

N7433.4.G797 S4 1978
Sentences

Robert Grenier
Whale Cloth, 1978
Craig Dworkin

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Robert Grenier's *Sentences* is known to most people—the majority of whom have never actually seen the original book—in surprisingly specific



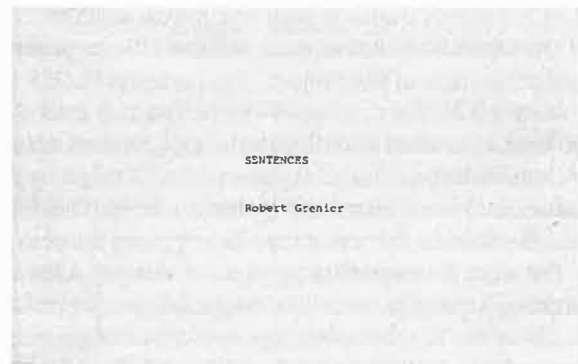
card/pages in a folding Chinese box.¹⁰

500 poems centered on 500 5 x 8" index cards contained in a blue, folding, Chinese cloth box.¹¹

(and so on....)

So the catalogue record of the book at the University of Utah Marriott Library, from a later editioning of rediscovered copies of the first printing, comes as something of a surprise to the reader accustomed to the usual description:

ca. 350 sheets in portfolio; 21 x 14 cm. Encased in blue portfolio as issued. Limited ed. of 200 copies, signed by the author. UU copy in Rare Books is



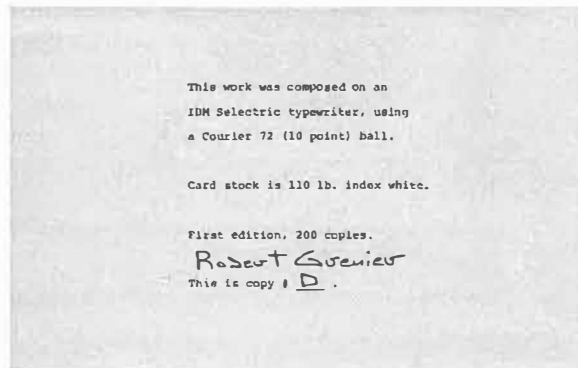
bibliographic detail. The description of the physical object has become a cliché, trailing the work's mention like a *de rigueur* epithet:

It is a Chinese-style unfolding box covered in dark blue cloth that closes with imitation ivory clasps; inside is a stack of 500 5 x 8 note cards, each with a short poem printed in the center.⁷

Grenier's *Sentences*—500 discrete articulations each on a separate index card and housed in a blue Chinese box.⁸

Robert Grenier's great work *Sentences*, 500 cards stacked together in a Chinese box.⁹

A landmark collection of 500 unbound poem/



lettered E. A set of approximately 350 phrases and words printed separately on sheets and held together by portfolio. Order of sheets not important.¹²

While the cataloguer is clearly wide of the mark in reckoning the number of sheets, the casual descriptions are frequently not quite as accurate as their arithmetic would seem to aspire. *Sentences* contains five hundred poems, to be sure, but several more *cards*—including a title page, a copyright page, a colophon and some number of blank interleaves (my copy has two; the Marriott Library copy includes four). More importantly, the enclosure described quite accurately by the cataloguer as a portfolio (etymologically, something that carries loose leaves), is repeatedly called a ‘Chinese box’ by the poets, as if that were a *terme de métier* from bookbinding. Needless to say, specifying the national origin of a binding’s manufacture, like specifying the number of poems in a collection, is unusual (Grenier’s *A Day at the Beach*, for example, is never referred to as ‘216 poems in an American codex’). Perhaps the Sinophilic epithet associates Grenier’s book in some vague way with two other canonical texts of Language poetry: Ron Silliman’s contemporaneous *Chinese Notebook* (which cites *Sentences* at several points) and Bob Perelman’s infamous poem ‘China.’¹³

Regardless of those associations, the focus on the book’s binding resonates with the idiomatic connotations of ‘Chinese box.’ On the one hand, the phrase has come to refer to the computer in John Searle’s famous thought-experiment about linguistic competence, mechanical inscription and textual comprehension.¹⁴ In general, the questions raised by Searle are all to the point for Grenier’s cryptic texts and their relation to language acquisition and the non-human communications of bird song. On the other hand, ‘Chinese box’ also denotes a framed literary structure: ‘the device of the ‘story within the story,’ variously labeled ‘frame,’ ‘Chinese box,’ ‘Russian doll,’ or ‘embedded’ narrative.’¹⁵ Unlike the mirroring suggested by Russian dolls, the structure of *Sentences* is certainly not recursive, given the striking contrast between the enclosure and its cards. The portfolio, with its incongruously ornate closures (the Utah copy sports a broken clasp), is shoddily hand-crafted, awkwardly unstable and conspicuously imprecise; the box is always threatening to collapse. The cards, in contrast, evince an austere, mechanical facture, with precise typography and a minimalist expanse of uniformly trimmed sheets. Their commercial grey, furthermore, sets off the saturated blue of the cloth, which softens and unevenly thickens the boards of the portfolio. The measure of the poems’ success is the degree to which they let the reader forget the aesthetic announced by their binding. Perhaps the poets’ insistence on that binding is a compensatory reaction. Perhaps the librarian’s impulse to count the ‘phrases and words’ in *Sentences*—not something normally attempted for other holdings in Rare Books—registers a desire to shift the focus away from the book’s poorly bound portfolio.

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Regardless of motives, the fact that *Sentences* provokes poets to speak to bibliography and bibliographers to speak to poetry is symptomatic of the book’s singular power. However odd or inaccurate their respective descriptions, the poets register the significance of the material object to Grenier’s work, just as the cataloguer registers the significance of the grammatical investigations undertaken by his poems as they interrogate the relationships between sentences, phrases, words and letters—and the extent to which those categories are simultaneously separated and held together by Grenier’s poetics.