Here Today

By Richard Gehr
Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)
By William Gibson
Illustrated by Dennis Ashbaugh
Kevin Begas 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 concept of this highly anticipated collaboration between

the science fiction writer and artist Dennis Ashbaugh is in equal degrees inevitable, gimmicky, pranksual, 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 with 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 Begas 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 transmitted to fiber-optic sites 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

relief of '92