About ten years ago, after leaving the Slade School in London, Brian Moran was back in the California Bay Area 'working in a photocopy shop in El Cerrito', when he saw the 1973 Manson documentary and ‘noticed in one of the shots a large photo album/scrapbook with "The Book of The Dead" handwritten across the cover.’ While stressing that he finds the Manson family no more interesting ‘than any other person/group that wants to start their own messianic/doomsday cult’, Moran continues ‘I really wanted to know what was in that book and I also knew I wanted to make my own.’ Both what is known in the West as the “Egyptian Book of the Dead”, whose title in fact translates as something closer to “Book of Coming Forth By Day”, or “Book of Coming into the Light”, and the similarly so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo Thodol, lit. “liminality/liberation”, variously translated as e.g. The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States, The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between (and which constitutes two parts of a larger dharma cycle), are effectively psychopomps in book form, whose task, like that of Greek Hermes/Roman Mercury, or the Christian “dog-headed Saint” Christopher, is to guide the dead through after-life or after-death states, though not to judge, albeit judgement may befall.

Moran:

I was interested in the Manson "Book of the Dead" because the group was deliberately self-mythologising and literally creating their own unique religious codes and sacraments to prepare themselves for a new age after the impending apocalypse. The Book of the Dead seemed significant in that context because it was presumably a collection of things they thought were too important to be lost for some reason and important enough to pass on to people outside their time and circle of believers. As such [it] seemed to me as a potential holy text.

At the same time, extrapolating from the idea of a holy text in general, Moran says:

I also started thinking about it in the secular sense as an kind of encyclopedia written by mid 20th century acid fried juvenile delinquents under the thrall of a criminally abusive middle aged man who they literally believed was the messiah. I started to think about the historical relevance of a book like that compared to the relevance of an educated systematic attempt to record the same history.

Out of this parallel processing, Moran emerged with an abiding concern for those consonances that exist between such sacred and secular efforts to ‘contain the cosmos within a text’ as that of the Manson family versus, for example, that of the Enlightenment philosopher Diderot, whose fervent hope for his encyclopaedia was that it would serve to transmit the usefulness of the work of his own and preceding centuries to those who come after. A Book of the Dead in another sense, then, as Diderot always intended the encyclopaedia to serve as a sort of transmission from the living, presential world of the once-living, now dead, to the now-living. In this sense, of course, all books are eventually books of the dead, though here too, we come upon a differentiation between the presential, let’s say “horizontal” compulsion to collecting/collating, and the “vertically" oriented, archival impulse, systematic or no, which may at once be seen, à la Diderot, as an effort to stay horizontal, i.e., somehow present and relevant in the living world. Cf. e.g. Paul Gellman’s Good Collage/Assemblage directive, whose urban dystopic resemblance to Emerson’s exhortation to becoming a Transparent Eyeball in Nature is quite striking: “Craft counts, and I’m not talking about being archival, either. That’s for pussies who think they’re leaving their legacy. . .”

The completeness of any encyclopaedia, the extent to which it contains the whole cosmos, can of course only ever be symbolic. With regard to sacred texts, this is a rather more contested and heretical question, one which has doubtless lead to

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2 Thurman, Robert (trans.) The Tibetan Book of the Dead, as popularly known in the West; known in Tibet as “The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between”; composed by Padma Sambhava; discovered by Karma Lingpa; foreword by the Dalai Lama London: Harper Collins 1994

3 In Chris Kraus, You Are Invited To Be The Last Tiny Creature, Where Art Belongs, semiotext(e) intervention series 8 2011
much bloodshed and pulling of beards. Moran’s own Book of the Dead, intended ‘as a kind of decentralized encyclopedia of images’, wherein ‘secular and religious idealism blur and become indistinguishable’ was never begun with completion in mind. Holding the conjoined questions of ‘Are encyclopedias religious books or not? How deranged does an encyclopedia get before it’s not true anymore?’ his intention is rather to work on it until he either dies, or is unable to work any more, accepting that ‘in the end no matter how much work I do there will be more omissions than works’. It may be that the very weirdness of this ‘weird indefinite project aspect’ is why it has not been made explicit until now, but ten years on, Moran feels he has grown into what may, at the outset, have seemed a rather outré project for a 24 year old artist to even talk about. Previous chapters, or books in the biblical sense of being the books of a, or even the Book, have included The Organic Farm, shown at Rob Tufnell’s gallery in London and a series of orientalist paintings called The Hashishan, at Herald Street, London. Given the emphasis on light and thus vision in the original title of the Egyptian Book of the Dead (as on hearing in the Tibetan), it seems fitting that the ‘weird indefinite project aspect’ of Moran’s Book of the Dead should be annunciated with the opening of The Transparent Eyeball. Another such chapter, book, or decentralized loci, The Transparent Eyeball is a sort of clearing or enclosure in which Moran’s caricatures of ‘persistent but wildly different notions of the experience of sight’, which not only describe visual modes of being (as perceiving) in the world, but advocate ways in which these modes of being-perceiving may be attained and induced—namely ‘Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Transparent Eyeball metaphor, figurative illustrations of the senses from Descartes meditations on first philosophy, the dream machine by William S Burroughs and Brion Gysin4, and patterns from mid 20th century blacklight posters’—are let loose to ‘interact, fall down, be nervous, look past each other, reach impasses etc’. Even holding that ‘the only way to communicate anything historical is also to totally distort it’, somewhat in the spirit of Aby Warburg, Moran is inciting the archived to dance.

R Bligh [as R.B. Synthesizer] April 2013

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4 Situated for Moran, ‘in an odd position culturally, like a kind of intersection between so many 20th century cultural movements’, it makes sense that Brion Gysin should appear as a recurring character in Moran’s work, even as a kind of cipher for the artist in relation to his microcosmic chapters, books or worlds.