

ACCESS & CLOSURE

by Toby Millman

reviewed by Clifton Meador

Access & Closure

Toby Millman, 2008

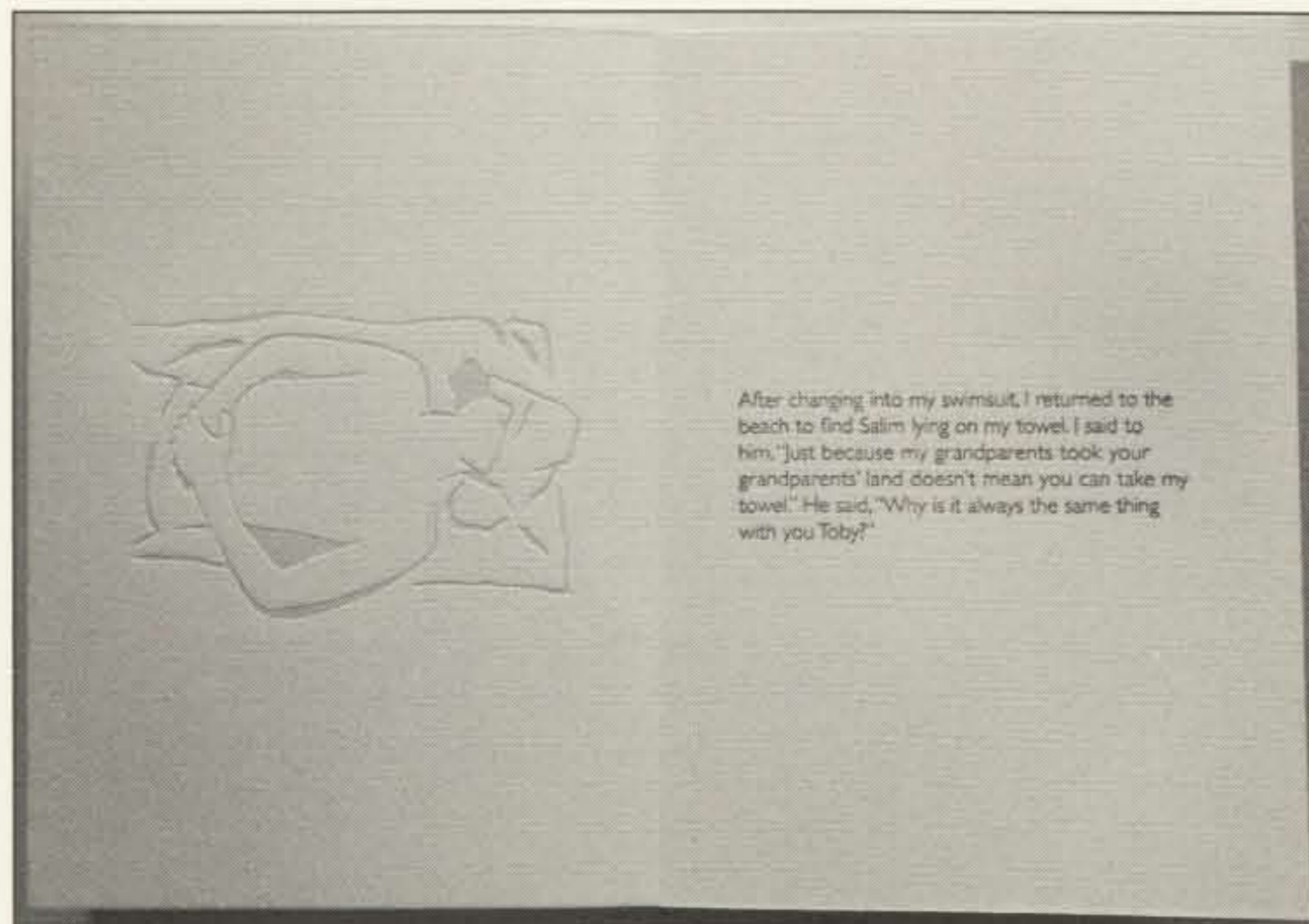
Afterword by Anton Shammas

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Complex issues are difficult subjects in art, and they sometimes require complex forms in order to explore them adequately. Toby Millman has taken on a huge, tough issue, one that grapples directly with identity, history, and politics of the most difficult sort as it attempts to humanize a distant struggle. This ambitious book, the artist's first, is one of the fruits of that project.

Toby Millman is an American who decided to move to East Jerusalem to study Arabic. This simple act, of trying to learn the language of Palestinians while living with them, reflects an admirable urge to try to understand the human dimensions of this struggle, to understand in an experiential way the reality of being Palestinian. She spent months living in Palestinian communities, teaching school, studying Arabic, volunteering, and witnessing the daily realities of that life. She brought back stories and images of that experience that do not illustrate the grand politics of the struggle, but the personal dimensions of it, the everyday events that make Palestine seem like a real place instead of a news event.



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Access & Closure is a sequence of narrative vignettes and letterpress-printed images that offer some insight into everyday life as seen by an American with limited Arabic. The short prose pieces are all in first-person and have the ring of authenticity: they are documents of real life with glimpses of the bigger issues that loom over everyday life. In one fragment Millman reports:

After changing into my swimsuit, I returned to the beach to find Salim lying on my towel. I said to him "Just because my grandparents took your grandparents' land doesn't mean you can take my towel." He said, "Why is it always the same thing with you Toby?"

Here is Millman's artistic strategy revealed: the fragments, narrative and visual, are persuasive of her veracity, and thus present the larger issues in an incremental, personal way. It is just in this fragment that it becomes clear that not only is Millman an American, but that she is an American Jew. Suddenly the project of this book becomes even more engaging; she is wrestling with her own personal engagement with a difficult history, questioning her own responsibilities as a person, as an American, and as a Jew. Her decision to learn Arabic, to live in Palestinian communities, to work with these people becomes a deeply engaging question, one that can't really be answered except by her own experience.

Millman does not construct a traditional story with beginning, middle, and end, but instead presents dislocated narrative fragments, little bits of life that seem all the more real for being presented out of context. The overall effect of these fragments is ultimately more moving than a grand story of struggle, since the experiences they present are accessible, easily related to anyone's life. Her struggles with Arabic and the confusion that hovers over any foreigner attempting to understand an unfamiliar culture serve to make her imperfect comprehension of the situation in the Palestinian zones more persuasive and authentic, particularly in light of her own identity.

The images, printed in very light inks so that they look nearly blind-embossed, are derived from Millman's photographs. These images were produced from casual, un-posed photographs of people in ordinary settings. Millman translates these nearly banal photographs into cut paper outlines, re-photographs them, and prints them as high-contrast images. This transformation nearly eliminates the photographic texture of the images—the relentless recording of detail that characterizes the photographic image—but does preserve some of the optical codes of photography. These are still recognizably photographic images, transformed into nearly abstract shapes that only grudgingly describe people and situations.

Access & Closure is short, too short, a common problem with many artist's books. Millman's successful strategy of using fragments as persuasion succeeds in engaging the reader just as the book ends. This is a 64-page book with text blocks on nearly every other



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page: that works out to 32 book openings. If time is the substance of a book, those 32 openings represent a too-brief engagement with the reader. The material cries out for a longer experience. There are enough recurring names to create the desire to know these people more: Ala' and Yasmin (who is also Allison), the teenage heartthrob Diyya, the shwarma guy who helps Millman get a taxi, all start to emerge from the abstracted images and engage the reader. This is not a problem unique to this book: the enormous labor of making a book by hand frequently truncates work arbitrarily, cutting off development just when it becomes most engaging.

Access & Closure is printed in an edition of 50 copies: this also represents a large amount of work when hand-printing, but in terms of the potential audience for this work, 50 copies is a very small number. It is one of the problems with the genre of artists' books that the only successful economic model for publishing is to create tiny editions and charge large sums for these books. It is true, though, that the so-called democratic multiple fails miserably as a way to make a living. Still, *Access & Closure* deserves a larger audience than it will probably find, unless it is reissued in a different, larger edition.

Access & Closure is a successful first artist's book and provides a peephole into the Palestinian struggle, but no closure for a difficult story.

Clifton Meador is an artist whose work combines photography, writing, printmaking, and design to explore history, narrative, and the space of the book. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, most notably two New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, and a Fulbright Scholar Award to the Republic of Georgia. His work is featured in many collections internationally. He is currently an Associate Professor & Director of the Interdisciplinary MFA in Book & Paper at Columbia College Chicago.