RA, Professor of Sculpture, 1880



Acts of Parliament Vol. IV, Undated



The History of the Reformation of the Church of England Vol. I, Gilbert Burnet, DD, Bishop of Salisbury, 1850



The Poetical Works of Wordsworth with Memoir, Explanatory Notes, etc. from The Lansdowne Poets series, Undated, c.1880-09.



The History of Modern Europe Vol. IV, William Russell, 1850