

How Hard It Is To Die: Artist's Novels **Maria Fusco**

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‘Keep things apart, keep sentences separate, or else they may turn into colours.’
Elias Canetti

Treating plot as an atypical activity (hypersensitive to the touch, environmental in nature) the artist's novel is an increasingly formal response to the problem of art production: reproducible; comprehensible; metacritical. This seemingly sensible format for contemporary art to play with throws up a number of interesting questions about the direction, the criticality and most essentially the ‘readability’ of such books.

Should the artist's novel be read in the same way as the art object?

And again: Should the artist's novel be read in the same way as a fiction writer's novel?

Artists writing books that may be named ‘novels’ is not of course an exclusively contemporary or particularly experimental action. Artists as well-known as Salvador Dali, Carl Andre and Andy Warhol all produced written works that they themselves identified as novels, whilst Eduardo Paolozzi made thirteen years worth of pictorial essays and short visual fictions for the literary journal *Ambit* which he often chose to subtitle as ‘novels’, such as ‘Why We Are In Vietnam: A Novel’ and ‘Things: A Novel’ (both 1969).

The lack of visibility and subsequent dissemination of such early artist's novels by practitioners as famous as Dali, Andre and Warhol whose visual work would be familiar to even a non-specialist audience is a curious facet of artists writings. Their novels are forgotten, or again they were never known. One might suggest that this is because of the avant-garde nature of the books, I would contest this, by suggesting that the novels were not only quite conventional in the main, but that the real reason for their lack of presence was that they were not received as a ‘legal’ element of a visual artists' oeuvre.

Salvador Dali's only substantial fiction work, *Hidden Faces* (1944), is a workaday tale that boils down the thematic characteristics of his visual work into a dramatic treatise which is, it must be said, an annoyingly nostalgic story of aristocratic excess set against monumental social change. The reader is left with a sense of hollow echo of the hackneyed scribe, rather than that of a creative encounter, enacting, through writing, the dead weight of Dali's famous quote, ‘We are all hungry and thirsty for concrete images. Abstract art will have been good for one thing: to restore its exact virginity to figurative art.’

As an aside, it's interesting to note that Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1940) and Maurice Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* (1941), both of which are often cited as the first postmodern novel, were written four years before *Hidden Faces* and yet embody much more forward-facing and experimental attitudes to writing production than that of Dali.

In contrast to Salvador Dali's a priori narration, Carl Andre's cycle of writings *BILLY BUILDER, or the Painfull Machine: A Novel of Velocity* (1959) stalk Andre's interest in the stricture of material and have a lightness of interpretative touch that lifts his text into symbol.

'On the following Sunday, unbeknownst to Billy Builder, Mother Builder and Mundane Carpenter, Garson Fanshot, son of the Fanshot millions, returned to Onus Falls from his student days at Old Farmer's Preparatory School. Wishing to surprise his best summer friend, Garson went immediately to the modest Builder Cottage and slipped into Billy's basement laboratory through a little-used passage in the root cellar. Garson moved silently toward the laboratory, but the sight of Mundane Carpenter and Billy Builder leaning together over the Periodic Table caused him to emit a nearly audible gasp.'¹

You get the sense in this opening passage that Andre enjoyed (and was rather good at) the process of writing; his playful placement of character and object are used to encourage the reader to make their own narrative with phrases such as 'the Periodic Table' taking the part of two nouns at once. Although published serially, when read together *Billy the Builder* moves beyond the apologue into a novel-like discourse, there is a distinct leakage of Andre's practice as text becomes form and yet also discusses it.

a, A Novel (1968) Andy Warhol's typically deadpan and competitive response to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is a promising formulation of art and words, presenting as it does (purportedly) unedited transcripts of conversations between Warhol and Factory actor Ondine recorded over a two-year period. The result is a really quite familiar Warholian trope, in terms of process and subject, but not in terms of form. The finished book retains errors, inconsistencies and misidentifications, which read as a critique of cultural status of the book, but not of the book itself, hence Warhol's retention of the nomenclature 'novel' in his title.

The imprecision of Warhol's constraint-led process of *a, A Novel* retains a surprising freshness, yet, as a reflection on its influence on today's experimental writing, the book's verbatim flatness can be seen most actively in 'conceptual poetry' rather than in artist's writing. American poet Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003) is a retyping of *The New York Times* and *The Weather* (2005) presents a year of transcribed weather reports, enacting as Goldsmith puts it 'uncreative writing'.

By contrast, the contemporary artist's novel is all about creative writing, standing against, (or perhaps standing up to?) the traditional non-validity of writing as a form of art practice demonstrated by the obscurity of Dali, Andre and Warhol's books.

The last ten years or so have seen a distinct bloom in the publication of artists' novels, and also in the frameworks which support their production and distribution: academic programmes such as MFA Art Writing at Goldsmiths, London (formed in 2008, of which I am Director) propagates and debates what it is to write *in* and *with* art; whilst two recent institutional shows in large-scale venues have made a good stab at cohering writing forms together, *Gagarin: The Artists in Their Own Words* at S.M.A.K., Gent (2009) and *The Malady of Writing: A project on text and speculative imagination* at MACBA, Barcelona (2009).

We can note the formal slippage of artist's writing and its solidification into 'the novel' as part of a more generalized rupture in process and audience -

often characterized in an art context by the phrase ‘The Discursive Turn’ - and, with specific reference to art and writing, situated within a perceived crisis in criticality and judgment procedures.

Whilst the novel stakes little claim to be a straightforwardly factual document, (see English experimental novelist B.S. Johnson’s observation, “The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form, within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.”), it is nonetheless a critical document, in that has the ability to sit within dialogical rather than dialectical page-space. It’s important to state here that many (perhaps the majority of) artist’s novels do also play with dialectics as plot, but of course in different ways. Some recent works that I’ve enjoyed reading like this are: *All Books* by Liam Gillick (Book Works: 2009); *Fat Mountain Scenes* by Phyllis Kiehl (Metronome Press: 2005); *Philip* collaboratively authored by Mark Aerial Waller, Heman Chong, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt, Steve Rushton and Leif Magne Tangen (Dexter Sinister: 2006) and *The seven most exciting hours of Mr. Trier’s life in twenty-four chapters* by Keren Cytter (Sternberg Press: 2008).

The actual production and economy of these artists’ novels is closely identified with a handful of international art publishers who are more familiar with conceptual totality of the artist’s book than the documentary notation of the catalogue, and are happy to work with writing as a ‘legitimate’ form of the visual. There is however much less traffic in the other direction - i.e. from art to literature - artists are solely publishing their writing in an art context, with the notable exception of Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, first published by Metronome Press in 2005, and then republished by the much more ‘mainstream’ Alma Books in 2006. This discipline-location of the artist’s novel must indicate that readers who are willing and happy to spend time with experimental writing are currently clustered in and around art, or then again it might indicate that the artist’s novel is there to be looked at, but not read.

Now, I’d like to spend some time focussing on novels by artists Jake Chapman and Jana Leo. This is of course a minuscule, probably non-representational selection, but, it has been made in order to attempt to highlight what I guess to be the two most generalised approaches or trends in the contemporary artist’s novel: Abundance as Method and Seriality as Plot.

The Marriage of Reason & Squalor by Jake Chapman (Fuel: 2008) is a peculiarly ambitious book that at first appears to centre on the complex emotional life of its heroine Chlamydia Love who is torn between her wealthy fiancé and the bestselling author Helmet Mandragorass.

Embedded within the main narrative however are a number of visual subplots which threaten to mutiny, or at least seriously redirect the course of the book: two glossy sections of ‘reproductions’ of Chlamydia’s naïvely pagan watercolours; a transcript of Helmet’s novel *Come Hell or High Water* and subsequent rejection letters from recognizably mainstream publishers. These rejections range from platitudes to hilariously measured advice such as, ‘Some of your phrases seem either a bit lazy or don’t make sense so watch this, i.e. ‘his hands felt electric on hers as though an electric charge was passing between them – as though the two of them formed an electrical circuit.’ (see p.23 – also – how can ‘he play her like a fish?’).ⁱⁱ

The reading experience of *The Marriage of Reason & Squalor*, it seems, is to enjamb a wide range of creative production, by building within its pages a complete vision of the characters’ lives *outside of words*. In doing this, the book

has been wrongly lauded as 'subversive', in fact this publication is a clever paean to productivity, for there are no critical gaps in it, even though much of its content discusses issues of criticality and judgment. In this way Chapman's book recuperates contemporary practice, through enacting Umberto Eco's description of the novel as 'a machine for generating interpretations'.

Jana Leo's *Rape New York* (Book Works: 2009) is one of nine novels (or perhaps more precisely novellas) edited by writer Stewart Home, collected together as a run entitled 'Semina' with the strapline, 'Where the novel has a nervous breakdown'.

Writing through hierarchies of violence and corruption, Leo's autobiographical novel has a first person narrator who outlines her rape and ensuing lawsuit in a disturbing steady tone. Moving from a description of the administrative records of her landlord's criminal negligence, 'Arrange and make self-closing the doors entrance at 5 sty northwest apt (Date reported: 04/03/1996 27-2005 ADM CODE); Properly repair the broken or defective inoperative intercom system (Date reported: 06/05/2000 27-2005 ADM CODE)...'ⁱⁱⁱ

To the act of rape itself,

'He'd pulled his pants down. His underwear was stripped blue, black and white. He'd put the condom on. I didn't look at him. I turned my head to the side. I opened my legs. He tried to put his penis in, but it wasn't easy. I was tense, my vagina was dry and his penis was large. He was unable to enter me. It hurt.'^{iv}

Whilst we are as modern readers familiar with (and yes probably desensitized to) the detached voice of the psychopath - Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) being probably the most accomplished and well-known example of this genre (even though the narrator's voice is presented with an ironic delivery), 'I like to dissect girls...' - *Rape New York's* tone together of course with the content of tests the specific against the general by flattening out hierarchies of information and emotion, we don't feel particularly empathize with the 'Jana' character because the writer doesn't let us.

There is sequence at work in Leo's book, a spacial 'plot' which addresses literary critic Richard Sheppard's assertion about the nature of postmodernity as '... decentred plurality, ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuities, indeterminacy and depending on one's point of view, chaos...'^v This is evident even in the novel's title, *Rape New York*, which suggests or hints that it may be part of a ghastly series, *Rape London*, *Rape Paris*, *Rape Tokyo* etc.

Both Chapman and Leo's possession of the subjective voice contrasted with the modular narrative is an unusual facet of contemporary art writing, creating an oblique yet deadly relationship with critical objectivity.

It is this very characteristic that recurs in the contemporary artist's novel: they read less as about the story, more about themselves, pointing to how or whether they might indeed actually be novels. As Christine Brook-Rose puts it so neatly in *Amalgamemnon* (1994) the duty of the writing is to be 'Be vocal not equivocal.'^{vi}

ⁱ Carl Andre, 'BILLY BUILDER, or the Painfull Machine: A Novel of Velocity' in *Tracks*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Fall 1976). Pg 53.

ⁱⁱ Jake Chapman, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*. FUEL (2008). Pg 269.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jana Leo, *Rape New York*. Book Works (2009). Pg 63.

^{iv} Ibid. Pg 20.

^v Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*. Northwest University Press (2000). Pg 358.

^{vi} Christine Brook-Rose, *Amalgamemnon*. Dalkey Archive Press (1994). Pg 65.