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Books Artists Told Me To Read

After Matt Keegan accepted my pitch for this magazine, an article with an idea as simple as its title, I wondered if I should go through with it at all. The concept could come off as too facile. And I must admit that the title of this essay is somewhat misleading because, in a couple of instances, the books in question were not suggested to me by the artists, but came up in conversation naturally. In those cases, I had already read the book, or even asked the artist if he or she had read it.

64

In making what might appear as a rather hackneyed comparison between art and literature—*ut pictura poesis*, etc.—I don't mean that the following books influenced the art described. Nor am I concerned, in this case, with the linguistic turn of post-1960s Conceptual art, or the recent trend to appropriate literature or books or writing as a "strategy" in contemporary art. And nor do I mean artists who write fiction or poetry, or the novel or epic poem as a "readymade" within an exhibition. As with Bernadette Corporation, Matt's book-based works, the poetry of Yvonne Rainer and Carl Andre, or the New York Art Book Fair, literature in contemporary art can be compelling on a case-by-case basis. But here, I am more interested in the way one aesthetic form produces knowledge and experience in ways that might be different from another, especially in an age that purports to see "books in an expanded field," to quote Badlands Unlimited. I'm more intrigued by how those differences manifest in the work of its practitioners.

I admit that I'm irritated by or tired of the fashionable appropriation of literature in art or *as art*. So mine is a slippery position. But it's irritating art that irritates me, not whether it simplistically appropriates literature or writing. And there are plenty of examples of excellent writers who are also artists, such as Heather Phillipson or Tom McCarthy, for whom the boundary between these things is porous. (Is it a British, post-Blake thing? Maybe.) Still, I'm skeptical of the rhetoric that collapses these two related endeavors, because each produce knowledge and sensations about the world in different ways.

In May, I attended a benefit luncheon for an arts foundation upstate, where I was seated near the wife of a well-

known artist. Let's call her Margaret. Before lunch, Margaret had asked for a cigarette from my friend, while the three of us loitered outside. When Margaret and I discovered that we would be sitting at the same table, she said that she was excited because we could talk about books: "No one in the art world reads," she declared, exhaling smoke. Once seated inside, however, we were one-too-many seats apart to discuss anything, except to request the quinoa, and we never got to have that discussion about books. (I also could not help but think about Gertrude Stein's fascination with the wives of geniuses—geniuses themselves.) I wondered what Margaret's definition of reading was, what books she read, and whether my taste would interest her.

As a writer who moonlights—or, perhaps the better word is *mainlines*—in the art world, but whose first allegiance is to literature (call it fiction, call it poetry, call it whatever you want, but don't call it contemporary art), it is not the first time that Margaret's declaration had crossed my mind. Do contemporary artists read? Of course, it depends on which artists. But if so, what does their reading say about their work? It's obvious that many have been trained to discuss critical theory, particularly those post-MFA, but what about literature? A friend tells me MFAs at Bard are now being encouraged to read novels. So it goes. There's no easy answer to my question, because artists, like any sampling of contemporary global culture, are not homogenous. Still, I wanted to test out these questions by writing about books artists have told me to read and books I've discussed with artists.

Earlier this year, in London, a friend introduced me to Ed Atkins at the opening of Smiljan Radic's 2014 Serpentine Pavilion, a lovely irradiated potato-like structure in Kensington Gardens. I told Atkins how much I had liked his exhibition, which was currently up across the bridge in Serpentine's new Sackler building. He told me that he was about to go over and look at it because he hadn't seen it since the opening. He wondered if I wanted like to join him for a tour. I sure did.

As Atkins and I stood in front of the first of the five channels for his multiprojection installation *Ribbons*, watching the

video and listening to its intricately layered soundscape, I suddenly felt compelled to ask him if he had read Michel Leiris's *Manhood*. He smiled conspiratorially and nodded. We proceeded to discuss our shared admiration for that book.

"It has been some time," Michel Leiris writes, "since I have ceased to consider the sexual act as a simple matter." So begins *Manhood* with a detailed description of Leiris's middle-aged body, including that admission of impotence. The book is an example of "autobiographical ethnography," in which Leiris, a poet-turned-anthropologist, uses himself as the object of ethnographic scrutiny. In this case, Leiris uses the facts of his own life to explore castration complexes in (mid-century French) men.

While the work of Ed Atkins is not autobiographical, he implicates himself in unexpected ways. In *Ribbons*, Atkins's avatar, Dave, sings a variety of songs—from a religious hymn by Bach to a song by Randy Newman—while either resting his head on a bar table, or hiding under it like a troll. The wall on which two of the videos are projected has an aperture—a glory hole, in fact, apparently proportional to Atkins's height, hence involving his body, or its index, in the work.

Dave's cigarette, unashed, is flaccid and curved: the same shape found on the impotency warning that covers the exterior of Canadian packs. In an accompanying video, a head bounces and rolls down a staircase in an endless loop, a work that a friend of mine believes is about skull-fucking.

So the resonance to *Manhood* is clear. Atkins engages in an unflinching look at the bankruptcy of contemporary (English? European? Western?) masculinity. In Atkins's installation, the head, along with the deflated cock, become the emblem of European manhood—castrated, impotent, decapitated.

That same friend who introduced us had described Atkins's work as being about masculinity, but from the perspective of someone who had read a lot of feminist theory (an observation that also highlights the major difference between the work of Jordan Wolfson and Atkins: criticality and self-reflection). I agreed. Rarely has the psychology of a loser, or The Great Historical Loser, i.e., the European male, been more probed.

But back in 2011, when I was visiting Los Angeles, I was thinking about a completely different kind of artist. My host had arranged for me a studio visit with an unfamiliar artist—Marina Pinsky, who was then a student at UCLA. At the time, Pinsky was taking photographs of basic dry goods and foodstuffs from the Soviet Union—not the "former Soviet Union" or "Russia," but actual objects from before the fall of the wall, if I recall correctly. The way she arranged the objects revealed not only a photographic intelligence (i.e., how those objects would look as pictures), but also a sculptural one, so it makes sense that Pinsky's work is hard to pin down, involving a series of conceptual and formal veers, moving from one idea or form to another.

Last winter I found myself in LA over the holidays, where, at Night Gallery's Christmas party, I visited with Pinsky. Knowing that she had emigrated from the former Soviet Union, I asked her about a novelist I was reading at

the time, Leonid Tsypkin, whose work was largely unread during his life—heartbreaking novels in breathtakingly long sentences about the lives of Russian Jews surviving the nadir of the Soviet Union. She said she hadn't heard of him, but she enthusiastically suggested other Russian novelists. I took notes.

Of the ones she suggested, I like *The Suitcase* by Sergej Dovlatov the best. The novel concerns eight items in a suitcase, each chapter chronicling its story. After emigrating from Soviet Russia, the narrator left the suitcase in a closet, perhaps not wanting to confront the involuntary memories its contents would conjure. Once he finally decided to open it, the memories return—each producing a short story, ranging from how the narrator tried to sell Finnish socks on the black market to how Fernand Léger's jacket came into his possession. Pell-mell, the objects are an assortment of the few things he had that he could take with him when he got his visa to leave the Soviet Union.

Dovlatov's novels, like most good novels through the Soviet era, circulated before they were officially published in samizdat—unofficial and underground facsimiles of manuscripts. Many authors who did not receive state approval remained in samizdat until they were published in Europe or the United States, only finding publication in Russian after the collapse of the Communist imperium.

In certain cases Russian Jews who were granted permission to leave the Soviet Union—many immigrating to the United States—risked having the rest of their remaining families persecuted as traitors (such was the case with Tsypkin, who saw himself demoted after his son emigrated). The borough of Queens recently honored Dovlatov, an émigré himself, by naming a street in Forrest Hills after him.

Pinsky's early works have something of the samizdat about them. Those early photographs speak not only to the absurd aesthetics that any commercial good has when taken out of context, but they also interrogate the strange relationships between things. How do we relate to all this *stuff* around us, both regarding its specific history and independent of it? Nothing is ever resolved, and that is its power.

A lack of resolution is, of course, common among art and artists, many of whom prefer open-ended projects, or open form. Few other contemporary artists are as devoted to an open-form project as Christopher Williams, whose "For Example" series has been developing and building over the past two decades. (The work of R. H. Quaytman also comes to mind.) I have had the opportunity on a few occasions to visit Williams in his near-perfect studio in Cologne. On a visit two years ago I noticed, among all the materials piled neatly on his tables, a stack of the novels by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, whose work I had been reading at the time as well. I asked Williams about them. At that point, I had yet to read *Camera*, the novel I espied on the top of the pile.

All of Toussaint's novels are without plot—or, rather, they are plotted not by the conventional arrangement of escalating actions that lead to a resolution, but by one small observation after another. He calls the kind of novels he writes "infinitesimal," as opposed to "minimalist." They function through motif, tone, and atmosphere. The endings feel ▶

like endings, but you are never quite certain why. Often what-
ever might constitute the “action” of the stories is omitted.
The only things that remain are the interstices of a life: a
particular image, an exchange with a stranger.

In particular, *Camera* follows a hapless narrator through his
hapless life, focusing on events in which cameras play a role,
in effect making the novel a quiet reflection on the role of
that technical apparatus in our daily lives. These wry and
ironic novels, which one could imagine Jacques Tati starring
in the film adaptations of, may seem distant from Williams’s
rigorous photo-based Conceptual art. However, they have
more than the superficial connection to cameras. They both
share the same kind of sequential logic, that same kind of
inexplicable motif, the same whimsy.

The numerous photographs that Williams has restaged
and then placed side-by-side—recreating a scene with a
nude model in *Society of the Spectacle*, images of printing
machines in Africa, stacks of Ritter Sport chocolate—juxta-
pose a series of images that are not intended to be seen
together. Williams’s artistic program is to slow down images,
to make us think about the way we consume them, not only
the photographs themselves, but also the various apparatuses
that make photography possible: the camera, and in his case,
the museum wall.

Only through the quick glance at a magazine stand, idle
surfing of the Internet, or the thumbing of a TV remote
control would such pictures be montaged, and yet in
Williams’s program those so-called randomly placed pictures
are intentionally paired. The images build. The seemingly
disparate become linked. What does, to paraphrase John
Kelsey, a jellyfish have in common with an upturned car? In
Williams’s work, the viewer begins to see the way that a
camera and the museum unite a series of otherwise unrelated
things, quite similar to how, in *Camera*, a life is strung
together through happenstance. Meaning is made in the
montage of incongruous quiddities.

It’s about how two seemingly different things relate, no
matter what they are. Toussaint has said that the opening
sentence of *Camera* is something like a program or a manifesto:

“It was at about the same time in my life, a calm life in
which ordinarily nothing happened, that two events
coincided, events that, taken separately, were hardly
of any interest, and that, considered together, were
unfortunately not connected in any way.” ==

