

the science-fiction writer and artist Dennis Ashbaugh is in equal degrees inevitable, gimmicky, prankish, and profound: a computer disc, embedded inside an elaborately distressed *livre d'artiste*, it can only be played *once*.

Once you click the Agrippa icon there's no turning back. *No round trip*. The 3000 or so words of text scroll slowly up the screen, in broken lines that might as well be called poetry, burning Gibson's reconstructed family past into the reader's memory. And there it will fade into obscurity—like the ghostly DNA portraits, overprinted by copper-etched advertisements, in the rusty, honeycombed bronze portfolio that nests the disc. *I remembered the mechanism*. The text was inspired by an "Agrippa"-model photo album discovered in a Virginia attic. Conceptually, the project involves the reader in a nonnegotiable exchange. Would you trade this text for that experience?

Not since Gutenberg, one could argue, has a mere book so ingeniously linked performance, technology, and old-fashioned commerce. *Agrippa* exists in two limited editions: of 350 regular (\$500 each) and 95 "museum" copies (\$1500). Its purchase obviously puts the buyer in a quandary. Do you read the text and satisfy your interest in Gibson's writing, or do you preserve the work intact, as an investment or fetish? Big dilemma. According to Kevin Begos Jr., *Agrippa's* publisher, everyone who's bought a copy so far has left it intact. Some museums backed off, however, when the publisher declined to provide a reproducible version.

Another level was introduced December 9, when the text was to

be transmitted via fiber optics from a Wyoming barn to selected sites around the world, including, in New York, the Kitchen and the Americas Society. This aspect of the project dangled a unique temptation before the hackers of the world. Cambridge's Thinking Machines Group, among others, had vowed to break *Agrippa's* encryption and steal the text. *Ammunition. Real little bits of war, but also the mechanism itself*. The Kitchen's Macintosh IICI crashed mysteriously the day before the presentation. "It has to have been an inside job," says Begos.

To ensure a secure transmission, the decision was made to run the text off computer discs simultaneously at 7:30 p.m. At the same time, it was fed unannounced to certain electronic bulletin board services, where subscribers could download it for a single fleeting read. *The shutter falls forever, dividing this from that*. Rather than being destroyed, the writing achieves new life, appropriately in the very cyberspace Gibson invented in *Neuromancer*. All involved knew from the start that unauthorized versions would inevitably emerge.

A cool fluorescent cave of dreams. In the chandeliered Park Avenue digs of the Americas Society, a well-heeled audience paid \$15 each to see Begos interviewed, hear a taped Penn Jillette read *Agrippa*, and sip white wine in a gallery lined with Ashbaugh's ominous abstract portraits of DNA protein molecules. It was cool to hear Jillette—magician, performance artist, buffoon—stumble gruffly over Gibson's aging brown memories of Wheeling, West Virginia, and his days as a Toronto draft dodger. *The alien*

crack the long hammer nail to forget to grip on *Agrippa*, this "relic of the future" in Begos's phrase, you must realize that a deep vein of nostalgia runs through science fiction. On one level, SF asks little more than: Why can we remember the past and not the future? If you don't believe me, ask William Burroughs, whose imagistic writing and collage style *Agrippa* so poignantly echoes in its earthy musk. *The second shot, equally unintended, notched the hardwood banister and brought a strange bright smell of ancient sap to life in a beam of dusty sunlight. Absolutely alone in awareness of the mechanism. Like the first time you put your mouth on a woman.*

The eerie Kodak clarity of the photographs Gibson describes mocks his memory of a dead father (and a conspicuously absent mother). But there is more than a hint of regeneration, even artificial life, in the computer's encrypting and in Ashbaugh's abstract genome etchings, which slowly resolve on the page as if they were reconstructing the father himself from scratch. *The mechanism closes. Agrippa* thus becomes, among other things, a model of transduction in which Gibson's memory is conveyed by means of a computer virus into a work of art with a genetic trajectory. A little chill and distant, but impressive all the same in its suggestions of a past predicted and a future recalled. How else to explain the way he foresees his writerly vocation in *certain magazines, esoteric and precious? I knew then, he continues, knew utterly, the deal done in my heart forever. Though how I knew not nor ever have.* ■

Here Today

By Richard Gehr

Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)

By William Gibson

Illustrated by Dennis Ashbaugh
Kevin Begos Publishing, \$500;
deluxe \$1500

A Kodak album of time-burned construction paper. Lately I've been referring to *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* as William Gibson's "Incredible Disappearing Book Trick." The conceit of this highly anticipated collaboration between