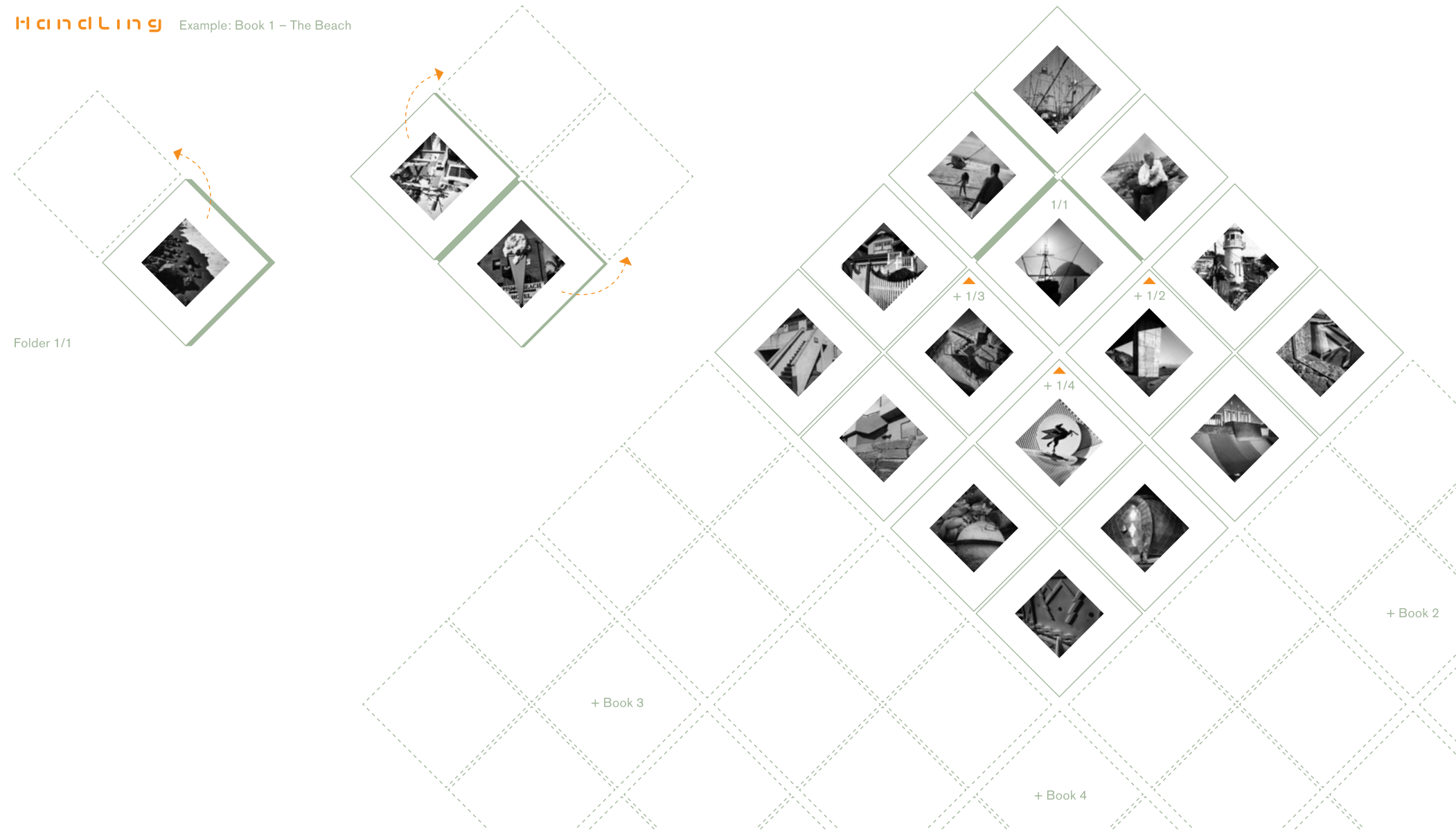


Handling Example: Book 1 – The Beach



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EDITED BY ALEXANDER SCHOLZ AND JOHN WOOD

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Defacing the Diamond: Translations of the Tressian Eye

“*The machinery of grace is always simple*” Michael Donaghy

I. Toward the Familiar

__So simple, in fact, that we often overlook it or misunderstand it, as the epigraph above suggests. In his poem, “Machines”, Donaghy juxtaposes the familiar circling of the seventeenth century, courtly pavane and the rotation of a bicycle’s triangular spokes:

Dearest, note how these two are alike:
This harpsichord pavane by Purcell
And the racer’s twelve-speed bike.¹

__Arthur Tress, too, notes these familiar patterns with an eye discerning not only the beauty of shape and form but the “grace” that accompanies our relationship to it, our dance with it, our seduction by it. And if grace is the intent of our creative impulses, then these pictures show that it is something we are constantly moving toward. But in our everyday lives, that which we move toward is not the angelic host materialized. It is the road sign, the gas pump, the quotidian and ineluctable. We ask ourselves what practical purpose do these things—the neglected stairwell and the doorframe—serve? What could they possibly mean in the absence of human care other than a stress in the poetics of universal geometry—the balance between terrestrial directives and cosmic symbols? Tress shows us in this collection of urban and rural formscapes what Donaghy realizes at the end of his own vision:

So much is chance,
So much agility, desire, and feverish care,
As bicyclists and harpsichordists prove

Who only by moving can balance,
Only by balancing move.²

__To the inattentive, the crosshatching shadows of a guardrail or the zigzag of toppled 2 × 4’s are little more than peripheral inconsistencies with our neatly put-together lives. To the intuitive eye, however, (to the Tressian eye) a stranger, more sacred space exists between, underneath, behind, and among our factoried facades. Those shadows and stairs are the visible tracings, as Tress himself notes,³ of the ineffable mandalas that surround us; those misplaced 2 × 4’s are the sun’s rays engraved on so much of our tribal pottery and native totems.⁴ Look at them long enough, as with a stereogram, and these loose stitchings of form merge and facet together by their own familiarity of being, revealing—as Tress’s vision has done time and again—the threads of works and wonders on which we balance our lives.

__All great art provokes serious thought, serious scrutiny and questioning. Tress’s vision is no different. We are struck by two things immediately in his quadrangular series: first, the tilting of the traditional frame to a diamond sort of viewfinder, and, second, the seemingly disparate locations in which these photographs were taken, suggesting not only the breadth of enigma which exists in the commonplace but the journey toward that enigma and its doorway, its entrance.

__Like lines of poetry,⁵ one must first concede the fact that every move of the eye in this series signifies intent, though the scenes themselves suggest chaos. Nothing is extraneous; nothing is left out; every plane, line, and angle matters, even if such movements evade immediate understanding. Here are beaches, cities, deserts, and rural landscapes. And all are balanced by the repetition of form that links place to place. But what should we be looking for in these most ordinary of environments? To answer that question, I had to follow Tress beyond my own preconceived ideas about the meaning of angularity in the modern world.

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Notes | **1** Michael Donaghy, “Machines,” *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975-1995*, (London: Picador, 2000), p. 3. | **2** Ibid. | **3** Arthur Tress, unpublished notes. | **4** Ibid. | **5** In his notes and journals, Tress often refers to the haiku-nature of these photographs. In an entry from April 22, 2007, he even uses the phrase, “Constructivist Haiku”, marrying Japanese moment-driven poetry to Rodchenko’s early twentieth century Constructivism. In later email correspondence, Tress furthered the point: *Although in my mind I wanted the pointers to be about the modernist play of shapes and forms, the best ones go beyond that into a ,tressian’ mood of mandala like essence ... I wanted you to experience them as the japanese experience poetry cards that combine calligraphy[haiku] and a visual sketch—called Haiga.* | **6** Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba, (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 12. | **7** In a letter dated, February 18, 2008, Tress notes that the “Pointers” “evolved from an earlier group of images called ‘Faceted Fictions’” in which he used a small, crystal ball to “capture a cinematographic sense of time.” | **8** Isabella Pakszwer Far, “Reflections on the Paintings of Giorgio de Chirico,” *de Chirico*, trans. Joseph M. Bernstein, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), p. 8. | **9** Ibid. | **10** Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd edition, trans. John W. Harvey, (London: Oxford UP, 1958), p. 12-13. | **11** Peter Noever, *The Future Is Our Only Goal*, (Munich: Prestel, 1991), p. 7.

__“Transformed”, “divides”, “fragments”—these are all words central to Tress’s own photographic vocabulary, “holistic” as well. As Rodchenko realized and Tress also knows, one must first deconstruct in order to create. To some extent, Tress’s whole journey has been about the demolition of the mundane, as in his *Still Lives*, *Hospital Constructions*, and *Faceted Fictions*, the trigger for this current collection. Of this last book, Tress writes:

I was intrigued by the sense of almost cinemagraphic multiple movements that could be generated on a flat static surface, and I noticed they were similar to the time-catching hyperactivity of Etienne Marey chronophotography or the shifting curvilinear chaos of a futuristic painting.¹²

__Rodchenko, too, was concerned with the “chaos” that would lead us to the future. “The future is our only goal!”¹³ says Rodchenko, because the future, to his mind, would heal the past, thus the holistic nature of his deconstruction. But the future is not Tress’s *only* goal, and it is certainly not the place where the holistic vision ends. Transcendence of political upheaval, social conflict, modern progress, even time itself is the manifold ambition of the Tressian eye. For Rodchenko, the magic of a broken, linear vision could help a people escape the oppression of a particular moment in history. But, as Tress points out, the linear can give us access to places beyond the reach of any particular moment. By photographing the matrices of form that stratify both time and space, Tress, like Blake, can “hold infinity in the palm of [his] hand”.¹⁴

__Earlier I compared Tress’s photographs to cathedral windows. Tress refers to Bruno Taut’s *Glas Haus*—the cathedral of the twentieth century. Only from inside a building such as this do we understand the rich and tangible nature of Tress’s vision “in whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / Are recognized, and robed as destinies”,¹⁵ as the poet, Philip Larkin, once put it. Diamonds surround, and through those diamonds the universe is reimagined, transformed, frenetic with light! We stand at the center, *within*, and behold as Blake beheld worlds in a grain of sand. This is where the healing takes place. This is where both the self of the mind and the self of the universe collide, as Tress tells us:

The “Pointer” diamond framed photograph accents the “faceted” nature of our visual perceptions—sharp sunlight hitting the objects of our daily lives creates a multiplicity of angles that hint towards a self-repeating “fractal” universe.¹⁶

__In Tress’s world, we are dragonflies hovering over glimmering waters of fractal light. We see the world unfinished, still forming in the furnace of the sun. We see the “morning air ... awash with angels” as Richard Wilbur sees in his poem, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World”.¹⁷ Tress calls us to the things of this world because he recognizes the miraculous and malleable nature of that which we are each the demiurge. In Buddhist tradition, the diamond symbolizes the nature of the mind, and it is in the mind, as this book details, that the natural and supernatural coexist.

III. The Here Within

__Passage into the supernatural, however, starts in the natural world. There are four doors in this book—urban, rural, desert, beach—suggesting, perhaps, the four sides of the diamond, the four entrances into the mandala, the four corners of the earth, and the four elements to which all wonder corresponds.

__In the desert, we traverse the sands as Elijah, seeking truth. There we find, as he did, the tree, but this is no broom tree or scrub, its fruit heavy as those grapes heaved from the promised land. Or they are planets themselves, metallic and orbiting the mind’s core. On the beach, Pegasus bolts between the linear boundaries of our world, which are the boundaries of our own eyes. In the country, gnomons litter the fields: old silos, cattle guards, threshing wheels and rusted combines, scattering shadows, displacing time. And the city, it almost goes without saying, pinnacles with Tressian pointers. Between the unfinished architecture and worming wires, it seems we are reading from pages straight out of Luca Pacioli’s *De Divina Proportione*.

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Notes | **12** Arthur Tress, “Faceted Fictions,” in *Fantastic Voyage: Photographs 1956-2000*, p. 188. | **13** Peter Noever, op. cit., p. 7. | **14** William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence.” | **15** Philip Larkin, “Church Going”. Philip Larkin Collected Poems, ed. Anthony Thwaite, (London: Marvell P, 1989), p. 98. | **16** Arthur Tress, unpublished notes. | **17** Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*, (San Diego: HBJ, 1988), p. 233. | **18** W. B. Yeats, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd edition, ed. Richard J. Finneran, (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 236. | **19** Arthur Tress, email to John Wood, April 25, 2009. | **20** Rudolf Otto, op. cit., p. 12. | **21** Marco Livingstone, “Anxiety as a Way of Life,” in *Arthur Tress: Talisman*, p.7. | **22** Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 94. | **23** John Wood, “The Starry Voyages of Arthur Tress,” in *Arthur Tress: Fantastic Voyage*, p. 27.

__This is not entirely the Modernist vision of the apocalypse *now*. What we find here are particles of and passageways to paradise—the manifestation of Yeats’ dialogue between self and soul where “[w]e are blest by everything” and “[e]verything we look upon is blest”.¹⁸ The multiform glyphs we see in these photographs are not only preexisting phenomena, as in the shape of a tree, but a by-product of our own existence, as we see in the gate that mimics the tree. Tress mentions in a letter the “semi religious vibration” of “how things are in the world and simultaneously in the great beyond outside of that—found in the most ordinary of things ... a cracked sidewalk, some geometrical shapes at a construction site, building shadows, etc”.¹⁹ Notably, Rudolf Otto says the same thing of the *mysterium tremendum*:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant”.²⁰

__The Tressian eye—its repetition, vibration, and resonance with the familiar—shows us that the human element cannot help but to add mystery to mystery. Variation of place and miracle within this book proves, ultimately, that place d not matter when it comes to the fantastic. We open doors wherever we are because the doors are *within*.

__Romantic and Modernist visions are balanced by the Tressian eye. Chaos and natural decay are refractured and refused with a new life of symbiotic elegance. It has been said of Tress’s oeuvre that death is the underlying theme,²¹ but in this work, we see death only as an agent of a more vivid picture of the *living* whole, of change rather than complete obliteration. Roger Scruton, in his book *Beauty*, touches on this too. He says: “In much of our activity we are ‘home building’, erecting in the *teeth* of *change* and *decay*, the permanent symbols of a settled form of life. The invisible hand ... moves of its own accord towards a style, grammar and convention”.²² Scruton, like Tress, sees the “teeth”, the “change and decay”, and the “symbols” that we erect both with intention and out of habit, emphasizing the aweful balance of beauty that both adorns and clutters this place.

__Tress has long been looked upon as a journeyman of photographic art. His retrospective, *Fantastic Voyage*, captures what John Wood calls “a mystic’s view of man caught in the universal fantasies of the human comedy and a scientist’s view of nature held in the starry weave of universal patterns”.²³ If man is “caught” in a fantasy and nature is “held” in a pattern of its own coruscating emanations, then Tress’s new book is the door (literally in its artistic design) through which we must walk to traverse our own fantasies into the fantastic reality of the natural world. It is where Donaghy’s wheels carry us; it is the socket of Emerson’s eyeball; it is the meeting place of Carlyle’s natural supernaturalism—the synthesis of the creative mind and the creating universe.

__Until now, Tress has been out to sea on his voyages, authoring his novel of shadows through pilgrimages, initiations, callings, magical flights, and transformations. But what is one to do with the ship once one realizes that those places sought are *within*, and that the miraculous *without* can be had always and at once? The ship is wrecked and is itself imbibed by the geometries of time—its decadence and obsolescence—and is respoken into being with Tressian repetition: *Behold, Behold, Behold*.

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Steven Brown has published his work in a variety of leading journals, received grants and awards for his writing, holds graduate degrees both in English Literature and Creative Writing, and has taught at the university level. He is currently pursuing a Ph. D. at the Harvard University in the History of American Civilization, and 21st Edition just published a book of his poetry accompanied by photographs of Jerry Uelsmann. His well-known blog, Sublimophile (www.sublimophile.blogspot.com), has attracted international attention because of the style of his writing and the brilliance of his criticism. Photographic critic and historian John Wood has called him “the smartest contemporary art critic I have read in decades.”

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