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The Simultaneous Book: Women's Writing in Contemporary Art

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Graduate Program in Art and Visual Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of
Philosophy

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Abstract

Artist's books have re-emerged as an important medium for contemporary art, but what may or may not constitute an "artist's book" remains contentious. This dissertation seeks to explore and expand the various forms an artist's book may take. While the recent explosion of international Art Book Fairs attests to the vitality of the market for artist's books, questions remain about how artist's books function within an expanded field of experimental literary production. As conventionally defined, an artist's book is a book made by a visual artist. Alongside a wider selection of formats now accepted within the category of the artist's book, the experimental novel has migrated from the literary world to that of the gallery. In this context, such experimental novels have been re-defined in 2014 by artist-scholar David Maroto and curator Joanna Zielinska as "artist's novels"—a categorization clearly derived from "artist's books." However, this new name retains the assumption that such novels must be written by visual artists—a problematic assumption this dissertation seeks to challenge.

Novels written by women authors who don't adhere to the classification "visual artist" are nonetheless gaining momentum in today's contemporary art world. Yet works by authors such as Chris Kraus or Catherine Millet are often not recognized as artist's novels because their authors are not or/and do not consider themselves to be visual artists. I contend that we can usefully situate their work within the genre of the artist's novel by addressing how they invent artistic postures and artistic alter-egos within the autofictional worlds of their texts. My dissertation *The Simultaneous Book* proposes to open up the definition of the artist's novel to include novels written by woman writers whose practice can be situated at the intersection of conceptual writing, performance art, and autofiction.

The Simultaneous Book investigates how certain novels written by women authors who have been, historically, refused classification within the tradition of "serious literature," can now be embraced under the rubric of the "artist's novel." I contend that these "artist's novels" grow out of an understanding of the practice of art writing as *écriture féminine*. Thus, in *The Simultaneous Book*, the category of the "artist's novel"

and the practice of art writing as women's writing both function as a sort of refuge for formerly marginalized literary practices, while pointing subtly towards the changing role of patriarchy in the literary and artistic fields.

Structured around a series of discussions with art writers and visual artists, the dissertation commences with a feminist art-writing manifesto. The second chapter functions as an introduction to the recent history of the artist's novel which enmeshes the practice of art writing with the emergence of Hélène Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* on the North American art scene. The third chapter can be understood as four case studies: artist's novels by Pauline Klein, Cara Benedetto, Rebekah Rutkoff and Maude Veilleux, are examined by way of conversations with the authors and discussions of the performative potentials of their art-writing practices. The fourth chapter presents a series of four speculative art criticism texts I wrote on the work of women artists Ulla van Brandenburg, Valérie Blass, Liz Magor, Moira Davey and Francesca Woodman. This chapter also makes use of conversation as part of a performative methodology that enacts the tenets of *écriture féminine*. The final chapter concludes *The Simultaneous Book* with a reflection on the impact of women art writing on the artworld. *The Simultaneous Book* weaves these different chapters together into an experimental book whose overarching structure itself takes the form of an artist's book, thereby integrating the historicization and creation of art into one, feminist practice, namely, art writing.

Summary for Lay Audience

My dissertation, *The Simultaneous Book*, is an inquiry into the artist's novel, a sub-category of the artist's book, and its recent emergence in the contemporary art scene. More specifically, I look at the novelistic production of women artists and authors that can simultaneously be considered a literary and visual art object. Through my fieldwork, I came to witness a specific overlap between the literary and visual arts scene where women visual artists and writers who performatively embody their novels gather together to form a *secret society* that makes writing and performance a space of visibility for women's voices.

The Simultaneous Book is a discussion of the many occurrences of this *secret society* that includes seminal historical female figures in literature and visual arts as well as emerging contemporary artists. *The Simultaneous Book* thus maps a network of influences between feminist artists and authors. In fact, my dissertation aims at contextualizing "art writing" within a feminist framework. Through my research, I have come to believe that feminism is taking over the contested notion of art writing. The emergence of a generation of young women art writers, for whom a hybrid practice of performance art and creative writing embodies the tenets of *écriture féminine*, potentially marks the culmination of the most substantial contributions to the field of art writing.

Over the years, international debates around the discipline have advanced contextualizing efforts that were all very diverse, if not divergent at times. Yet, at the forefront of art writing we find notable woman writers, such as Chris Kraus and Maria Fusco, who are setting the terms of the discipline by rendering "writing as a visible practice." These women writers and artists' practice all converge to suggest a definition of art writing as an autonomous, feminist praxis within the field of visual culture.

Keywords

Art Writing, Feminism, Performance Art, Artist's book, Artist's novel, Literature, Art History, Manifesto, Women's Writings, Autofiction, Conceptual Writing.

Co-Authorship Statement

Chapter Three is structured as a series of interviews. Each transcription was reviewed and approved by the interviewees Pauline Klein, Rebekah Rutkoff, Cara Benedetto and Maude Veilleux. In Chapter Four, the speculative art criticism pieces that were informed by interviews all had their transcriptions reviewed and approved by interviewees Ulla von Brandenburg, Jenine Marsh, Kari Cwynar, and Roxane Cheibes. For the three interviews conducted in French, namely with Pauline Klein, Maude Veilleux and Roxane Cheibes, I translated them into English myself.

Acknowledgments

I extend my kindest thanks to colleagues Kevin Rodgers and Kelly Jazvac who put into effect my aspiration to pursue doctoral studies. My sincere gratitude goes to Western's faculty Tricia Johnson, Patrick Mahon, Cody Barteet, David Merritt, Kelly Wood, Kirsty Robertson, and Dr. Chris Roulston, for their precious support throughout the program. I am most grateful to my advisor Daniela Snepkova who gave me the necessary latitude and freedom to carry out my research-creation project successfully. I also wish to thank Cara Benedetto, Rebekah Rutkoff, Maude Veilleux and Pauline Klein, as well as Tamara Faith Berger, Jenine Marsh, Ulla von Brandenburg, and Roxane Cheibs for their precious contribution and collaboration, and their immense trust in my writerly experimentations.

As with most of my work, my artist's book and art writing projects could not have happened without the *amitié intellectuelle, artistique et/ou professionnelle* of Steve Lyons, Ania Wroblewski, Robin Simpson, Tegan Moore, Vincent Bonin, Marc Boucrot, Valérie Blass, Cynthia Girard, Tiziana La Melia, Walter Scott, cheyanne turions, Nadège Greibmeir-Forget, Michael Nardone, Charles Stankieveh, Sheila Heti, Jaclyn Bruneau, Anna Madelska, Jason Hallows, Kari Cwynar, Kara Hamilton, Xenia Benivolski, Corinn Gerber, Loretta Lamargese, Ella Dawn McGough, Leila Timmins, David Balzer, Yaniya Lee, and Natasha Chaykowski. I would also like to acknowledge the institutional support received from the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program and Western University, Art Metropole, Kunstverein Toronto, 8Eleven, Parker Branch, Untitled Art Society, Galerie Division, Gallery 44, BookArt and the Quebec Art Council. My warmest feelings go to my parents and my sister, my cousin Geneviève Lareau and her family, as well as my partner Matthew Palmer, for all the encouragement and support.

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ANNIE ERNAUX

Chère Maryse Larivière,
votre requête me touche
beaucoup. Vingt ans après aussi
"Vieilles" le livre, il revit en
vous.
Annie Ernaux

Figure 1 - Annie Ernaux, thank-you card, 2009.

(Dear Maryse Larivière, your request touches me a lot. Twenty years after I "lived" the book, it lives again in you. Annie Ernaux)

1 The Simultaneous Book, A Manifesto.

In the aftermath of 9/11, my hope to be an artist had pretty much vanished. That is, until my friend Antye, a Finnish artist, invited me to join her in Berlin. Once there, I don't know exactly how it happened, but very quickly, I stumbled into a secret society of woman artists. Antye was but one member, so when I prompted her about the uncanniness of all her collaborators and studio assistants being pregnant women, she looked away, and whispered: "We got fed up with the boys' club, so we've created our own invisible art system. We just never, ever mention it in front of them..."

Our conversation about this concealed art world ended right there, and the topic was never brought up again. But here I am a decade later preparing to write about this secret society of women artists. The enterprise I am about to undertake isn't without its challenges: my first encounter with the society of women artists was also the last time I actually heard it called by name, yet I cannot account for the many times it has since spontaneously, if only very briefly, appeared in front of my eyes. This secret society comes in a flash, in a moving cloud of feelings and shared intuitions, drawn by affective situations intelligible beyond the intellect, and with the senses.

So, what is this secret society? I will try my best to describe it briefly, but not so much as to expose its inner working. Invisible and ubiquitous, this secret society pervades the art world, from its center to its margins. It is an immanent and parasitic grouping, existing all over and beyond, within, sometimes in the middle and on top of the

art world. Mainstream and marginal, master and slave, tops and bottoms, our secret society of women artists is everywhere but nowhere to be seen.

Its membership comprises all artists, making no distinction between the most ignored and obscure artists, the artists' artists, the darlings of the local art scene, the non-artists and the con artists. We do not bear visible signs of companionship. Rather, we try to keep our affiliation as invisible as possible. We sport un/fashionable kinds of invisibility in order to be as inconspicuous as one can be amidst a crowd of young art hipsters. In fact, our secret society includes pretty much anyone and everyone who actually gets its shared yet fleeting vision, meaning that yes, of course gentle men are in it as well. The question then is what is there to get?

The society's furtiveness in fact intimates the impossibility of “a seamless category of women.”¹ The society is exclusive to women (and allies) in direct response to the Boys' Club's historical exclusion of women. The Boys' Club never included women, and we feel that Linda Nochlin's “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” very well encapsulates our sentiment, that this situation still rings true today. In any case, we certainly don't have time to waste waiting around for the golden nuggets of artistic genius to be handed over to us.² This apparent unity of the secret society is necessary for effective political action in opposing resistance to the boys' club, because what is really important to the society is the constant re-assessment by its members of what it means to

1 Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire.” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London, Routledge 2001), 344.

2 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 147-158.

be a “woman” and an “artist.” Their grouping as a secret society of women is meant to create an agonistic context for varying ideological stances regarding femininity, feminism and gender to be enacted through fictional characters, alter-egos or true selves. Agonism offers a way out of essentialism while retaining some of its beneficial aspects; an over-generalized definition of the group is avoided while women's political power as class and agency as individuals is maintained. Though subtle, the society's diverging aesthetic postures and ideological inclinations are representative of its various gender politics and agendas. Conversely, each woman artist in the group assesses for herself the way she thinks of herself as artist, which could even mean that she doesn't identify with the “artist” moniker. This leads to a redefinition of what it means to be a woman, no matter where on the larger spectrum of gender she places herself, or where she transits in order to remain fluid and unfixated on the spectrum of gender.

Arguably, the concept of “woman” is just as limiting as the idea of the “artist,” especially if the latter notion is understood to be based on a particular medium. In the context of the secret society, we thus reject the idea of being recognized as artists per se since we would rather define ourselves infinitely. Of course, a stronger presence and greater recognition of women are necessary in the world of art, and the secret society is working towards such an end goal. Yet the secret society as a group formation comes to underline how women, who may not desire to be called artists, are actually doing something that has more to do with art than art has to do with itself. In fact, this is exactly where the potential power of our secret society lies: it holds the power to open up the possibilities for what art can be.

It goes without saying that the secret society is unreal. There is no fixed group of women artists organized as a secret society, at least not to my knowledge. There are no passwords, membership cards, or hazing rituals, no bureaucratic frameworks or organizational structures (hierarchical or not). Wiped of any conventional signs of official organization, of existence according to law, this secret society is informal in the extreme, and therefore profoundly elusive. So, let's not simply say that it is pure fantasy, but that it is both ostensibly real and unreal.

Yet this indefinable secret society is bound to be the “most visible disappearance act in art history.”³ Duchamp's withdrawal from the art world was relentlessly praised (or deemed overrated by Joseph Beuys on national television), but what about ours? Of course, Rose Sélavy is one of us, but she's just another member of our invisible sisterhood like anyone else. Isn't it rather surprising that no one actually noticed us stepping out of the art world and into real life, that no one witnessed our renunciation (voluntary or not) of our status as artist, our taking a radical artistic posture and critical stance directed at the institution of art?

Where to look, if no further than what is immediately obvious... How can we witness the extent to which our invisible secret society is thriving? More specifically, shouldn't the question be, “what are we looking at, then”? What are the traces, what sort of vestige is the secret society leaving behind? Perhaps writing offers a way of

³ Steven Stern, “A Fraction of the Whole.” *Frieze magazine*, London, Issue 121, March 2009, <https://frieze.com/article/fraction-whole>.

understanding the liminal existence of a society that is both present and absent in the contemporary artworld.

Indeed, writing as art for us is an embodied practice that can also be understood as a critique of the artist-as-institution. We appear to be stepping out of the art world, and renouncing our status as artists, as most are forgetting that the institution of art is not “something external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as art.”⁴ We put your bankrupted white cube up for sale in order to assemble our own fiction-museum in writings.⁵

We are moving in and out of the artworld from “rooms of our own.”⁶ The rooms we have “are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silk; are hard as horsehair or soft as feather—one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face.”⁷ We have rooms, spaces, places of our own that we make into our studios and where we subversively oscillate between being artist and writer. We have rooms of our own where we write with force to break down walls of patriarchy.

4 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institutions of Critique,” in *Institutional Critique*, Eds. Alberro & Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

5 Marcel Broodthaers, *Museum of Modern Art for sale—due to bankruptcy*, 1970-71.

6 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 112.

7 Ibid, 87.

Our discrete interventions of resistance haven't brought us the same critical attention as our male counterparts, but that doesn't matter, because for us, art is elsewhere. Art is "elsewhere, outside," where "birds, women and writing gather."⁸ To really think of art calls for looking in places considered outside its (privileged visual) realm, and sometimes those places might be right there in front of our very own eyes. And as such, we have carved ourselves a space for our "intervention without surrendering our primary concern, which is devotion to making art, a devotion intense and rewarding enough that it is the path leading to our freedom and fulfillment."⁹ Art demands that we turn away from the artworld to solely direct our attention exactly where we may express ourselves artistically: in writings.

Yes, we are continuously writing, and that for almost a century, and over five hundred years more, and over three thousand years, a portrait of her, of our secret society, of our sister, a poet and a painter, whom we will not leave to die. We are giving her a body, "which she has so often laid down,"¹⁰ that we draw from our bodies, from our lives, from the lives of our forerunners. We are writing in preparation of her becoming, with effort and determination, so she can be born again and again, so it can be possible for her to live and think and write and make art. She is coming as we work for her, "even in poverty and obscurity, [and that] is worthwhile."¹¹

⁸ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 113.

⁹ bell hooks, 'Women Artists: The Creative Process' (1995), in *Feminism-Art-Theory, An Anthology 1968-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 640.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 112.

¹¹ Ibid.

We are ceaselessly coming to writing to bring her back to life, to bring alive our ephemeral social formation, so she can be rendered visible and intelligible through (auto)fictional (re)constructions. We “put ourselves into the text, as into the world and into history [and into art,] by [our] own movement.”¹² By way of fiction, the possibility for documenting our spontaneous occurrences readily expands. Since we mostly gather through private conversations among our members, a nuanced and subjective form of transcription and representation is required here, especially if we are to equally account for non-verbal, affective and psychoanalytical expressions as well as for conversational content. Fiction is a great way for us to bring theory into action: it confronts and mediates the gap between theory and everyday life, art and criticism; gender in theory and gender as lived.

We are writing because we believe our emotions must become our shared cultural reality, because of no reasons at all, because of our madness, our nastiness, because our skin exudes the perfume of our thoughts in the air around us. “Writing [is] in the air around [us.] Always close, intoxicating, invisible, inaccessible. [We] undergo writing! It comes to [us] abruptly. [Every] day, [we are] tracked down, besieged, taken. It captures [us.] [We] are seized. From where? [We know] nothing about it. From some bodily region. [We] don’t know where.”¹³ From down there, and up here, all at once but we won’t disclose our secret to you. We won’t keep ourselves from flying, and no special cages will ever prevent us from our flights of poetry, in words and images. We will go all

¹² Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 37.

¹³ Hélène Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 9.

the way to write, we will theorize our desires, and “we will show you our *sexts*.”¹⁴ You will look straight on at us and see how beautiful we are when we are laughing.

Can you hear our roar of laughter? Can you read the open smile on our lips when you look at us, our floating red lips against the clear blue sky? Can you hear our voice, which is as distinctive as ever, the voice of our univocal project for the elaboration, perpetuation and advancement of an ontological feminine subjectivity that is “fluid and creative and mutually interrelated to respectful relations.”¹⁵ What about the sound of our lyrical “I”, the invention of Sappho, can you hear its mutter, our mother? Can you hear the choruses performing publicly our poem where the “I” becomes a communal voice, a “persona, a poetic construct rather than a real-life figure?”¹⁶ Can you hear the incantatory, rhythmic erotic lyrics of the poet’s and her companions, an expression of our yearnings? Our chanting is a deeply personal expression of our private passions, yet it is also relentlessly public and communitarian.

Can you discern our visage, her face, the facial features of our “artistauthors” whose identity oscillates from the literary author to visual artist statuses yet always remains ambiguous? Obviously, using “*écrivaine*” (author) over “*plasticienne*” (visual artist), or vice-versa, is not only unproductive but too limiting for us. Our identity formation has developed in dialogue with visual artists and literary authors who have

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 54.

¹⁵ Jay Johnston, “Chapter 2 – Difference,” in *Angel of Desire: Esoteric Bodies, Aesthetics and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁶ Daniel Mendelsohn, “Girl, Interrupted. Who was Sappho?”, *The New Yorker*, New York, March 6 (2015), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/16/girl-interrupted>.

already been accepted by the canon as well as with others who don't necessarily have the pedigree, so to speak. Our “artistauthors” are coming from different fields or backgrounds into writing, writing as art (as opposed to writing about art or art criticism), “as a practice in itself, a studio-based activity”¹⁷ or put plainly, “art writing.” We certainly do not make any distinction between the two statuses, since for us there is no difference between the literary category of “écriture féminine” (women's writing) and the visual arts practice of “art writing.” We simply argue that the two cannot be distinguished, and that there is no difference. We are looking at the practice first more and foremost, than we are looking at individual work. We are talking about creative practices, a creative practice expressed through writing, writing as performance art. More specifically, we define “art writing as [an interdisciplinary] practice within contemporary arts,” that does not “simply think of contemporary arts as something purely visual.”¹⁸ Our performative practice of art writing puts “the sentient [feminine] body at the centre of knowing,”¹⁹ as both feminist body art and women’s writings have urge us repeatedly. For us, art writing and women’s writing is one and the same practice as we write through performance art, through body art, through performing the feminine subject, through

17 Maria Fusco, “Discover Art Writing in the UK”, Youtube. Video File. March 28, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fssdDpvS138>

18 Ibid.

19 Peggy Phelan, “The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80.” In *Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Cornelia Butler & Lisa Gabrielle Mark, eds. (Cambridge/Los Angeles: The MIT Press/Moca, 2007), 348.

female agency. And as we write “in art and with art, we also write “towards the artist’s novel.”²⁰

Our “simultaneous book”,²¹ to reclaim Sonia Delaunay's expression, is a book where performance (art) and creative writing elide into one another. Our simultaneous book includes no illustrations or artworks as conventionally conceived (photographs, collages, drawings), and appears similar to any novel, any other literary book, one might encounter in a bookstore. Yet, our simultaneous book is exactly an artist’s novel in how it conjures the artistic attitude of its “artistauthor,” and the originality of ours lies in how it merges the two paramount feminist mediums together—writing and performance—into the “quintessential twentieth-century artform, [namely] the artist’s book.”²² But our simultaneous book might not exactly be an artist’s book, and it might not exactly be an artist’s novel in that, for our books to be considered as such, we would need to be visual artists which we may not always be, nor always want to be. Indeed, the notions of “artist’s book” as well as its subcategory “artist’s novel” are defined as a book, or a novel, created by a visual artist. In an act of defiance, we are knocking down the last of wall in this alleged *Museum without Walls*,²³ by challenging the notion of artist’s book, following the example of Lucy Lippard who has finally let go of her resistance in

20 Marie Fusco, *Give Up Art* (Los Angeles: New Documents, 2017), 21.

21 Sonia Delaunay & Blaise Cendrars, *La prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*, artist’s book, 200 x 35.6 cm, Edition of 50-100 (Paris: Éditions des Hommes Nouveaux, 1913).

22 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 2004), 1.

23 Stefan Klima, *Artists Book—A Critical Survey of the Literature* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 59.

defining her own “weird little feminist novel *I See/You Mean*” as an artist’s novel “because it wasn’t an artist’s book according to [her] criteria.”²⁴

You may not consider us a visual artist, yet we embody artistic postures in writings, we inhabit the body of the artist in fiction, we enact our politics and aesthetics in words. We declare our simultaneous books to be “artist’s novels,” as a strategy to open up the artist’s book definition and make space for the practice of women “artistauthors” from the center of art history. And in a further act of defiance, we thus move away from the artist-books epithets “book-as-exhibition” and “portable exhibition” towards a feminine matrix in which “visual and textual regimes are mobilized” for an embodied gaze, the “boundaries between visual and performance art” collapsed as well as where the notions of creative writing and art making “have been, and continue, to be redrawn”²⁵ to pen our “book-as-performance.”

But I need to ask here, with some foreboding, how have we arrived at this hybrid object? How is it possible for a book to be at once a conceptual art, a performance and literature? How have we arrived at this contemporary simultaneous book, an invisible, dematerialized art object of sophisticated, radical, discreet subversion, when all the while the novel is at the brink of death, “there is [only] embarrassment for the poet,”²⁶ and the artwork is a ludicrous, luxurious toy-of-the-moment for the techno-bourgeois?

²⁴ Julia Ault, “Interview with Lucy R. Lippard on Printed Matter,” *Printed Matter*, Website, March 20, 2019, <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/tables/41>.

²⁵ Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, eds, *Interfaces—Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 20.

²⁶ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016), 11.

Our secret society belongs to an extended, sophisticated historical lineage of female provocation in writing. Its inception goes all the way back, and rightfully so, to the advent of women's writing with Christine de Pizan's *Le livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405), an allegorical account of an ideal society of women. The earliest occurrence in literature of a female first-person narrative, de Pizan's book came about in direct response to the misogyny she found in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (1275) and Boccaccio's *On Famous Women* (1374). This is exactly where we need to go back in time to consider how writing emerged as a feminine critique of the institution of patriarchy as *Le livre de la Cité des Dames* features Christine de Pizan who imagines herself as the architect of a city built out of bricks meant to represent historical and mythical women of knowledge. This dematerialized performance by de Pizan is no less of a conceptual art project in rehabilitating the place of women contributions in history than Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" (1979), "one of the most ambitious works of art made in the postwar period, [as] it succeeds as few others have in integrating a strong esthetic with [feminist] political content."²⁷ De Pizan's *Le livre de la Cité des Dames* is not only meant to be read, but also enacted in real life and Chicago certainly perpetuates the legacy of this secret society of women with *The Dinner Party*. Looking all the way back to *Le livre de la Cité des Dames*, we can clearly see how our performances of gender and of institutional critique through writing were even at that time a place for us to transgress, resist and compose complex ideas of femininity while bringing the private sphere into the public realm as a political gesture.

²⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, "Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party," *Art America*, New York, (April 1980): 115.

Since its inception, our feminine posturing and institutional critique has indeed created a secret chronology of women's writing of which the contemporary form or predilection is the simultaneous book. Our “artistauthors” don't necessarily see any sort of link between one another, they might not think of themselves, or be thought of, as a cohesive group of writers. Instead, they experience art more in terms of their own circles and concerns, and herein our secret society once again manages to retain its immanence. This genealogy further invokes the contribution of Madame de La Fayette, the author of *La Princess de Clèves* (1678), arguably the first modern novel²⁸, who critically wrote on themes of love, marriage, and women's position in society. Our secret society relies on proposing a rebuttal to History, to received notions about femininity, and to expectations regarding women in society. We propose a story written from a feminine perspective that analyzes the regulation of female sexuality, or the lack thereof, a story about a woman moving into society without the story ending with marriage. None of us are trying to write the grand narrative of History, we are not trying to write history as a factual, neutral and generalizing narrative, no, our agenda is a conceptualization of the political that includes the emotional, the intimate, and the personal. We are writing the backstory of History, the ways in which relations of power are played out, and in its own way, the royal court or high society, or intellectual circles and salons, can all be thought of as what a contemporary art scene could be back in the days of La Fayette.

The ways in which we write have been the main vehicle through which feminist concerns and claims led to the elaboration of institutional critique. Our intention is

²⁸ John Campbell, "La 'Modernité' De La Princesse De Clèves." *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 29.1 (2007): 63-72.

definitely to destabilize the status quo and make readers uncomfortable. Historians have subsumed our radical feminist discourses into an allegedly larger canon and a legacy of institutional critique that undermines the potential of certain artworks, especially those that are based solely on writing, to truly broaden the horizon of what is legible as art. “What form of practices do we reward?”²⁹ The unique way we envision institutional critique questions the forms of artistic practices made legible (or not) through the processes of art history. It is our poetic postures that foretold modernity in art as in literature, and our resistance to patriarchy that generated innovations in both of those fields, yet most of our contributions were rendered invisible and shrouded in silence.

Regardless, we kept on writing for a greater “expansion of our verbal powers,” and that was “the very expansion [Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven] sought in all of her art.”³⁰ BEvFL’s sound poetry brought the page into the space of art by way of the body to channel her dissidence against the double standards and sexual hypocrisy women of her time had to face. Her poetic writings, and so with our simultaneous books, are much “more of a performance than typical books which is perhaps why the art world so eagerly embrace [them].”³¹ Not only did she share our taste for provocation, and posture of anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment, proto-punk inclinations, she also fully embraced the

29 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institutions of Critique,” in *Institutional Critique*. Alberro & Stimson, Eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

30 Irene Gammel & Suzanne Zelazo, « “Harpischords Metallic Howl”: The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s Sound Poetry. » *Modernism/modernity*, volume eighteen, number two, The John Hopkins University Press, (2012), 259.

31 M.H. Miller, “The Novelist as Performance Artist: On Chris Kraus, the Art World’s Favorite Fiction Writer.” *Observer*, 30 Oct. (2012), <https://observer.com/2012/10/the-novelist-as-performance-artist-on-chris-kraus-the-art-worlds-favorite-fiction-writer/>.

complexities of femininity by reconsidering the place of women in society beyond what had been drawn thus far by Western culture. Ultimately, we reclaim her most notable poetic pun, namely the artwork known as the icon of twentieth-century art, the readymade *Fountain* (1917), which is believed to have been a gift from the Baroness to a famous artist friend.³²

Another key moment in our genealogy is looking back at the advent of performance art, conceptual art and feminist art as elaborated through the practice of the poet Valentine de Saint-Point, the avant-garde poet member of the Futurist movement. As such, De Saint-Point was quick to riposte by developing new ways of thinking and making art, new ways of being as an artist, and as a woman, that were based on her belief in the equality of the sexes. She collaboratively elaborated the concept of “cerebral art” or “Ideaist art,” basically the precursor of conceptual art, which consisted of a multi-disciplinary practice where multiple, superimposed mediums were used to simultaneously express an idea and to escape materiality. Her conception of dance, known as “metachorie” was equally a precursor to performance art, which promoted the expression of ideas with the body in new and abstract ways. De Saint-Point's “artistic posturings” and “actions féminines” are contributing to the history of the formation of our secret society since her archive contains only literary objects, printed matter and documentation,

³² Julian Spalding & Glyn Thompson, “Did Marcel Duchamp steal Elsa’s urinal?” *The Art Newspaper*, Comment, Issue 262, (November 2014); Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa—Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity, A cultured biography*, (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2002); Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism—A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2004).

manifestos, political essays and novellas. Her rallying cry was “we must make lust into a work of art’, [while she, comparably to all of us] produced no identifiable art object.”³³

As we are the fabulists of the art world, desire is our motivation and through creative writing, we ask ourselves, how can we talk of art? Should we even bother? What kind of discourse should we maintain around art? Who are we discursively performing for? Curators, historians, art dealers, editors, publishers, the viewers, the readers, the public? And why? Who are we really talking to? How are our idiosyncratic postures an expression of our freedom?

Our artistic sorority manipulates the artistic and literary field to give ourselves the most freedom through producing artistic attitudes as opposed to art objects. A conceptual project to the utmost, our simultaneous books function as literary and artistic works at once, not forging any distinction or hierarchy between these historically connected creative forms. Weaving together narrative passages, interviews and theoretical discussions about feminism, sexuality and the conditions for art making, these simultaneous books make use of fiction to discuss informal networks, affinity groups, and female friendships, and the role of such friendships in the production of art and its discourses. In short, we use the simultaneous book to discuss the many occurrences of our secret society.

Our work swings between language in its written form and language expressed orally, to complicate our position as to the necessity for artists to take stances on their

³³ Adrien Sina, “Action Feminine, Valentine de Saint Point.” *Tate Modern*, 01 05 2009: Issue 16, <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/action-feminine>.

own practice. We dance between obfuscating and revealing our position as we muse in streams of consciousness, while obliquely responding to the context in which we are evolving. The criticality in our writings emerges at times outside the text, but within shifting viewpoints, and through adopting different postures for expressing similar concerns in different tones. Our use of fiction mixed with autobiographical writings also pertains all at once to philosophical, theoretical and poetic considerations that fused together become a creative project in their own right. Freedom, whimsicality and intuition, supplant nihilism in sustaining colorful language that unfolds seamlessly in our digressive methodology for art writing.

Yet again, here we are thinking through our project which is nothing else than analyzing ideas, what Simone Weil practiced as “performance philosophy” which consist of taking one's experience as women, “know the suffering of the common person, and process that through writing in order to transmit the psychic experience of that kind of occurrence.”³⁴ We open up a new kind of space for art, away from the gallery, and inside the book, in a continuous dematerialization of art and of our bodies into a subjective voice, as to always respond to and get under the new and ever changing capitalist context. Our simultaneous books specifically respond to wider concerns women have about gender and sexual politics in the art world and outside of it.

Our simultaneous books are thus preoccupied with self-representation and stand as a discreet intervention to re-insert ourselves in art history through the history of

³⁴ Sheila Heti, “Interview with Chris Kraus,” *The Believer*, San Francisco, September (2013), http://www.believermag.com/issues/201309/?read=interview_kraus.

women's writings. While it might appear as if there is a plethora of women drifting away from the art world, we haven't drifted ashore. No, we are busying ourselves at writing so as to voice our political, artistic, philosophical feminine visions. We even enjoy this limbo between both worlds in this liminal posture of art conversationalist. "When you come to read [us] you will ask why [we] don't keep to painting and [our] exhibitions, since [we] write so rough and disorderly. It's because now [we] feel the need for words – and what [we] are writing is new to [us] because until now [our] true world has never been touched. The word is [our] fourth dimension."³⁵ Our contribution to art history is located in an oral tradition of knowledge transmission through a discursive and participatory practice of art for an utterly dematerialized and always becoming simultaneous book.

The "private is political" is our muted rallying pledge of honour. Our artistic posture is autofiction. Our form of predilection is autofiction as performance of the self, and a way to explore art and aesthetics as ideas as well as to produce artworks on a solely conceptual basis. We make use of autofiction as a weapon to express mostly feminine, if not feminist, issues that are related (in)directly to art. Our autofictional simultaneous books are performances, especially of gender, in its utmost ephemerality. A performance in our minds, and in the reader's, an art object for the imagination. Our enlarged circle of woman "artistauthors" is producing alternatives for what it means to be a woman, and as such, our resistance in writing should be understood as an institutional project outside of the institution of art, but still in reaction to patriarchy. Our natural and mutual correlation

35 Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (New York: New Directions Books, 2012), 4.

is based on our intention as “artistauthors” as we speak of our own experiences, as we are in constant conversation with one another.

We write in order to bypass the cacophony of the overcrowded contemporary art scene, and oust into the twilight all those too many people who want to make art. We write as a conscious dismissal of the realm of the visible. We vow ourselves to the “inner image.”³⁶ We spit in the Eye that has colonized every aspect of reality and pillaged the meaning of life.³⁷ The art world is still an alienating space for women artists but there are so many of us now, that we have decided to take up the last free space in the gallery, the in-between, the space of the simultaneous book.

We believe in the primacy of “private thoughts, the interior life, the last defense for the possibility of art, but for this possibility to happen, we must keep our heads under water, never come out of our chaotic intimacy, and make words and things follow one another within the turbulent boundaries of our closed bodies, preserving them like a secret.”³⁸ Art as a secret. That idea is what is at the heart of our conception of women’s art writing. Art as a secret, by women without secrets.

36 Jennifer Krasinski, “New Lovers: An Interview with Paul Chan.” *The Paris Review*: March 10, (2015), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/03/10/new-lovers-an-interview-with-paul-chan/>.

37 Pauline Klein, “On était trop à vouloir faire de l’art,” in *Journal de Paris* (Biennale de Paris), Alexandre Gurita ed., Paris, (2012), 10.

38 Ibid.

2 “À toutes mes sœurs-rocks”³⁹: Women’s Writing in Contemporary Art.

In spring 2016, I finally caught a glimpse of a writing scene I had known about for a while, discreetly lodged in the art world. I drove to Manhattan from Montreal to attend the launch of Toronto author Tamara Faith Berger’s *Kuntalini*. The novel, about a young woman’s yogic sexual awakening and emancipatory journey from Toronto to Niagara Falls, was the latest title from the erotica series *New Lovers*, published by New York artist Paul Chan’s imprint, Badlands Unlimited. After arriving on the Lower East Side, I headed directly to Badlands’ inconspicuous headquarters, identified only by the “Y.P. 99¢ & up” light-box sign that also advertised its bookstore. The bodega located right below the Badlands office gave away the imprint’s DIY editorial ethos: a few shelves full of their challenging, experimental art publications placed next to a bunch of plastic flowers, Woolite boxes and other dusty products.

The private party for *Kuntalini* was a prelude to a series of launch events throughout the weekend held at the bookstores Printed Matter and McNally Jackson, as well as KGB Bar. Inside Badlands, the tone was set by a copy of Berger’s purple, “soft-touch” laminated book, which was stuck in a black resin cast of a Richard Nixon mask and displayed on a silver platter in the bar area. The room was bathed in the glow of many screens playing, in a continuous loop, the hilarious book trailer for *Kuntalini*: a fast-paced yoga video synched to a death metal song and interspersed with gothic font

³⁹ Josée Yvon, *Pages intimes de ma peau* (Montréal: Écrits des Forges, 2017), 9.

intertitles that read, “Eat ass, pray, love.” The snippets of conversation I could grasp on my way to the back of the room to greet Berger and her friend, the author and film scholar Rebekah Rutkoff, alternated between humour and cynicism at the then-unthinkable Republican nomination of Donald Trump for president. The evening concluded with New Lovers series editor Micaela Durand and I chatting over a cigarette while sitting on Badlands’ front stoop—until author Al Bedell interjected with a sly quip about the status of women in the arts, a comment that would be curiously reformulated in a panel discussion later that weekend.

In the following days, Berger went on to electrify New York’s alt-lit and art-world crowds alike. At KGB Bar, she read an excerpt from her book alongside poet Michael Robbins and author Lynne Tillman, who announced the forthcoming reissue of *Madame Realism*, a book of fictocriticism, with Semiotext(e). Later on, at a panel hosted by Printed Matter, the discussion became strident when Badlands’ Chan announced his motivation for publishing erotica by women art writers, stating, more or less, that there is no sex in contemporary art.

This statement did not sit well with me and many women in the room, including Berger, poet Ariana Reines and Montreal artist Cynthia Girard. To start, there is plenty of sex in the artworld—mostly male and masturbatory. Boys’ club jizz not only covers artworks, but also every artworld transaction. Although Chan’s blanket statement was meant to point to the latent conservatism of the art market, it also reveals a blind spot, curiously obscuring an entire tradition of art dealing with sex and desire appearing in avant-garde writing by women and queers for decades.

New Lovers is therefore not new. It represents a small fraction of art writing that aims to document women's political, professional and sexual claims—writing that explores the many desiring nuances of feminine sexuality as well as the complications around its expression. By the time the series was created, Cara Benedetto, author of *New Lovers No. 6, Burning Blue*, had already written an artist's novel⁴⁰ reimagining the romance novel from a radical feminist perspective. If anything, *New Lovers* promotes the practices of a new generation of artists whose work is indebted to a long lineage of provocative written accounts of female desire. But most importantly, *New Lovers* directs us to a genealogy of art writing that *is* a history of by women, about women's experience, the one genealogy that the most significant practitioners of art writing live with today.

The influence of art writing in modern and contemporary visual art practices by women has a long-standing history. Yet, this narrative has remained somewhat obfuscated until recently, when it has steadily unfolded alongside the expanding feminist art historical project. Thanks to scholarship emerging since the 2010s that has developed discourses at the intersection of literature, visual arts and feminist studies, we can begin to understand art writing as a category that holds together hybrid practices of feminist politics, performance art and creative writing. One book in particular, Hilary Robinson's *Feminism-Art-Theory/An Anthology 1968-2000* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), offers a historiography of art writing that includes creative writers, visual artists and feminist thinkers.⁴¹

40 Cara Benedetto, *The Coming of Age* (Stuttgart: Staatliche Akademie Bildenden, 2014).

41 From Valerie Solanas to bell hooks, Hilary Robinson's elaborated a historiography of feminist writings by visual artists and art historians that also acknowledges outside influences that intersect with visual art practices, but are situated outside the realm of visual arts, such as literature, theory and criticism, activism.

A landmark for a history of art writing in the feminine, which has served as a starting point for the exhibition *Inside the Visible* (ICA Boston, 1996), is curator Catherine de Zegher's case study on Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of Belgian poet Adon Lacroix's contribution to concrete poetry. This art theft exemplifies how the many works by female artists and writers have been obfuscated from the history of conceptual writing and conceptual art, and from the narrative around the advent of modernity in the arts. But more importantly, this historical case represents a striking portent of the sexism still pervasive today in the art and literary milieus with the likes of Paul Chan. Subsuming the writings from the New Lovers series into his own practice,⁴² he confines women art writers to their proper place, conscripting them to "the role of the woman as muse—as readymade—appropriated and erased."⁴³ De Zegher's project *Inside the Visible*, which introduced 'the critical reading of woman as sign or as "objet trouvé," the coming-into-language and articulation of "beginnings," and the underlying mechanisms of "in/visibility"⁴⁴ to the usual narrative of the advent of modernity in the visual arts, foregrounds the continued engagement of the "écriture d'art féminine."⁴⁵ By reclaiming their bodies, representations, experiences and agency by (re)performing in writing their

Hilary Robinson, "Introduction: Feminism-Art-Theory-Towards a (Political) Historiography," *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 2.

⁴² Paul Chan has absorbed the feminist writings of all authors he published as part of the New Lover series into his "Nonprojections" installation project. A specific installation that further exemplify this situation, "Nonprojections for New Lovers" was presented at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2015.

⁴³ Catherine de Zegher, "Introduction: Inside the Visible," *Inside the Visible, an elliptical traverse of 20th century art; in, of, and from the feminine* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 1996), 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ A mash-up of the two French terms "écriture féminine" (women's writings) and "écriture d'art" (art writing).

own artistic readymade, women art writers are involved in a pursuit that was, and still is, directly meant to challenge the traditional–white, male, universal, neutral–processes and methodologies underlying many critical and academic discourses on the history of art.

A brief and incomplete genealogy of women writers could include Adon Lacroix’ Dadaist poetry; Valentine de Saint-Point’s Futurist manifestos 46; Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s ready-made provocations in sound poetry 47; Claude Cahun’s androgynous performative writings in *Héroïnes* (1920-1924) and *Aveux Non Avenus* (1930)⁴⁸; Situationist International member Michèle Bernstein’s novelistic “dérives”

46 Valentine de Saint-Point’s “feminine actions” have greatly benefitted from the expansive research work initiated by curator Adrien Sina, which has culminated in an exhibition that travelled to New York Performa Biennale, to London’s Tate Modern and Paris’ Centre Pompidou as well as a comprehensive monography “Féminine Futures; Valentine de Saint-Point, Performance, Danse, Guerre, Politique et Érotisme”, published by Les Presses du Réel, Paris in 2011.

47 Dr. Irene Gammel’s internationally acclaimed *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (MIT Press, 2002) in addition to the compendium of her writings in *Body Sweats* (MIT Press, 2011) compiled by Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo, as well as the scholarship by Amelia Jones have all contributed to contextualize the innovative practice of the artist in order to challenge the myths surrounding Duchamp’s readymade.

48 In France, les éditions Mille et une Nuit have re-published Claude Cahun’s experimental books *Héroïne* in 2006 and *Aveux Non Avenus* in 2011 while the scholarship of Whitney Chadwick, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Gen Day, Alexandra Arvisais as well as Andrea Oberhuber offers a variety of insights from a multidisciplinary perspective on the radical postures of the artist. Now, one must also consider how Surrealism can be mostly understood as a literary movement composed of a majority of women as per Penelope Rosemont exposes with her compendium *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

Tous les chevaux du roi (1960) and *La nuit* (1961)⁴⁹; Adrian Piper’s “meta-art”⁵⁰ practice and pivotal twin-volume *Out of Order, Out of Sight*⁵¹; Lucy Lippard’s conceptual art novel *I See/You Mean* (1979)⁵²; Kathy Acker’s collage and appropriation novels⁵³; Jenny Holzer’s poster art *Truisms* (1978–87) and *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82)⁵⁴; Sophie Calle’s *True Stories* (2011); Andrea Fraser speeches and institutional

49 Published by Buchet/Chastel from Paris in the 1960s, both novels were republished by Editions Allia in Paris, *Tous les chevaux du roi* in 2004 and *La nuit* in 2011, as their English translations gained popularity in the artworld. Indeed, the artist collective Reena Spaulings Fine Arts from New York had developed a rough translation of *All the King’s Horses*, which was serialized and published as the press release for their exhibition series in the early 2000s. The project was later picked up by John Kelsey, director of the eponymous gallery, who polished the translation and published it with Semiotext(e) in 2008. As for *The Night*, a translation was developed by the UK artist collective Everyone Agrees and Clodagh Kinsella, and published with BookWorks, London in 2013, alongside the collective’s creative response to the novel, “After the Night.”

50 First published in *Artforum*, Piper’s article “In Support of Meta-Art” from 1973 gives the greatest insight as to how the thinking of art can be understood as an artistic practice, which often materialized in writings, with no regards as to whether it accompanies or is the art itself, and how this “new occupation for artists” can potentially provide a better understanding of art beyond art criticism and art historical writings. As such, Piper’s “meta-art” provides a foretaste of current development in art writing, especially of the practices invested in race politics and activism. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992*, (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1996); *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*, (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1996).

51 Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1996); *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1996).

52 Jacob Korczynski offers a valuable essay on Lippard’s creative writing experiments by bridging the novel with Babette Mangolte’s film *The Camera: Je, La Camera: I* (1975) produced in the context of his “For If I Can’t Dance’s Performance in Residence” organized by the feminist transdisciplinary group “If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution” from Amsterdam, NL.

53 For interdisciplinary scholarship on the subversive work of Acker, one must look for *Lust For Life-On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006) and other editorial projects by Amy Scholder. While McKenzie Wark’s email exchanges with the author in *I’m very into you – Correspondance 1995-1996*, Chris Kraus’ *After Kathy Acker*, the first biography on the artist, and Olivia Laing’s autofictional novel based on Acker’s life *Crudo* all garnered a lot of attention around the work in recent years, Melville House’s *Kathy Acker – The Last Interview* “catapult the author into the mythic canon of admired, dead women” as Claudia Ross notes in *Obituary Spirit*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 03/12/2019.

54 The political potential of these radical feminist posters has been put to use most recently as part of the “Me Too” campaign within the artworld, especially the slogan “Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise.” In Fall 2017, a letter titled *No Surprise* was sent to *Artforum* to denounce sexual harassment and demand the equal treatment of women artists. The letter was penned by high profile women in the cultural field

critique performances⁵⁵; Valérie Mréjen's textual readymade novels such as *L'agrume* (2003) or *Liste rose* (2007); Frances Stark's online sex-chats in *My Best Things* (2011) and other letter writings; and Miranda July's film scripts, short stories collection *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (2007) and the novel *The First Bad Man-A Novel* (2015), among many others.

A key text in this genealogy is French writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa." First published in the French journal "L'Arc" in 1975, as part of the special issue on Simone de Beauvoir, Cixous' vibrant manifesto inaugurated the practice of *écriture féminine*. Penned in response to "The Second Sex" brand of feminism, Cixous' text exhorted women to create a new language to express, symbolize and theorize a feminine consciousness through the embodied performance of female subjectivity. Cixous proposes "an aesthetic theory that combines critical thinking and literary practice,"⁵⁶ to advocate for sexual difference and sorority. Cixous addresses the performative dimension of *écriture féminine* in subsequent essays inspired by Clarice Lispector's amorous, artistic and philosophical meditations. About the Brazilian author's

such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Rosemarie Trockel, Heather Phillipson, Phyllida Barlow, Cecily Brown, Catherine Opie, Miranda July, Hannah Perry, Helen Marten and Julie Mehretu, amongst many others.

⁵⁵ Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Presse, 2007).

⁵⁶ Delphine Naudier, "L'écriture-femme, une innovation esthétique emblématique" (*Société Contemporaine* : 2001, numéro 44), 63.

novel *Agua Viva* (1973), Cixous notes that the book “aims to write-paint, aims to work on the gesture of writing as a gesture of painting.”⁵⁷

Thanks to Paula and Keith Cohen’s 1976 English translation of Cixous’ manifesto, Cixous’ writings circulated in the so-called French Theory wave, which opened up “a habitable and breathable space for women and minorities”⁵⁸ within academia across North America. Although the manifesto’s reach in France has been limited to specialized circles, Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” is now a staple text within most major feminist art publications. This attests to the rapid dissemination of “womanspeak” well beyond academia and into visual arts milieus in the Anglophone world. At the time of its initial publication, Cixous’ call was immediately taken up in the arts by Carolee Schneemann, most notably in *Interior Scroll* (1975), a performance in which the artist pulled a text out of her vagina and read it aloud.⁵⁹ In Canada, the advent of a culture “au féminin” was embodied in the innovations of Joyce Wieland, whose visual art practice has been historicized as a form of women’s writing.⁶⁰

57 Hélène Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God,” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 104-105.

58 Avital Ronell, *American Philo – Entretiens avec Anne Dufourmantelle* (Paris: Stock, 2006), 186.

59 While the text Schneemann read during her performance, *From Tape no.2 for “Kitch’s Last Meal”*, was initially thought of as a critique of the chauvinism in the structuralist film scene, the address was in fact directed at art critic and historian Annette Michelson, who had an unfavorable opinion on the artist’ films.

60 From a conversation with art historian Johanne Sloan, where she pointed to me towards the writings by Lauren Rabinovitz, Kay Armatage and Leila Sujir on the film *Water Sark* by Joyce Wieland. Kathryn Elder, ed, *The Films of Joyce Wieland*, (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 1999); Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance-Women, Power & New Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Writing close to the body, in reference to Performance art and Conceptual art, is a focus of the New Narrative movement that took hold of North American literary milieus in the late 1970s. While this movement is widely regarded as a seeding ground for what we now call “art writing,” the aforementioned genealogy is rarely addressed directly in retrospective accounts of the movement’s formation. Nonetheless, the compendium *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997* (Nightboat Books, 2017) establishes a thorough overview of the movement, which is composed of writers like Kathy Acker, Chris Kraus, Lynne Tillman and Eileen Myles, but also of Quebecoise authors Nicole Brossard and Gail Scott, who, as “feminist artists, were turning narrative into stripped-down symphonies of desire, revolution and difference.”⁶¹

Indeed, New Narrative was in conversation with the Montreal women’s writing scene captured in the anthology *La théorie, un Dimanche* (Éditions du remue-ménage, 1988) which included Brossard and Scott alongside Louky Bersianik, author of the feminist bible *The Euguelion* (Alter Ego Editions, 1976/1996), Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré and France Théoret. This scene was described by Vancouver poet Lisa Robertson in her introduction to the anthology’s translation, *Theory, A Sunday* (Belladonna*, 2012), as “mythic and galvanizing”⁶² for young women art writers like her in the 1980s, allowing direct access to and a unique perspective on *écriture féminine* and French theory.

61 Kevin Killian & Dodie Bellamy, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), IX.

62 Lisa Robertson, “Theory, A City” in *Theory, A Sunday* (Brooklyn: Belladonna*, 2012), 12.

Of course, the New Narrative writers have not only sought to answer the question of “what do women want?” They have also sought to further expand the horizon of women’s writing by theorizing gender, queer and racial politics against the cool, aesthetic disinterestedness of the prevailing modernism in visual arts and literary scenes.⁶³ The New Narrative’s sex writing proposed alternatives to what it means to be a woman and an artist. But in many ways, it was Chris Kraus’s novel *I Love Dick* (1997) that created a precedent essential to understanding women’s writing and art writing as one and the same thing in the contemporary art landscape.

A milestone of *écriture féminine* within the North American art scene, Kraus’ *I Love Dick* documents an experimental performance that harnesses female desire by blurring the boundary between art and life. The novel references the performative posture of Sophie Calle’s art film *No Sex Last Night* (1996), and later became the eponymous television series *I Love Dick*, released in 2017 on Amazon Video and directed by Jill Soloway. These helps us better understand Kraus’s art-writing practice as performance art, operating within a genealogy of film, dance, video, performance and conceptual works centred on female desire and creativity. Soloway’s series adds performances by artist India Salvor Menezes and actress Roberta Colindrez to the narrative, while each episode is interspersed with footage of works by Schneemann, Chantal Akerman, Cheryl Donegan, Vanalyne Green, Petra Cortright, Marina Abramović, Annie Sprinkle and Maya Deren. These inclusions are meant to help viewers better see the performance art aspects of Kraus’ project. Through the reception of Kraus’s novel in the art world, and its

⁶³ Kevin Killian & Dodie Bellamy, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997*, (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), IX.

widespread dissemination through online television, *I Love Dick* is a cultural marker that anticipated a plethora of art writing projects by women authors now gaining momentum in today's contemporary art world, but more particularly in North America.

Supported by the advent of social media, imbued with the experimentations of both literary and visual autofictions which encompass life-writing, autobiography and diaries, and linked to the educational force of feminism in the fine arts and humanities, a new generation of women art writers has emerged in North America since 2010. This emerging generation, which can be situated within a renewed discussion on “the paradigm of ‘writing the body,’”⁶⁴ have opened up what Maria Walsh identifies as the “1990s empowering discourses of the abject body”⁶⁵ to discourses on sex/body-positive cultures, ethics of care, and the return of visual pleasures in thinking the representation of women. With Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person Be* (Anansi, 2010) at the forefront, this new wave of women's art writing has found a safe space for feminine voices across a network of alternative art milieus in Canada.

In Montreal, an exciting scene has formed around the art and publishing platform Filles Missiles that brings together a multiplicity of references unique to the bilingual context. Composed of women writers, artists and musicians, Filles Missiles, which includes Montreal writers Daphné B., Marie Darsigny, Sara Hébert, Maude Veilleux and Sara Sutterlin, publishes digital-narrative projects and zines as well as poetry and novels

⁶⁴ Maria Walsh, & Mo Thorp, “Section 1 Introduction,” *Twenty Years of Make Magazine – Back to the Future of Women's Art*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2018), 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

in analog formats with local alt-lit publishers such as L'Écrou, L'Oie de Cravan, Hamac and Metatron. As *I Love Dick* was only translated into French in 2016, Filles Missiles has encouraged the circulation of Kraus's and other New Narrative authors' poetics and aesthetics in the francophone community. In 2017, Daphné B. and Kathy L. published a fan-fiction version of *I Love Dick* that brings Clarice Lispector into the age of male tears and Tumblr. Nevertheless, the literary influences at the heart of this scene are resolutely francophone, from the "Sunday Theory" group to Nelly Arcan and Marie-Sissi Labrèche in Québec and from Marguerite Duras, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to Annie Ernaux, Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes, Marcela Iacub, Paul B. Preciado and Chloé Delaume in France, with a special inclination for Sophie Calle, Nathalie Léger and Pauline Klein, whose writings were given a boost in feminism via their journey into the Anglo-American artworld.⁶⁶

The group borrows its name from the book *Filles-missiles* (Écrits des Forges, 1986) written by the under-acknowledged Montreal poet Josée Yvon. The book is famous for its use of colloquial language, vulgarities and descriptions of alternative and marginalized lifestyles. A writer we tend to forget about when we think of art writing, Yvon wrote punk-trash poems that incorporated performative photography. In *Le clitoris de la fée des étoiles* (Les Herbes rouges, No. 17, 1974), a collaboration to accompany the

⁶⁶ In "Double Game" (Violette Éditions, 2007), Sophie Calle re-appropriated her fictional performance artist self "Maria" as imagined by Paul Auster in his novel "Léviathan" (Actes Sud, 2007); for her novel "Suite for Barbara Loden" (Dorothy Project, 2012/2017), Nathalie Léger followed the peregrinations of "Wanda" across America as a close-reading of the only film by actress and director Barbara Loden; Pauline Klein made use of her "gallery girl" experience in New York as research material to write her novel "Alice Khan" (Allia, 2010).

poetry of her partner Denis Vanier, Yvon created self-portraits: close-ups of her private parts, most specifically her vulva, in a nod to *L'Origine du monde* (1886) by Courbet.

An informed guess would center Toronto's art writing scene around the artist-run space Art Metropole. A critical artistic nexus for artist's publications, books and multiples founded by the artist-collective *General Idea* in 1974, Art Metropole has proposed over the last decade a programming oriented towards feminist/performance writing praxis with reading events, workshops, publications and reading groups centering the work of Cara Benedetto, Chris Kraus, Rebekah Rutkoff, Hazel Meyer, Maggie Groat, Maiko Tanaka, Walter Scott, Aruna D'Souza and the feminist group "If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution: Toronto Edition" initiated by Jacob Korczynski. But one also quickly figures the energetic community involved with "Doored," the performance art show presented at the alternative space Double Double Land in Kensington Market, as yet another stronghold of hybrid and experimental art writing practices in the city. Organized and hosted by artist-duo *Life of a Craphead*, the thirty shows that were presented from 2012 to 2017 featured performances by Bridget Moser, Lena Suski and Fan Wu, Aisha Sasha John, Lisa Smolkin, Liza Peterson, Jessica Karuhanga amongst many more. For the most part, these artists practice what is called "art comedy," which, as artist Bridget Moser puts it, makes use of performance as a way to bring text into space through speech acts and bodily movements while proposing an idiosyncratic visual aesthetic through props, gestures and languages/discourses appropriated and borrowed from various sources, from comedy to pop culture and

advertising.⁶⁷ Besides, the nomadic platform Kunstverein Toronto, briefly but intensely active from 2014 to 2017, centred its curatorial mandate around art writing and performance art, beginning with an exhibition of Carolee Schneemann's correspondence, while closing the curtain on its activities with a show of artifacts from Anna Banana's archives.

In Vancouver, the “parallel text” tradition is palpable in the emerging art-writing scene that orbits around Blank Cheque Press and Publication Studio Vancouver. They publish writers such as Jacquelyn Ross, Steffanie Ling, Bopha Chhay and artist Tiziana La Melia, whose works preserve and enrich this unique trajectory of art writing in Canada. The parallel text tradition emerged with the artist-run centre system, which was then called the “parallel gallery” scene, and has been developing since the 1980s. A leading figure of the parallel text tradition, Lisa Robertson, author of *Occasional Work and Seven Walks From The Office for Soft Architecture* (Coach House Books, 2010), defines art writing as “creat[ing] a text that [is] parallel to an artistic practice by discussing with the artist, by taking on some of the artist's research materials and research means, and making a textual object which [can] parallel the installation or video or painting—whatever the medium [is].”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Bridget Moser, “Bridget Moser performs her mind for you,” Banff Art Centre, Web, <https://www.banffcentre.ca/articles/bridget-moser-performs-her-mind-you>

⁶⁸ Charles Bernstein, “Lisa Robertson on Close Listening.” *Jacket2*: Pennsound & Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, October 23, (2016), <https://jacket2.org/commentary/lisa-robertson-close-listening>.

Wanting to look further into the parallel text tradition, I attended last fall's conference *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?*⁶⁹ organized by Contemporary Calgary, where Chris Kraus was a speaker. I talked with Robertson, also a speaker at the conference, and she reminded me of the fundamental similarity between the parallel text tradition in Canada and the art writing that has flourished as a specific practice in the global contemporary art world over the last decade. While sharing her wealth of knowledge with me on the subject, I was made to think that the inclusion of Robertson's writings in the documenta 14 journal "South as a State of Mind," edited by American poet and critic Quinn Latimer, further suggests how influential Robertson's work has been on contemporary art practices here in Canada, but also on the international stage.

When I mentioned to Robertson how I defined this art-writing scene, as I describe it in this chapter, she immediately pointed out that I was conflating art writing and women's writing. As if to test my definition of art writing, she then proceeded to ask two young women writers sitting next to us, attendees at the conference, to briefly describe their practices. They both suggested that it was about giving a voice to women's experiences, changing language to better represent feminine consciousness and defining on our own terms the historicization of the "woman artist." For this new generation of art writers, the importance of elaborating on a discourse in accordance with the female imaginary is a given, beyond merely defining, and declaring, the point at which writing becomes art.

⁶⁹ Lisa Baldisseri & Joanne Bristol, curators, *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* Contemporary Calgary, Calgary, AB September 15-17, (2017), <http://neverthesame.ca>.

Back home with all my thoughts, I wonder: could this mean that feminism is taking over the contested notion of art writing? The emergence of a generation of young women art writers, for whom a hybrid practice of performance art and creative writing embodies the tenets of *écriture féminine*, potentially marks the culmination of the most substantial contributions to the field of art writing. Over the years, international debates around the discipline have advanced contextualizing efforts that were all very diverse, if not divergent at time. Still, at the forefront, comes Chris Kraus's books which all enact in their own way the potency of the performative feminine subjectivity for the practice of writing-as-contemporary-art. Here in Canada, Amy Fung's practice furthers the interconnectedness of gender, sexual and racial politics with the parallel text. But the most riveting proposition comes from UK artist-as-researcher Maria Fusco, who sets the terms of the discipline by rendering "writing as a visible practice,"⁷⁰ one that shifts between various art forms such as drawing, performance and speech acts. All of these practices converge to suggest a definition of art writing as an autonomous, feminist praxis within the field of visual culture.

Of course, feminism takes part in the mainstream contemporary art discourse, but in the present case, it seems like its aesthetics and politics have somewhat transmuted into the default viewpoint of art writers. Such a commitment to feminism by women art writers not only upends art writing's "mythical norm,"⁷¹ it also subtly overthrows it,

70 Chris Sharratt, "An Interview with Maria Fusco", *Art & Education*: New York, 2018, <https://www.artandeducation.net/schoolwatch/229480/writing-as-a-visible-practice-an-interview-with-maria-fusco>.

71 "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure." Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing, 1984), 116.

revealing art writing as a carrier of gendered, sexualized and racialized subjectivities. By inscribing the feminine at its core, contemporary art writing ultimately aims to generate, in the words of Linda Nochlin, “an unconscious feminist response to the Great Art of the museum and its authorized discourses.”⁷²

⁷² Linda Nochlin, “Sophie Calle: Word, Image, and the End of Ekphrasis” in *Women Artists, The Linda Nochlin Reader*, Maura Reilly, ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 415.

3 Conversations: Coming to Art Writing.

Over the last two decades, my wanderings around the contemporary art and literary worlds provided me with the opportunity to meet in person the many figures of art writing that are populating the present dissertation. All these literary rendezvous are connected by one, simple gesture, that I now recognize as artistic: I collect autographs from my favorite female authors. A peculiarly curated personal library, the collection was never turned into an exhibition as I have never known what to really make of it. But what I realize now is that my interest in philography has fed off the development of my historiography of experimental women-artist's writings collected here in *The Simultaneous Book*, as if I intuitively knew back then that somehow these encounters would reveal their meaning to me, in time.

These meetings amount to a series of particularly compelling anecdotes, some of which I have written about more expansively. Each in their own way, they offer a certain hysterical charm: I have arrived late to my entry exam at Le Fresnoy-Studio National des arts contemporains in Tourcoing, France, due to inadvertently stealing Valérie Mréjen's novel *L'agrume* from the bookstore where she was doing a reading; inserted in my signed copy of *Simple Passion* was a note from Annie Ernaux about how she interpreted my unusual dedication request as a way for her novel to be brought back to life again through my romantic relationship (Figure 1 - Annie Ernaux, *thank-you card*, 2009.); at the opening of her exhibition *Prenez soin de vous* at Fondation Phi (formerly known as DHC/ART) in Montreal, Sophie Calle asked me to sign the copy of her own artist's book, as she confused me with Canadian singer Feist, whom was invited to perform for the

occasion; halfway through the process, I was prevented from completing my online purchase of Marcela Iacub's *Belle et bête*, and was redirected to a webpage describing the court order for libel obtained by French politician Dominique Strauss-Khan, the novel's involuntary protagonist; Lucy R Lippard initially refused to sign her only novel, in a gesture of disavowal of its significance for her practice when I first asked her after her presentation on Eva Hesse at the AGO, but years later, she finally agreed to autograph my copy, at an event during NYABF in the context of her exhibition *Materializing 'Six Year'* at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York; an old gent's attempts to derail the conversation by oversharing with the audience his sexual fantasies were met with indifference by Catherine Millet, who quickly moved on to answering my question regarding the conceptual project behind her writings with a cool and professional demeanor at her book launch her book *Dali & Me* in Lyon, France.

Whether these stories attest to my desire of narrativizing my personal experience of navigating the artworld or my particular investment in exploring new ways to historicize women's art practices, they certainly underline how I am most interested in discussing the art practice, and in interpreting artworks, directly with the concerned artists. For how can one consign such an ephemeral practice as performative writing if not dialogically? More often than not, the discreet performance of art writers is only partially documented, while their creative process is often not explicitly recorded in their novels. Especially when these practices are emergent ones, and whose art objects command a particular attentiveness to syntax, narrativity and voices more than an evaluation or interpretation. Thus, conversation, as collaborative practice and intellectual

work, seems to me the appropriate format to approach the four case studies on artist's novels assembled in this chapter.

Yet, it is not as much the remarkable anecdotes that marks my encounter with each of these novel's authors. But rather, it is the distinctiveness of their voice that draws my attention and seduces me into investigating their practice and making space for their writerly works within the field of art writing. Of course, amidst the chorus of my conversations with the authors Pauline Klein, Cara Benedetto, Rebekah Rutkoff and Maude Veilleux, here and there, we can decipher Hélène Cixous' whispers to us, her friends: "Some paper, a bit of imagination, and you're in full flight."⁷³ All quite unique, the voice of each of these authors commands all of our senses into listening to their words and follow them through the artistic journey that defines their practice.

Above all, these four authors represent the voices that resonates most with the ways in which I envisage this genealogy of women's art writing. As in fact, this genealogy is only possible to be conceptualized in retrospect, as its influence is rendered legible through the experimental practice of this emergent generation of women's art writers. Consequently, I chose to converse with these authors based on how their practice best exemplify art writing as a hybrid of *écriture féminine*, performance and creative writing; Pauline Klein's novels as conceptual art, Rebekah Rutkoff's texts as art films, Maude Veilleux's novels as relational art or Cara Benedetto's books as protest art. This hybrid space of their novels-as-performance epitomizes what Linda Nochlin calls "the

73 Hélène Cixous, "Un effet d'épine de rose, *Le rire de la méduse et autres ironies* (Paris : Éditions Galilée, 2010), 25.

role of women artists in breaking down the barriers between media and genres in exploring new modes of investigation and expression.”⁷⁴ And while listening closely to the rustling of the following pages, through my inquiry into the ways of *coming to art writing* that is unique to each writer, you will be able to hear the faint cry for help of Pauline Klein, the murmurs of female desire of Cara Benedetto, the enchanting laughs of Rebekah Rutkoff and the siren songs of Maude Veilleux.

⁷⁴ Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 706.

3.1 Sleeping Through the Night: Pauline Klein.

I have never met Pauline Klein in person. She lives and works in Paris as a communication manager in the haute couture industry. In early July 2016, I interviewed her over the phone from my room at Whitney Hall, a women's residence and oldest dormitory on St George campus at the University of Toronto. At the time, Pauline was right in the midst of going over a last round of edits for her most recent novel *Les souhaits ridicules*, which was to be released for the Winter 2017 "rentrée littéraire." The particular meticulousness of Pauline's prose is certainly favoured by her publisher Allia, the influential Parisian edition house renown for re-publishing, often rare, historical art-writing books by the likes of Walter Benjamin and Michèle Bernstein, but also debut novels of contemporary artists such as Valérie Mréjen.

For over two hours, we chatted about her novels, about how *Les souhaits ridicules* is less invested in a discussion on contemporary art than the preceding ones, *Alice Khan* (2010) and *Fermer l'oeil de la nuit* (2012), but still, how each of their unique female protagonist all use the art of self-effacement, self-transformation and masquerade as a strategy to evade the male gaze. Beyond the conventions of serious art criticism, our conversation proposes a glimpse into the few glimmers of playfulness in Pauline's voice, a reminder of the little shenanigans of her performance art games.

Maryse: *Is it birds I hear singing in the background?*

Pauline: Yes, there is a tree just outside my window, and I am sitting right in front of it, smoking a cigarette while I am speaking to you.

Maryse: Your voice, I remember the texture of your voice in my mind when I first picked up your book. Looking closely at the dedication, I found myself hearing the voice of woman whispering “help” to me. I was deeply moved by this encounter, as fictional as it was. No other novel has ever made me feel like this. The book’s main character Alice Khan’s existential cry for help made me want to read your book. Why did you decide to call out the reader with such urgency?

Pauline: I think this existential cry for help is intimately linked to humor inasmuch as my ability and willingness to laugh and have fun are involved. I can allow myself to be in these states of distress only if I know I can also laugh about it, and I move through these emotions back and forth. Asking for help, at the beginning of the novel is also a way to be playful with the dedication. It is meant to be a pun that I dedicate the novel to “à l’aide” (help me/to help) like I could have written to “à un tel” (to someone).

Maryse: Browsing through the titles on display at the Pompidou bookstore in Paris, my attention was first drawn to the artwork on the cover of your novel “Alice Khan.” The reproduction was vaguely familiar and my intuition about it, quite right. The miniature painting - a fainted portrait of a lady with a frame gilded in gold and a dark red velour mat - was credited to Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Miller. Why did you choose this work, a work very much attached to its own mysterious female voice, for the cover?

Pauline: I did not choose this work by Janet Cardiff as much as it became evident it needed to be the cover image. One day, I bought this tiny painting at a flea market in New York. I paid ten dollars for it. It is kind of a falsely antique miniature painting. I kept it in my pocket while I walked around all day. At the end of the day, I visited PS1 MOMA in Queens and at the time, there was an installation by Cardiff and Miller called *The Dark Pool* (1995). It was an installation made of an enormous amount of mundane stuff. The room was pitch black, and there were objects piled up on top of one another, like in an attic. I waited for the security guard to look away before adding my painting to the installation. It was posing there naturally, as if everything was normal. It was perfect. When the guard looked over again, I touched the painting on purpose pretending to take it back, and he said: “No, no, no, don’t touch the installation please.” I thought it was funny that he told me not to touch it, so I left it there in the installation and it became part of the work. And then, a few years later, maybe three or four years later, I was looking for an image for the cover of my novel, and I was reminded of this painting. I thought it would be a perfect fit for the story, so I contacted Janet Cardiff via her gallery in New York. I had the chance to actually talk to her directly about it and she admitted that she always wondered how this painting got there as it was never part of the inventory for the installation but decided to keep it anyways. Even though she could not understand how that painting got in there, Cardiff felt it belonged in her installation *The Dark Pool*. The painting travelled with the

installation in different museums all over the world as Cardiff is a well-known international artist.

Maryse: And so, your object, through this intervention, is now an integral part of Janet Cardiff's artwork?

Pauline: Yes! At the time, Cardiff managed to recover the painting from a storage space somewhere before it was shipped to a museum in Sydney. So, she found it for me in the inventory – the painting has its own inventory number now – she documented it and sent me the image that we ended up using for the cover art. I no longer have a copy of the image, but I remember the inventory number that proves the painting is part of the artwork! I thought it was very romantic of her and quite cute that she decided to keep it.

Maryse: Is it the only instance where you interfere like that with an artwork by another artist?

*Pauline: No, when I worked at a gallery in New York, I made little black dots onto paintings, which is what I describe in the story of *Alice Khan*.*

Maryse: So, it is a true story then? It is by way of the artistic alter ego Alice that Anna, the main character of your novel, performs all the artistic actions in the story. We are easily led to presume that these are all fictional gestures... But as I understand it now, it actually happened in reality? You "pointed the oeuvres" by adding your mark, your imprint where you could on the canvas, and filling the otherwise invisible, empty space of certain masterworks in order to enter the community of artists?

Pauline: Yes! I think my work is very much concerned with collaborations inasmuch as I participate in the making of other artists' work as much as I involve others in mine. For *Alice Khan*, I asked a journalist whose work I really appreciate to write a short paragraph to be included in the novel. Here you go: I did not solely write the book by myself! Similarly, on a day I was alone in that gallery in New York where I worked, I enjoyed being able to add two or three little black dots with a felt tip pen on Andy Warhol's painting *Hamburger* (1985-86), a black and white serigraphy. It's black on black... So no one can notice it, even if it is on a painting that must be worth millions of dollars!

Maryse: *Ah, ah, ah! Are we really talking about collaborations here? Your approach reminds me of Sturtevant, in how you challenge the authority of the original... In a melange of fiction writing and performance art, your novel activates an ingenious critical discourse about the value of art, about a male-dominated art world. As such, can your novel be considered as a meta institutional critique?*

Pauline: My interventions are not meant to be a critique. In fact, I am not interested in contemporary art critique. More generally, I am not really interested in indignation.

Maryse: *Really? Indignation is not a sentiment fuelling your practice...*

Pauline: Well, I find this sentiment does not amount to very much these days. Indignation for me must remain intimate, something inside you, something

quirky and personal, but when shared socially, this generative force is depleted, diminished.

Maryse: And if I was to say that your novel is a kaleidoscope of astute inquiries regarding the nature of art, does that resonate better with you?

Pauline: In the novel, these artistic interventions are a way to bring humour, and maybe also some derision, in a kind of way to pull things down, and meanwhile asking why, why all this? I am only asking the question though...

Maryse: You ask a lot of question through the reflection of your main character without necessarily give answers, on the contrary, you direct the readers to a commentary on contemporary art, am I right?

Pauline: Yes, and all the better! Asking the right questions is more interesting to me than the answers. I think questions are good. They are small worlds in themselves, you know, questions. Answers, they end things. I don't really like endings. I prefer to leave things open, because it allows to go a little bit further. That is fine if my work promotes these sorts of thoughts, if you say it does. I have forgotten a bit because I feel slightly disconnected from contemporary art lately.

Maryse: I even heard you in an interview on the radio talking about how the contemporary art wold had been an obsession that has been fuelling your writings. Where does your interest for contemporary art comes from?

Pauline: Yes, at the time, six or seven years ago when my book came out, I definitely was! But soon afterwards, I was already less interested and now

I don't even know where we are at with contemporary art... With contemporary art, in the name of contemporary art, we can experiment with states, things, relations to the world, social relations, intimate relationships. There is in contemporary art, let's call it conceptual art or performance art, a tendency for experimentation that goes beyond the object, and that has to do with an experimental process. I have the impression that I do that with my interior life, my intimate life, with people, with men, with friends and family. I am very much into experience. I don't know very well where the limit between my life and my intimacy is, and what I do in the name of an artistic thing or a thing that is slightly performative, of performance. This is what I am really obsessed with.

Maryse: Your desire to be an artist is rendered visible through writing, without the need to make art objects nor even be an artist.

Pauline: Contemporary art became a repository that allowed me to anchor my discourse regarding a way of living that is close to experimentation, and which I call art in how experimentation, experience, and performance are its driving forces. *Alice Khan* came about with experimenting with what is in my life that is really my life, and what is just writing, the part of my life that I experiment with in order to write about it. The place of contemporary art became less important with the second and third novels, but they still remain quite experimental and performative, except that I try,

as opposed to performance artists who eat or make love in a gallery, to do that outside the confines of the gallery walls.

Maryse: Outside the white cube and onto the white page.

Pauline: Exactly! When I started working at a commercial gallery, it made me want to write because there was something ineluctable about it: the possibility to dematerialize all the things of art. To go towards absolutely nothing. Towards no artwork at all. So, obviously, conceptual art, which can tend toward no object, very much informs my project. I was certainly influenced by Jean-Yves Jouannais' book *Artistes sans oeuvres – I would prefer not to* (1997) about artists who decided against the production of artworks and maintained their practice solely at the level of ideas, or even further, withdrew completely from the artworld. To me, it talks to how we carry artworks inside us that we don't have to produce, and don't have to exteriorize as objects.

Maryse: Oh, I am aware of Jean-Yves Jouannais' poetic practice as curator, critic, author and artist. I met him in 2009 at a performance festival in Toulouse. I contributed to his "Encyclopedia of War" project which he was presenting at the festival. Ever since he published "Artists without Artworks" in the late nineties, Jouannais' project has remarkably woven together the histories of art and literature into one seamless discourse. He has introduced fictional artist/author in his writings, which he then carried out the artistic posture in real life through his own practice. I would say that for him, the figure of the artist is always of fiction. Similarly, your

novels have allowed you to step into the skin of many artist, play different feminine roles. Why do you choose to make art by way of fiction?

Pauline: Well, in my third novel, there are no artists, nor any reference to contemporary art, except that there is experimentation. Just like the novels written by artists, my most recent novel could be understood as an artwork, an artistic performance in the way the novel is articulated. Because everything could be a work of art; the way one sees the world and makes meaning. This is art. Yes, I think we can do the inverse route and say that my third novel could be a performance in the way I express my comprehension of women, of maternity, of sexuality.

Maryse: *The female artists you depict in your novels, aren't they always you?*

Pauline: Yes, a little bit.

Maryse: *Now that I think about it, it is mostly men who are artists in your novels.*

Pauline: It's true. It's the male characters that are artists, but I poke fun at them because anyways, I have problems with men.

Maryse: *I think there are a lot of us with that same problem...*

Pauline: Ha, ha, ha! I want to fight with men, a little bit. There is a feminist undercurrent in my work, in spite of myself, I guess. In a way, I fight male domination, and as you suggested in a sort of institutional critique, by portraying male artists as caricatures. In my first novel, there is this photographer who is convinced he is an artist. He only cares for his camera lens, and the eye that looks through it. Meanwhile, the main female character acts off-camera...

Maryse: My sense is that the two female characters in your second novel “Fermer l’oeil de la nuit” are one character. She is looking at herself from outside of herself, watching herself move through life, in a sort of depersonalization. All the female characters in your novels are very much conscious of their own representation.

Pauline: Totally true. In fact, not only they try to be a work of art, they position themselves as an art object. In my second novel, the male artist figure is also a caricature with all his deliberate provocations, his work made of meat flesh. He is posturing an iconoclast. He has the role of an impostor, a little bit like a con artist, meanwhile, the main character presents the characteristics of a true artist, working alone at home, and writing letters in a correspondence with a man we don’t know very much about. In fact, for me, this whole life she invents for herself and the whole fiction she puts into place is worth much more as art than the guy who is officially an exhibiting artist. In fact, that is pretty much the whole debate: whether exhibiting one’s art, or existing, and make something outside the constraint of the art milieu, and mostly within oneself. In fact, what is art? Is art necessarily visible? Is art necessarily what is on the wall of the gallery, within the page of a book, what is worth money, or has a social, cultural or economic value, or can art be a simple conversation about incredible yet mundane things?

Maryse: I have always understood art as something furtive that is always elsewhere...

Pauline: I like to go look in the blank spots and corners, explore every nook and cranny with my eye, putting my gaze on things that I think are worth classifying as aesthetic moments, moments of fiction, moments of literature. And what do I do with it afterward? Well, I write about them, and these moments become for me as important as what we call a painting or a sculpture.

Maryse: *Art is not to be confused with the artwork...*

Pauline: Yes, exactly!

Maryse: *I would be curious to hear you talk about this quote from the speculative essay you wrote a while ago for Beaux-Arts Magazine. I thought it was quite beautiful: “the invisible interior life is the last defence for the possibility of art, but for this possibility to happen, we must keep our heads under water, never come out of our chaotic intimacy, and make words and things cascade through within the turbulent boundaries of our enclosed bodies, preserve them like a secret.” What do you mean by this?*

Pauline: I believe that an interior life is a good defence against the aggression of images, of this flux of impoverished images accompanied by similarly poor commentary that circulates incessantly now on any given platform. People nowadays have the opportunity to expose themselves indiscriminately, yet on television, social medias, in magazines, billboards and on screens everywhere, we rarely see images that we haven't seen before. This life in square is terrible. We now think in square images. Fortunately, and I always try to remind myself of that, we have the rampart

of the invisible. The invisible is a weapon that protects us from the fuzziness of the infinite flow of images. In my practice, if ever I have one, I try to show an invisible image, and for me that is what constitutes intimacy. I don't know exactly how to show it. It is an unresolvable problem. Showing something that does not exist like writing a book that has no pages or say something in silence or make an image with the invisible.

Maryse: The invisible is given form in Mallarmé's "Le Livre" (1855-1871), or John Cage's "4'33'" (1952), or more recently, the Non-Projections (2014) by Paul Chan, and all tend towards an absolute. But my impression is that you are talking about something else. The invisible, the one you are describing, is it consciousness, or subjectivity?

Pauline: Or interiority. Everything that is inside, a silence. The problem is that we all have, I believe, an interesting interior life, we all make beautiful journeys interiorly, but the journey towards the outside, the return trip towards let's say writing, towards what we try to show that would correspond best to what we are trying to express, is very difficult to achieve.

Maryse: What is difficult? To put multidimensional abstract thoughts and multisensory affects into form?

Pauline: It is possible to make use of what happens inside us and express something that is worthwhile to be seen, heard or read, but very quickly, we are obligated to use a frame, a stage, a screen, a page, or paper, colours,

words. Whereas our internal brouhaha is an imaginary ball completely tied up on itself like when we are half-asleep, laying down and we have the impression of feeling something, the way a scent does it formidably well. A form of silence, of invisibility, we ought to keep our interior noises inside is my response to the dwindling of experience. In today's world, there is a need for images, words, and expressions, which even renders the most original and rich thoughts into clichés and platitudes through social media. I have the impression that the only weapon against this is to subside into silence. But this is not what I do, because I write. I try to tell myself, when I feel panicked in the face of everything that is said and that I hear, that we still all have an interior life that is richer than that. Does it make sense?

*Maryse: Yes totally! Your panic is probably the result of a new kind of pollution where the 'semantic flow' contaminates our psyche, ever more so since the 'intensification of the rhythm of the infosphere.'*⁷⁵ *There is a levelling off of all discourses that is generated through the acceleration of information, while the quality of information is proportionally inversed to the increasing rate of images we consume. In any case, visual illiteracy is a generalized condition. I agree that the only way to preserve one's sensibility from this spiritual mayhem is to withdraw from the flooding of mediatized images and words we are currently exposed to and conditioned*

⁷⁵ Franco Berardi, *And, Phenomenology of the End – Sensibility and Connective Mutation* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015), 171.

by contemporary lifestyle. Discrete interventions and 'small acts of transgressions' that speaks to an 'internal illumination' allows for different forms of community to emerge in resistance to the dominant discourses.⁷⁶ But what is this internal illumination that subjectivity is beaming outward, this light from which are emanating images, other kind of images, like a projector. There are many more kinds of images than the ones we find on the internet. Much of what we are talking about are photographic images, moving images digital images, a plane with pixels. But what is an image? I find this is a question that no one really seem to be asking. Everyone just assume that an image is a photographic one when in fact, it is not the case. The way I understand your practice is that you produce images at a different pace.

Pauline: Of course, it is a question of time. It takes more time to enter into a literary oeuvre, while it is also difficult physically to sustain what happens in the museum or exhibition space. You stroll about and pass an artwork, an installation; how much time are you supposed to spend in front of it? It is difficult to know how much time you should spend with an artwork. When to leave? Two seconds is not enough, an hour is too long, or maybe not. In books, time is being slightly dictated by the rhythm of reading, the fact that the book starts, and ends. So, it is more framed, in terms of time.

Maryse: *We still decide the speed at which we want to experience the book, no?*

⁷⁶ Christine Palmiéri, "Jacques Rancière: Le partage du sensible", *ETC*, No.59, Montréal (2002): 37.

Pauline: That is what is also interesting, to project oneself in the space-time interface of the book. Reading can happen anywhere, but the time dedicated to reading the book is ultimately finite. The relationship to time is a bit stranger in spaces dedicated to art than in books. The gallery space produces other feelings. Do we feel culprit if we just pass by too quickly, or feel ridiculous to stay too long in front of an artwork? My desire for an outlook on life, on the world, all the different relationships to the world are interesting. All the gazes...

Maryse: *All gaze?*

Pauline: To record in a book the experience of artists, the gaze of artists; it makes sense in my practice. In fact, they are always beings of fiction, no?

Maryse: *Just like the gallery is a space conducive for fiction, artworks are fictions.*

Pauline: Even artworks are fictions, yes! Literature in the sense of belles-lettres is somewhat dated, and readers want to feel something else.

Maryse: *For Chris Kraus, creative writing and poetry, and “other activities that have become so degraded and negligible in our culture, [that they] have invested the space of the gallery since it is their only chance to ‘appear’ within contemporary art’s coded-yet-infinitely malleable discourse.”⁷⁷*

Pauline: And an artist is a really good novelist in her own right! An artist is writing stories...

Maryse: *...with objects?*

⁷⁷ Chris Kraus, “The Ambiguous Virtues of Art School.” *Artspace Magazine*, March 2, 2015, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/book_report/chris-kraus-akademie-x-52660.

Pauline: I feel people have this need to read, to be confronted to more distinctive intimacies. The people I interact with, I find we all have the same discourse and we don't really authorize ourselves to different point of view. These days, our ways of thinking are generic, globalised. But books, and probably artist books as well, offer the possibility to have, to be in relationship with a different sort of intimacy. Today, I feel these are the real journeys. To have a point of view on a very specific thing, very focussed, quite intimate makes you travel much further. What we have very close to us, inside us, is the real voyage... No need to go really far.

Maryse: Well, the many glowing screens are filling up the spaces of imagination nowadays... Meanwhile when I read your books, I get the sense that you take a really small object, a tiny fragment of time, and you observe it very carefully, attentively, and with that moment in time, in space, you go really far, your gaze embrace, set ablaze this tiny fragment of your world within your whole body.

Pauline: Yes, this is what matter to me in life, the forgotten details, the forgotten things. I have a lot of empathy for abandoned things. Abandoned by the gaze, abandoned in the streets, or when we abandoned making meaning of those things. I very much look at people, I listen to them talking, I look at things, and I find there is a lot of small pieces of infinity that are very interesting in abandoned things. By "abandoned", I mean how we no longer grant value to certain things and how they fall out of fashion.

Maryse: *Your process involves being quite attentive to your environment, and, as you said to me previously, you wait for signs from life, for things to come to you in order to write.*

Pauline: I do wait for things to happen, and as I mentioned earlier regarding intimacy, it is a way to look at the world passively. But it has also been a way for me to find a justification for a certain form of laziness, where I hold back from “mettre les choses en oeuvre” and give form to my ideas, while I say to myself that my artworks are my souvenir, my intimacy, my personal diary, the book I never published, this little notebook in my drawer. It is a bit easy to think that when in fact I just didn’t have the courage to go up the stairs, take my notebook and transcribe the whole thing. And it was also fear.

Maryse: *A fear of what?*

Pauline: For a while, I desired to be normal, because I could sense that I was a bit different... Something masochistic in me made me desire to totally fit it socially, to be integrated, to be trivialized, and feel ordinary. I became really obsessed with fitting in which made me very much only have desire for mundane interactions with people, this sort of soft seduction between two people, like small talk with the baker or the florist. The bottom line is that my outlook on life makes me feel shame. This strange gaze I have makes me suffer more than anything. In fact, I write to officialise this strangeness. It was quite a transformative realization to go from being

considered by people as a weirdo and then being admired as a writer after I had been published.

Maryse: There is an impoverishment of subjectivity, or at least a loss in its diversity... Why should being imaginative and curious and original only be acceptable if placed toward a creative outlet?

Pauline: Well, becoming a writer allowed me to fit in the norm somehow... I have had very passionate, destructive relationships with men, and women as well, which gave me the impression I could never live my life normally. So, I went from being a bit of a dark or strange person to a writer and that was something huge for me at the time.

Maryse: What does that mean, being normal? I mean, "How should a person be," really, which is, as Chris Kraus says, the title to pretty much every novel, the ultimate title for a novel and most decisive existential question every novel should try to answer, to which there is no one answer... It is of course the title of Sheila Heti's novel, a paramount artist novel... In any case, writing has promoted you to come to terms with being yourself, with being an artist?

Pauline: I'm still uncertain whether or not I consider myself an artist sometimes, even though I know I should, especially now, I should be confident enough to assert myself as an artist. Yeah, I need to come to terms with that! I guess now I have decided to be less fearful and I am better able to express my opinions. My first two novels were steppingstones to my

maturing process, sort of coming-of-age novels in a way, or *young girl* novels even though I was not that young when I wrote them.

Maryse: Didn't you need a certain distance to write from the perspective of a younger woman, to access this naïve voice?

Pauline: I have always maintained distance with the narrative in my novels, and especially with the third one, I went even further, and depart from the world of art, and move into a fantastical world, where metamorphosis is possible! I was very attracted by the idea of metamorphosis, how one can transform into an animal!

Maryse: Femininity was a performance made visible through the various metamorphoses of your novels' main character into different, duplicitous artistic entities. Is the animal metamorphosis an extension of such performance? I am also thinking of how Marcela Iacub in "Belle et bête," or Marie Darrieussecq with "Truism", make use of the animal metamorphosis to speak to women's experiences.

Pauline: My third novel *Les souhaits ridicules* was influenced by my personal life since it talks about having kids, being a mother... I think the story is very feminine again, feminist even in how it talks about the physical and psychological transformation of a woman after she had children, as well as it discusses her relationship to men. It is also about the person you become once you plunge into the universe of children. I read a lot of stories, tales, fairy tales and my last novel is very much inspired by children stories. When we are older, and we are thrown in a children's universe that is quite

imaginative, delirious even, maniac and obsessive sometimes, and of course immature, that is what my book talks about, this sort of craziness. And as an adult, it hits you head on with your own anxiety in facing death. Maternity transforms you physically, sexually and as you read along, you can follow the transformation of the main character into an animal. I am interested in the animal metamorphosis as a metaphor to address questions of sexuality and debasement, submission too. I have tried to say things that I believe concerns a lot of women, and that are not necessarily easy to put into words nor even discussed in literature, voilà!

Maryse: *So, she transforms into a she-wolf?*

Pauline: No, into dog, une chienne, a bitch!

3.2 Magical Thinking: Rebekah Rutkoff.

I first met Rebekah Rutkoff during her Toronto book launch for *The Irresponsible Magician: Essay and Fictions* (Semiotext(e), 2015) at Art Metropole. Her presentation on her fictional dialogues with American cultural icons made quite an impression on me. With a happy curiosity, I then attended her conference at the University of Toronto the next day. Her presentation *Painting by Numbers: The Art of Lillian Schwartz*, a discreet feminist revision of the debut of computer art, is probably the most enticing scholarship I have ever encountered, as chances that I fall into a state of elation at an academic conference again are virtually nil.

Rebekah lives in Brooklyn and works as an assistant professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, but our interview was conducted via Skype over two days in May 2016, while we were both away from home: her, on Princeton University campus while in residence at the Lewis Centre for the Arts, and I, at the Banff Centre for the Arts, attending the art writing residency. After inquiring into the luminous prose that she developed around new media and cinema, we talked about the magic of her images and how her practice has seamlessly transitioned from visual arts to art writing over the years.

Rebekah: Just so you know, I'm outside. I've been cooped up all day and now I'm walking in a park with you on speakerphone.

Maryse: *Oh, that's nice, walking and talking. I hear the sound of birds... I like birds. I hope they will be on the record!*

Rebekah: Oh yeah!

Maryse: You are outside, in nature, while I am admiring the view of Banff's mountainous surroundings from the bay window in my studio. This passage from inside the studio and out in the world brings me to the only question that I have been meaning to ask you ever since I have heard you discuss your work in Toronto. You mentioned then that making artworks was not enough for you and you needed to write in order to explore certain ideas you were concerned with, in reference to your book's first essay "Studio: Transcript of an un-made video," an account of your time spent in the studio videotaping yourself while making art and writing. Is this fictional performance, or more specifically, is writing for you a way in or out of the studio, of the artworld? I guess it is stated clearly in the final part of the text where you say: "and so I finally gave up on being an artist and started video-taping [myself] writing."⁷⁸

Rebekah: There was something about my attempts at making visual art that was not working for me. I always felt like I was jumping out of a window and not landing anywhere, and so writing enabled me to take hold of that problematic state of affairs but with a more developed voice and enabled me to hold on to the longings and the problems related with making visual art while also feeling I was working from a place of authority, more of a psychic than critical authority, if that makes sense... It is interesting what you are saying whether it is a way out or way in, because in a sense it is both. I very much wanted a way out of visual arts, which is why I entered

⁷⁸ Rebekah Rutkoff, *The Irresponsible Magician* (Los Angeles: Semiontext(e), 2015), 19.

graduate school and pursued a PhD. Somehow it felt purer to me in the sense that I could pursue certain lines of inquiry that seemed important without being such a threat to my ego. While I was in graduate school, in addition to the scholarly work, I started to make these experimental performative pieces of creative writing without having to leave my identity as an artist behind. In fact, I could pull it in this new form. So, it is in the context of my doctoral work that this other kind of writing emerged. What is also important to mention is that I don't think it would have emerged without Wayne Koestenbaum. He taught in my program and I took this class with him called the "Lyrical Essay." Every week, we had to write a two-pages piece for his class, and I remember the first couple ones, I did bumble through writing them. But by the third one, I felt like I figured something out in my writing, and he was really responsive to it. It really marked a shift in my sense of what I could do there. There is something about him as an audience, an ideal audience for my writings although he did not give me particular advice, but there was something about his very being that enabled me to find this latent voice in myself.

Maryse: It is interesting that it only took one person, an audience of one, to get you on the right path to find your voice. That you found your voice under the guidance of Koestenbaum makes so much sense since his writings are imbued with popular culture and art history and the mundane while his painting methods have seeped into his poetic practice, and vice-versa. In "The Art of Transcribing A Sunset", you state that "Auder once told [you]

that making videos feels like working with language: like writing,”⁷⁹ after describing how with the proper object, gesture and light, video can produce poetry. Now I’m curious to know how experimental methodologies inform your writings. For instance, in order to write about the narrator’s peregrinations around Corfu in “The Incubators,” did you really travel there to “search for signs of H.D.’s presence on Corfu,”⁸⁰ or was it simply a fictional journey in the footsteps of American poetess Hilda Doolittle, or does it even matter? Moreover, is this voyage a performance to explore what it means to be an artist who delves in research, in order to get closer to your sensibility, access a greater understanding of your relationship to the world, but also access the work of H.D. in an embodied way?

Rebekah: It is a funny question for me, and I always struggle with that one, because some of the pieces in the book, if I take ten steps back from them, well, I can say that one is fictional, that one is not. The essay you mention about H.D., if I take a step out of it, I can say this is not fiction as I did go to Temenos and I did go to Corfu, but then, if you were to walk up close to a sentence, it becomes more complicated. And that kind of complication varies from piece to piece. Sometimes, you have an entire fictional structure, for example I obviously did not interview Oprah Winfrey, but it also contains vignettes from reality. And sometimes I use a vignette from

⁷⁹ Rebekah Rutkoff, *The Irresponsible Magician* (Los Angeles: Semiontext(e), 2015), 51.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.91

the realm of the imaginary that would work better than what has actually happened and is a conscious act of replacement. But other times there is a hazier zone or border between fiction and non-fiction. I am very interested in what it means to be composing a sentence and what works in the production of a sentence, so this question of rhetorical modes of discourse just really breaks down in my writings. It becomes a hazy boarder in different ways, for performative reasons, for poetic reasons, problem of memory... In a way, I need to move freely across different ways of thinking about fiction in order to write my pieces. In the process of putting together a single sentence and choosing a particular word, I often navigate consciously between making something up versus picking something from memory where I might be pretending it is fiction at work.

Maryse: The subjectivity of your narrator often slightly shifts from one text to another. It feels like her personality morphs from one encounter to another, but ultimately, a portrait of that narrator slowly appears. The more I advanced through the book the better I saw this character emerging clearly as a female artist yet without a clear understanding of what she's actually making... Did writing from these different subject positions allow you to perform different facets of what it is to be an artist?

*Rebekah: First, I should back up to say that a lot of my work is about going back to shards of things and recomposing them in the present tense. So, in other words, I didn't set out to write *The Irresponsible Magician* as one work. More precisely, I put it together after the fact. All the pieces come from*

wildly different moments. And so, it was only in retrospect, when I gathered these little shards, that I was able to make something out of them to render this portrait. Now, the rhetorical positions of the narrator are different and shift, and the portrait that emerges of this kind of global narrator of the book, even in spite of those differences, has to do with how I wanted to represent developmental changes and experiment with how that gets represented. I have this fantasy that you can't really write until you fully know yourself because otherwise it's like writing from a false self. But of course, things are not that black and white and, it's not really possible. So, I found a way to work that lets different developmental states of subjectivity exist side by side. I don't want to suggest that these states are chronological because in fact I think that these parts of our selves co-exist, sometimes some take more space than others. I'm interested in how to work with one's own ego ideals in terms of how one wants to see oneself, what is one's fantasy of an ideal self and how that plays out both sort of internally but also with respect to how it is presented to the world. I don't want anything to feel off limits, and I don't want real things to be off limits just because they are sort of tinged with immaturity. I want space for immature psychic states, narcissism and various kinds of primitive conflicts. Ultimately, I want writing to be a place in which those realities rub up against a more authoritative capacity to use language. It's one thing to just have a purely immature voice, but it's another to try to harness immaturity. It already suggests that some other self that is slightly more

self-aware which can work with the immaturity. I guess I'm interested in those various combinations of states of consciousness and letting them sit side by side.

Maryse: I have been wondering about what it meant to be shifting voices, and then I noticed how there was one voice, a female voice, that responds to men who hit on her. She gets hit on a lot actually! It is a very subtle narrative line in the book, but that becomes quite present once you notice it.

Rebekah: That's funny, and I am almost shocked! Even more so since it appears to be a recurring thing. But now that you say it, it makes sense to me. I guess there is an ambiguity as it is a fantasy of being hit on, in fact the narrator is not actually being hit on.

Maryse: She's fantasizing about it?

Rebekah: Yes, for the most part they are unconsummated hits on in a way! It portrays the vividness of imagination that is facilitated by that state of romantic fantasy. It's less about the encounters with men and more an interest in the way these encounters with men create space of heightened seeing in which visual tableaux emerge out of a fantasy space, if that makes sense.

Maryse: What I tuned in on was this aspect of feminine naivety that the character was performing, meanwhile she remains very conscious of her surrounding and makes very mature comments about creativity. I understood it as if it was her only response in the face of maleness, this juvenile voice tinted with narcissism as a form of resistance. Because of

the complex psychologies at play in the book, as a reader I often felt part of an intimate circle of gazes. I felt caught in this crossfire of gazes between characters, and sometimes the room got really busy with people! It is almost as if the dialogues would not be so effective if the reader was not there to eavesdrop on the conversation. The effect of the triangulation between characters and readers made it for me to feel very involved somehow in a similar way performance art involves the spectators to become participants.

Rebekah: The sense of intimacy that is bringing the reader in, the intensity of triangulation is an extension of narcissism. But I never know how to use the word narcissism because it has come to take on such a particular and limited zone of psychic reality. And I think it's a much more expansive notion. But I guess what I'm trying to say is that I think the sort of desire, the fantasy space of desire for the intensity of a one-on-one meeting, a kind of "I and thou" experience that will provide this intense light source is simultaneously engaging the reader with it.

Maryse: This intense light source, as you say, is it the fantasy the narrator is immersed in that also engulfs the readers in?

Rebekah: It functions rhetorically and performatively as the narrator's fantasy and is both represented in the book but also analyzed within a larger discussion on representation.

Maryse: This is a strategy often at play in your book, where you tell the reader what the book is about through the fictional narrative. In a way, the

characters are embodiments of ideas the book is also discussing theoretically. I have lifted many instances of mise-en-abyme and this one albeit discretely placed within your delirious discussion on intellectuals and celebrities is probably my favourite: “the way casual conversation become a charged form, more satisfying, for me, than the written output because you get the primal combination of common sense and left-overs from study.”⁸¹ You make use of these scraps of the mind, in that segment but also throughout the book, whether they are emerging from gossip, non-verbal communication, truisms, dreams, to make explicit certain dynamics between the characters or even put forth a certain diffuse art criticism...

Rebekah: It makes me happy that it worked that way for you. The word “magic” takes on that role in the book, that exact role you’re talking about here... Magical thinking, which is supposedly an immature psychic state, an infantile state of thinking that one’s fantasies control the world...

Maryse: *And control your book, as if the narrator had internalized critical discourse and art history to formulate her own consideration on art without acknowledging the reality of the artists she’s discussing. She is performing a sort of magical thinking of art, while mise-en-abyme, as an infinite repetition of an image within itself, is certainly akin to magic...*

Rebekah: There is a line in the piece about the Temenos, and also one in the piece about Michel Auder, where I’m making more authoritative statements

⁸¹ Rebekah Rutkoff, *The Irresponsible Magician. Essays & Fictions*, (Los Angeles: Semiontext(e), 2015), 16.

about magic. And obviously magic is in the title... The role magic is playing in the book involves both that state of being embedded in the narrator's psyche, but also my own theoretical and authoritative articulations of magic, which I think I have somewhat earned. I'm interested in what language sounds like when one actually acquires authority by genuine and very painful means, as opposed to when it is acquired through borrowed language. Another facet around this question of magic circulating in the book is the figure of the irresponsible magician, which is concerned with this misuse of authority that the narrator picks up on in other characters and is sceptical about and critiquing.

Maryse: Why is the magician irresponsible? I have been wondering what you did mean by that...

Rebekah: I think of the responsible magician as partly a fantasy of a fully formed, fully properly developmentally progressed adult that would be responsible. The naivety that the narrator has, a mix of childlike presence and maturity, is this fantasy of a non-abuse of power that is based on forms of not knowing oneself. I think that these fantasies are circulating throughout the book. And of course, anything can easily become seemingly irresponsible, especially with magical thinking.

Maryse: These fantasies of omnipotence, do you think it is a disposition necessary for art making?

Rebekah: Well, it certainly comes in handy or maybe it is even stronger when you are an artist. Maybe it is actually necessary. It is obviously a blurred line

but can make for a better imaginative life... I mean, writing is a space, a safe space to enact fantasies. Maybe it is a safe space for irresponsibility in a way.

Maryse: I was also thinking of your irresponsible magician embodied in all the famous people we encounter in your book. You are in conversation with many artists and celebrities; why so many celebrities? What does Oprah Winfrey have to do with art? I feel like the piece on Carolee Schneemann is the centrefold of your book. It is while reading that part of the book that your whole project became very clear to me. I could see how the narrative you created around her was clashing with her own personal narrative that she has created through her practice, and thus realized the level of fiction you have embedded in the text, but in all of the book as well.

Rebekah: Yeah, I mean, I can't believe that she didn't get it. The piece is not even a critique of her...

Maryse: So Carolee Schneemann read your piece?

Rebekah: Yes, but her priorities were such that she read it in terms of her own concerns, as opposed to wanting to take it on as a kind of performative, fictive piece. I mean, obviously she knew that I hadn't interviewed her... I was trying to engage with her by enacting something more primitive or imaginary. I was somehow serious in engaging in this fake, absurd piece. Honestly, I just don't get her reaction. Number one, it is not an unflattering portrait of her. Number two, it is obviously a piece of fiction. And number three, the whole thing only works because she is famous. Her name, her

proper name, has a kind of energy and is in the world, outside of the real person of Carolee Schneemann. So, if she's concerned about whether or not she has been taken seriously enough in the art world, I feel like she should be pleased that her proper name is inscribed well enough that she can be as legible as Oprah in this book. I hope I don't sound insensitive, but I don't really understand how people feel. I guess I am on some ethically weird ground here...

Maryse: Oh, I feel the title states very clearly that the piece is an interior monologue and that there is no ambiguity that Carolee Schneemann is a fictional character, as if you talked to her in a dream of sort. To what extent dreams are materials you use in your writings? How much of these fictional conversations, and your stories are based on dreams you have?

Rebekah: Yeah, it is this funny cliché about dreams where no one wants to hear about another person's dream. It seems kind of taboo. Like, you're really not supposed to, which I totally understand and sort of agree with. I don't necessarily love hearing people's dreams, but...

Maryse: But you don't just tell us about your dreams as much as you use them in a productive manner, you use your reveries as propositions to genuinely think about art. Am I right, yeah?

*Rebekah: In the last book that Eve Sedgwick wrote, called *The Weather in Proust*, I remember reading one of the first chapters, where she was talking about something very profound and deep about poetics. She mentioned something about moving back and forth between interior and exterior, and*

I was just shocked by this statement, because it is such a cliché. Yet it incarnates into my work, and it's a big deal, at least for me, to think about what's the relationship between interior and exterior, in language and in thought. I feel I live in this border zone. It is my natural resting place. Sometimes I am a little startled to realize that is not always a given for other people, and it makes me feel like I am weird or something. I am interested in the way that dreams can deliver up something that is useful, as you say, and it can be productive, but it is not something that is wilful on my part. It is not a wilful production of an idea. It is more like there it is. Or as you say, it becomes one of several scraps that I can use to think through art ideas. Sometimes dreams give me confidence. There is something I enjoy about being able to rest on the evidence of an idea that I did not wilfully produce myself in a way.

Maryse: During my research for our discussion, I have taken notes of this quote from the Schneemann piece on two different occasions: "ideally at the end there's grace and the phallus is as much yours as it is his." Later, when I finally noticed, I found the repetition amusing, a scrap of the mind revealing my overinvestment in this sentence, or a presage of what could be at stake in your work.

Rebekah: I think in a way what you are saying about this quote you wrote down twice is not unconnected... This idea of an ideal ending point of female heterosexuality, or just heterosexuality in general, is about a shared and ideal of intimacy. But that is very much about an interior landscape. And I

enjoy the shock of bringing these facts of inside life into the foreground of consciousness in my writing, sort of suddenly, hoping that there is resonance with the reader. We just don't often speak to each other in these ways, and my writings certainly make use of these movements back and forth.

Maryse: In your dream about Schneemann making a drip painting, you mention how you sat on a "raw spot, untouched by paint." I found in that gesture that your body becomes a marker of authorship for the piece, which is ultimately a fictional performance. Why did you reassess the history of drip painting according to your own personal fantasy?

Rebekah: Yes, it is a funny area where I really did have that dream, and obviously that is why it is a fictional piece. In my dream, Carolee Schneemann did say "I invented this method." It is not so much of a rewriting of art history as I didn't mean it to be literally about a historical chronology of dripped paint art. Just like I made up the category of "funeral sex," these fantasies are there to point to a certain power and space that are granted to a woman in this tableau of grief, and to what becomes possible in terms of desire and intimacy in that space.

Maryse: What is "funeral sex?"

Rebekah: Funeral sex is, like someone close to you dies, and you are in a lot of grief, which also gives you a kind of power, and at the funerals, there is a man, maybe someone from your past or an old boyfriend or even a friend, you reconnect with, and that becomes an opportunity for intimacy and sex.

Maryse: Talking about grief, I would like to discuss how you reference Clarice Lispector's last novel "The Hour of the Star," a book in which she was very much prescient of her own death. In your book, your photographic essay is borrowing that title and I have been wondering how her novel was productive for you?

Rebekah: I read that book many years ago and it was really important for me. She is the kind of author whose writing doesn't have to reference dreams or a movement from interior to exterior and back because it is all that. It is a given that that is where she is. So, it was a combination of her as a point of inspiration but also, I was really taken by this phrase *The Hour of the Star*. I am letting myself have associations around that phrase even beyond the reference to her work. There is as we talked before the obvious thread of interest in celebrity that runs through the book, and how I am interested in proper names. And for me, the phrase, "the hour of the star", resonates with this larger interest in the fantasy of a consolidated identity that a celebrity or a famous artist seems to have, and the way that we can wish for a psychic consolidation in ourselves, a more definitively profiled sense of identity. The photographs are echoing off of that fantasy, of these moments of heightened identity or spotlight on an achievement or inhabitation of authority, whether it is a mother taking a picture of her baby or being in a space of authoritative importance like this bust at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York, or something more ordinary like a birthday cake at a hotel in Ghana.

Maryse: *In the series there is also an image of a bulgy fold in a tablecloth and of a light prism on a bedspread and I am reminded of how Lispector's lyrical writings render a hazy contour around the personages she invents but from which emerges at times a vividly clear affective image. The Hour of the Star is no exception with its doubling, metamorphosis and shifting subjectivities and I find myself wondering how much her imaging processes are akin to the poet Hilda Doolittle, especially while reading this passage in your book about how H.D. is one of the few "protectors of the poetics of separation. They prevent overlap and merger between discreet images, and they know the importance of singling out frames, symbols, colours in the process of divining, naming and reordering one's own objects, psychic and material."*⁸² *Are poetics of separations also something at work in your writings?*

Rebekah: In a certain way, I am existing in a space, a hazy space where I am going back and forth between interior and exterior, which to a degree we all are as that is just the definition of being human. But the separation of images, whether in linguistic form or as literal, visual images, can be an important foil to that permeable boundary. It is a place to rest that reflects the desire to hold on to the instant... In my writings, you can feel sometimes that sharp edge of wanting to separate things or create crystalline objects. You could see that formally, in the segmentation of a particular textual piece, but also you might see it at play just in the construction of a given sentence

⁸² Rebekah Rutkoff, *The Irresponsible Magician* (Los Angeles: Semiontext(e), 2015), 85.

or just in my need to reference a visual object in a sentence. I identify very much with the need to separate out and create space between images, both in textual and visual registers.

Maryse: You give form to certain ways of...

Rebekah: There is one thing I struggle with right now, and I'm noticing this as I talk to you, is that I'm hesitant to attribute things to myself. This is more challenging than I would have guessed. Me sort of reflecting on my own work, well it's vague and it's unclear, even partly to me and I feel the need to apologize just because of this anxiety about representing myself correctly.

Maryse: I'm sorry you feel that way. Maybe it would make you feel better to know that I'm wearing a hoodie and joggers with a full-on landscape at sunset printed all over? Imagine you are talking to a sunset!

Rebekah: Okay, all right, good. Yeah, I need to take the pressure off. I think I'm struggling to find a language where it doesn't seem like I'm suggesting that only I have this impulse, you know. But I don't think it really matters. It is this anxiety on my part where instead of being well anchored in my discourse and personal views, and talk to what is really important to me, I keep wanting to reference, well, humanity in general, or at least, thinking, well, that every writer does that. Maybe these are impulses that we all share as writers. I'm being overly self-conscious about these being only concerns for me. Maybe they are concerns only for me, or maybe they are universal. But I feel I shouldn't hesitate like this... Even if I were just to

answer you by saying “yes, these are my private obsessions,” that doesn’t take away from the fact that they might be other people’s obsessions too.

Maryse: I think there are certainly a lot of people obsessed with Lispector these days!

Rebekah: Yeah, I’m sure! New Directions just published a collection of her short stories and it looks really beautiful.

Maryse: I have read all of her books by now, and they are all really well translated. I was given my first Lispector book “Agua Viva” last fall, so it’s only recently that I was introduced to her work, not even a year ago. I was so thrilled to find out that Hélène Cixous found the book in deep resonance with her “Laugh of Medusa.” I still can’t believe it... That discovery truly allowed me to finally bridge the gap between the art writing of Lispector and Cixous’ manifesto! I remember vividly that moment, so delicious, when it clicked in my mind that art writing and women’s writing was one and the same... Reading “Agua Viva,” I was immediately enthralled by how she described what it means to be moving from painting to writing, from being an artist in fiction to one in reality, if there is not even a difference... All along, women have had the need to create space for themselves in the artworld, and it appears to me that it has happens through the capacity of women to fantasize oneself as artist.

Rebekah: You’re right that it’s a way to engage on one’s own terms. It’s a way to extricate oneself from what is soul depleting and disturbing on so many levels. So often these days, when I’m confronted with so much artwork,

when I walk into a gallery space or a museum and it's this certain kind of arrangement of forms on the wall and on the floor, I really shut down in this way. I often have this feeling of wanting to say to the artist "try to say what you're saying on paper!" That would be a better, cleaner more economical way to express oneself, because it seems like they're basically using space in a discursive, linguistic way. And I just think that it could be done more straightforwardly, that it doesn't actually need this space and these objects, and in fact this leaning on these conventions of installation making, for example, only brings staleness to the whole endeavour. What's important is preserving the very real impulses that remain in oneself while also being able to bring in other facts of life.

Maryse: Facts of the feminine body, of the feminine psyche?

Rebekah: Yeah, it's not so conscious but there have definitely been periods in my life where for a period of time, I mostly just want to be reading stuff by women. This fall, for instance, I just got really curious about straightforward fiction by women. Because I tend to think that fiction in general is just such a bizarre category to me. In some ways, I feel a little more aligned with non-fiction. But, you know, because I was reading Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody* and Jane Bowles' *Two Serious Women*, and I just absolutely love both of them. When I read books like that, I realize how important these examples are for my own writings. I know that having been engaged with HD and Clarice Lispector and Virginia Wolf and Simone de Beauvoir, well, I probably couldn't have

written this book without them, although that is more of an unconscious thing because I read them at different moments in my life. They're very essential points of contact, and they give a sense of possibility in a way. But to return to what we were talking about in terms of interior/exterior, I think that another version of this interest in, and you've raised this question a number of times, this so-called making art, this distinction made between visual art and writing, can be summarized in the question "can I look" and I can, but how do I say it?

Maryse: Doesn't the artistic posture you inhabit also involve looking with all the senses, looking within yourself?

Rebekah: Yeah, in the same way that sometimes I use dreams or the authority of dreams or the sort of weirdness of dreams to do real work for me. I think I'm ultimately interested in how I can import the real impulses I have to make visual art to engage tactically and materially with these forms. And so, I'm often looking to produce that satisfaction or at least the tension around that wish in writing. Can I channel that impulse and bring it into a linguistic register? Can I make visual art in writing?

3.3 A Language of No Body: Cara Benedetto.

I met Cara Benedetto the night before her art writing event “Space her Place” at Art Metropole. Of that evening, I remember being struck by Cara’s articulation of what we would describe now as the #MeToo movement. It was a discourse I had never heard before, at least formulated that way: she made visible the extent to which violence towards women had been normalized in the art system. It was bad enough that many women artists in New York were considering dropping out of art altogether. The next day, with a group comprised mostly of women, I attended Cara’s workshop which was developed around her experimental romance novel *The Coming of Age*. Together, we watched and discussed Barbara Loden’s movie *Wanda* (1970), wrote short pieces of fiction and performed them in a location of our choice during our walk around Bloor and Lansdowne neighborhood.

Our interview was conducted six months later, in May 2015. Following an intensive work meeting with the collaborators of her publication *Contemporary Print Handbook*, at the offices of Halmos in Manhattan, New York, Cara talked to me about how her appointment as Assistant Professor in Print Media at Virginia Commonwealth University, as well as her artistic practice have conjointly advanced her feminist politics and activism.

Cara: So, you know my secret now?

Maryse: Yes, I have read your books, but I already knew too much...

Cara: Yeah.

Maryse: Your background is in printmaking, and you feel more of a performance artist than...

Cara: Or more of an event planner.

Maryse: More of an event planner than anything else, but you also are a writer. How did this all come about? How did you come to writing?

Cara: I was really interested in print culture when I was in school studying in my twenties because I was interested in its collaborative aspect, but also in these ideas around dissemination and multiplicity of art. The language around printmaking was always really interesting to me with its socialist background. It is a practice without ego in comparison to other medium. Then I moved to New York, but I quickly became totally disenchanted with the art world, which I sort of still am. I moved there to get an MFA because I wanted to teach, so I stayed around New York anyways and ended up going to Columbia. While studying there, I was able to take a lot of classes at Barnard.

Maryse: The women-only liberal arts college? They have an important feminist zine collection in their holding...

Cara: Yes, studying there led me to a lot of text-based artists from the '80s and thinking about language in this other way, about this other language that is possible for me as a woman. I have always been interested in writing, but always been really unhappy with images as I could never really figure out how "woman as image" related to my practice. And so, I started writing more and more and more and playing with form. At first, my texts had this

“sad joke” format but then I moved into scripts. After grad school, I worked in the expanded book format, which I still do through hosting various events and working from *bound structures*, or what I think about *bound structures*, which are about creating specific social spaces, through creating publications and publics and narratives around those social events.

Maryse: Is that what you mean when you describe your practice as an art event planner? By bound structures, you refer to both relational art and binding art and bondage?

Cara: Yes, and all these activities are means for me to come to the book structure. Writing as an art practice is also something that I came to through reading a lot of French authors, women authors, and thinking about writing oneself into the world as a woman artist. Women’s writings certainly made me aware of how to characterize subjective voices in multiple ways.

Maryse: Is your writing practice veering toward autofiction? Are you fictionalizing yourself as an artist as well through that process?

Cara: My writings are always based on my life. I would say that it is something that just happens. It mostly comes out of the necessity for survival or emotional survival.

Maryse: The first moment we hear the voice of Age, the main character in your novel “The Coming of Age,” she makes it clear that she is withholding from ever reaching orgasm, from coming, hence the title. The ways in

which you express this extended jouissance of the body is what gives form to the novel and bring about this unique lyrical tone to Age's sexual encounters. What was your thinking around the place of the female body within the narrative around Age's sexual awakening?

Cara: It is an erotic novel that is not erotic, in the sense that there is not a lot of explicit sex. The language is more gendered than the bodies are rendered; the bodies always remain elusive, with soft edges. And that was part of my desire to take the focus away from genitalia and, move it into understanding one's own position to not knowing what one wants. I was interested in exploring not knowing how to name desire, and trying to maintain it in a way, like a secret.

Maryse: What appear to be metaphors for sex at first quickly reveal an embodiment of obfuscation. Why keep the contours of the female body, Age's body, relatively nebulous?

Cara: The writing of the book and of the character Age definitely coexist in this space that is less about a physical body and more about trying to articulate how many bodies or no bodies, complex subjectivities, can connect or hurt each other or find different spaces. It is a language of no body.

Maryse: By language of no body, are you referencing anorexic aesthetics? Is it an expression of resistance to or rejection of normative representation of female sexuality?

Cara: Yes, but I actually think the "sad girl", which is the case of Age, has been with us for a long time, like the anorexic aesthetic was taken up a long

time ago. And now, her influence is vast. There are blogs and Tumblr accounts and other similar support structures that are sometimes negative like pro-anorexia. These formats are public announcements of these women's disappearance act... For a recent project, I have been thinking through the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* but also through various ways in which women are shrinking in order to empower themselves. I have been reading a lot about this pathetic masochism and the shrinking woman.

Maryse: The "thigh gap" phenomenon is getting a lot of traction in social media which is about the gap that appears between your legs, just below the crotch, when you get extremely skinny. Your thighs get so skinny that a hole, a space, gets created and you can see through, and the bigger the better. It is a space created by this denial of the body and I think is a way for women to grow invisible balls, in that exact space of the thigh gap. Talking about these online communities of women, what is your investment in them?

Cara: I'm interested in the activity of these online groups as a platform to articulate melancholy, leftist melancholy. In effect, it is something I always come back to; it really is a huge thing for me to support women and support women artists and writers. That is what feminism looks like to me these days, and social media allows women to gain movement and power through one another.

Maryse: New technologies have democratized feminism, and even made it viral through memes and experimentation with new forms of digital narratives.

How is Age specifically posturing or performing sad girl aesthetics of our post-Internet era?

Cara: She is sort of stuck and *en route*, and I think it comes back to Mom a lot. In a way, she is performing different moments of catharsis around an internalized hatred of Mom and of woman. She is doing it in ways that hurt her but sometimes also cracks her up. But the releases are never really complete; they are more restrained than I would say cathartic, or eventful.

Maryse: *How does Age's relationship to Mom affect the relationships she has with men? How are those two narratives entwined?*

Cara: It is an interesting question because for the most part, there are only male characters that Age is dealing with. These characters are sort of triggers for her. But sometimes, it is a voice from the vent, you know, and that one is without gender. But in terms of the multiplicity of voices, I think the mother is its own mental space in a way, that points to Ages' inability to find connections elsewhere. I think her searching for connections to others is hard because she has never othered Mom or never othered woman. So, she is trying to cope through objectification, but it is foreign to her in a way, as she over identifies with the space of Mom, a desire that Mom characterizes in all culture, and that we don't ever speak about or articulate.

Maryse: *This secret space of Mom, is what gives rhythm to women's writing, and your novel certainly feels like it was written with "milk and night," from the body onto the page. Now, the romance novel is your literary form of*

predilection, but reading “The Coming of Age,” I could not find much of its clichés. In what ways romantic tropes inform your work?

Cara: Well, I think my novel is art writing.

Maryse: In that it is an artwork?

Cara: Yes, and the way that it entertains the romance novel genre is through articulating a woman’s desire in relation to herself.

Maryse: But this sounds like women’s writing!

Cara: Most romance novels have a really strong female lead voice, but the voice is usually pretty banal and the writing at times can get superficial. A lot of the tropes in romance novels reference everyday interactions or places the narrative in a very specific context that can get kitsch. But the voice in my book is not banal as it seeks to complicate the subjectivities of a typical romance novel in terms of going as far as sexing a refrigerator for example.

Maryse: Is that why the affect in parts of your novel feels somewhat ethereal?

Cara: The writing in *Burning Blue* is completely of the genre, while *The Coming of Age* is completely different from a romance novel as the actual narrative is fighting certain of its stereotypes. The interest for me in that was in the actual content, in challenging what it could be. You know this belief in content, which is really weird to entertain, but also an interesting way to challenge oneself.

Maryse: “The Coming of Age” makes use of feminist aesthetics and politics to deconstruct the romance novel format while “Burning Blue” takes on

lesbian erotica topoi, yet in both, you challenge received notions of female desire?

Cara: Yes, again, I was also writing differently and so the stakes were not the same. With *Age*, I was thinking about the flow, and was more interested in the breaks and why the many voices were so dissonant. That is what I want to do with art writing. Now with *Burning Blue*, I was thinking about the way it is typically structured and wanted to create well-defined characters because the novel is so short. I don't think about these writing conventions as much for an art writing project. I just read, and re-read *The Hour of the Star*, this novel by Clarice Lispector. Have you read it?

Maryse: *Yes! Why do you always return to this novel?*

Cara: It is just so fucking amazing! I think it is the best novel ever written and I can't stop re-reading it. For me, it is all about the tension between the main character, this girl and the narrator, a man. They are both trite and contingent on one another. It is so nice to read it alongside Helene Cixous because she is always writing about Clarice Lispector, even when she is not. I always read two books at a time anyways... It is so nice out, isn't?

Maryse: *So nice... Look at these tiny sparrows just outside the bay window! Birds, women and writing... Did you know that Cixous' conceptualization of women's writings was given form through the writings of Clarice Lispector. "Agua Viva" immediately struck me as a discussion on what it means to make art in writing, on the infinite passage from painting to writing, and back, while embodying an ontological feminine subjectivity.*

So basically, Lispector's novel intuitively conflates both art writing and women's writing into one, and I can see how that must be inspiring to you.

Cara: Yes, guiding, major. She is messy, yet she is also precise. Her writings, it is out of this world, just incredible.

Maryse: *Your novel "Burning Blue," a lesbian erotica for Badlands Unlimited's New Lover series, is about a painter Josey, who is working towards an important exhibition at the MOMA. Why did you choose to portray her having to face so many challenges in her artistic career, and personal life, yet the sexuality you depict in this book is much more joyous and free.*

Cara: The novel is about this woman Josey who is going through early menopause and she is not a very financially successful artist. As she needs time to find herself, she goes upstate and falls in love with a very young online porn video editor named Trish. They have this really hot affair, until she is offered an important institutional show. But, because she ends up leaving her true love, Trish, she has a failed show at the MoMA. Her husband finally finds out about all of her dramas and he leaves her. Fast forward ten years, and Josey is a professor and the young woman Trish happens to be in her class and they have a new love affair again. So, it definitely takes on all of the tropes of romance in terms of structure and language. It is much more about emotional connections and kindnesses and love. It is really engaging in erotic strategies to become close, and about seduction. I have seduction down, that is not a problem. My problem is all of that other stuff that comes after. I had to do so many re-writes...

Maryse: I have always understood the process of writing to involve an editor that to a certain extent acts almost as a co-writer.

Cara: Yes, and that is what was kind of happening with Badlands and I really loved this process. After each round of comments, I had to keep rewriting. It's when I saw the first books from the series at the Walther König bookstore in Berlin that I had a panic attack, a full-on panic attack, so I had to re-write it again! Oh, but I am fine once the book is out. I have a pretty healthy separation from my work in a way. I don't take things personally, just like with art critique; it's the work, it's not you. It's just wonderful! [Laughs].

Maryse: "Burning Blue" being a smut novel, it makes sense to think of its writing as collaborative. But these many rewrites must bring the text far away from its initial gist? I have a sense that with "Age," you retained a lot of poetic mishaps of the first draft. The thoughts in your head were immediately put on paper, for writing to be for you a process of bodily excretion...

Cara: Yeah, I find it is the way to stay close to my voice. This is really important I think, especially in finding one's voice, and having these flaws and falters and, slips and skips, is pretty important, especially if affect is something that you believe in, like I do.

Maryse: Is performance a way for you to extend affect, language and feminist politics beyond the page and into space? Tell me more about the event you organized recently, and how it is building upon your writing practice.

Cara: I was commissioned to produce an event, a patron preview party, for the MOCA Cleveland. *Prelude her Patron* involved a commencement speaker, a lot of my MFA students, who were performing what I call “aggressions,” and then there was “L’amour Bleu,” a New York based music band and performance collective, who were writhing around on the ground and performing some masochistic gestures, which created a masculine “subspace.” As the event planner, I wrote the speeches and the toasts, and designed the evening atmosphere, and all the performance scripts. The performance appropriated the soft S&M portrayed in a film like *50 Shades of Grey* to bring awareness to the exploits of MFA students in art academia. Students in MFA programs are treated as masochists, and as their teacher in that arena, I am a sadist! Of course, all the patrons invited are sadists too! In these events I plan, just like with the course I teach, I am creating space for vulnerability where an encounter, and learning, is possible. I am very open or at least I am not afraid to be honest with language, and by honest, I mean critical, and that threatens people enormously. And that is very threatening for those who have something to lose, something to lose in the sense that they believed that they had something, so my work is about undermining dominant narratives.

Maryse: And what are these lip balms with the BPC logo?

Cara: They are for the event, and it is a customized logo. I just ordered a hundred of them that say BPC, which means “bored phallic class.” I love them so much! [Laughs] There is this thing where every day you want to be

surprised, you want lubrication to occur, in all these different ways - money, love, sex, success – but people are so sad and protective and unsatisfied anyways. Phallocentrism is really about denying powerlessness, or denying it exists. I think it is a great definition for it, rather than locating an imaginary phallus, which is also a good way to describe it. It is a straight-up denial of powerlessness in people, pretending it doesn't exist, that people are not powerless. Capitalism makes people believe that we all have voices... I guess this brings us back to our secret, you know, and where can we find value in art. I write as art, but also against art, to name what's problematic in art, and in life. But lately, with my practice, it is getting to the point where it is much more just about writing, and less about the romance trope, as I am not sure I can deal with real relationships anymore. And so, to erase my relationships is also part of my process now. It is something I have been thinking about a lot lately. When I reach the post-seduction stage, which is usually around eight months, after that I can't take it. The love is too strong, and I eat myself alive. I cleared 6,000 messages from my inbox just yesterday...

Maryse: *That you wrote?*

Cara: That I wrote together with him.

Maryse: *Oh, okay.*

Cara: There's a lot still [laughs].

Maryse: *Did you erase them all?*

Cara: Yeah, they're gone.

Maryse: Did you download and save them on your computer?

Cara: No, no when you block someone they just go away.

Maryse: Really?

Cara: I guess it is a kind of violence...

Maryse: But this is your writing!

Cara: Yeah, I know.

Maryse: Shouldn't you keep these exchanges, just in case...?

Cara: It's really painful to delete them, yeah.

Maryse: I read a lot of correspondences between writers, poets and artists, between them and their lovers. I am glad their letters got published since a lot of their ideas about their work are expressed in them. Whereas, with digital technology, we assume that everything is...

Cara: Saved.

Maryse: Yes, saved but it's actually not the case, and the survival of these digital letters is much less guaranteed than old fashioned paper.

Cara: You're right...

Maryse: Analog photographs last much longer than any digital data.

Cara: So true. Emails, "pfft", they're gone!

3.4 The Absolute Video: Maude Veilleux.

Maude Veilleux's novel *Prague* suddenly became too real when I got confronted with this passage about her then-husband Guillaume "who had said he'd prefer not to read the book."⁸³ Malaise. The blurred line between art and real life of Maude's novel was anxiety inducing for its protagonist, but also for me. Well versed in the qualms of autofiction, I was quite aware this sort of tension was the material Maude made use of in her poetry as well as in her creative writings. Despite all that, I completely stepped out of fiction at the demur of Maude's ex-artist-husband, for a moment. Until the magnitude of the novel's significance hit me. My slight discomfort about her project provoked me into re-reading Maude's complex assertions about a woman's independence.

Ok, I admit I already knew Maude when I picked up her novel. As a matter of fact, I picked it up because I knew her. I had in fact met her a few times. Here and there, at exhibition openings, and once, over for dinner at their house. For our interview, we had to meet three times over a year, the first time at my house in Mile End, later at hers, in Old Montreal, and then in Quebec City where she was in residence at "La maison de la littérature." It took us a year to garner all the words to speak together about her work as she was still very much involved in living within the novel's reverberations and intensities, and that far beyond the dates of its publication in the Fall of 2016.

Maryse: A reflection on contemporary relationships in the age of social media, your novel "Prague" was written following the currents of your

⁸³ Maude Veilleux, *Prague*, Trs. Aleshia Jensen and Aimee Wall (Montréal: QC Fiction, 2019), 84.

experience of polyamory. How did you come about to write about your amorous life, your sexual life? How did it happen that you took your marriage and opened it as a literary project?

Maude: It happened pretty much on its own. My poetry always strives towards the intimate, and already in my early works, I discussed my heartbreaks, my personal relationships, my couple. Meanwhile, autofiction as well as life writing are literary genres that I have been identifying with for a long time now. In the case of *Prague*, I initially wasn't going in this direction with the project, because I had internalized a lot of shame for writing from the self. The fact is that the open marriage happened well before I even thought of the book. The decision to open our marriage was taken together with my husband well before I started to write about it. It is further along, once I engaged in a new relationship and so many things were happening in these encounters, that this overflow of powerful erotic moments prompted me to write about them just for myself. Sometimes the sentence rolls in my mind, sometimes when I walk, a poem starts to write itself, and with these moments, it felt just the same, I would go home, and the sentences poured out of me to fill in this document. It is only after writing about twenty pages or so that I had the impression that a project was starting to set itself in motion, a project that I never anticipated doing. That explains why in the middle of the novel, I initiated a reflection on the process of writing the novel. Only at that moment, I understood that there was a project, that the open couple was becoming a project. Through the

ways in which I organized the encounters with my lover, or my way of being, or how I was consumed by the book, this is when I became conscious of the work to come...

Maryse: *It is the project that caught up with you?*

Maude: Yes, exactly!

Maryse: *So, you did not start the project with the idea of documenting this experience?*

Maude: Absolutely not, even though I do document a lot of things from my quotidian, and I have been doing it for a long time now, but it was really not thought out in advance.

Maryse: *Halfway through “Prague,” you cite Annie Ernaux discussing the personal risk at stake in her practice: “I also resisted before diving in the writing of ‘La femme gelée,’ I was suspecting that, more or less consciously, I was sacrificing my personal life, that when I would be done writing the book, I would separate from my husband. Which is what happened.”⁸⁴ You inserted Ernaux’s reflection on the challenges of autofiction in the text exactly when the narrator in your novel becomes preoccupied by similar thoughts on the relationship of art and life. The effects of intertextuality, by citing Ernaux, make your project clearly legible while it anchors your novel in a specific lineage of autofictional writings. Of course, reading “Prague,” I immediately thought of Ernaux’s*

⁸⁴ Annie Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau* (Paris: Gallimard—Folio, 2011), 125.

“Passion simple” (Gallimard, 1991). How did you get to Annie Ernaux’s corpus?

Maude: Of course, I had read a bit of Ernaux’s in the past, but while I was writing the novel, I started reading “Passion simple,” and it immediately made so much sense. I had the impression that she had written what I was trying to do... In fact, I had read most of her novels in Quarto,⁸⁵ but I was trying to read it in the proposed order, and so, I had not arrived at “Passion simple” yet. The first title being *Les armoires vides*, I think, and then you move through the book slowly, and there is *La place*, and *L’évènement*... I don’t really remember why, but I decided to jump to *Passion simple*. I think it is my editor who told me to check it out, because there were so many links with my work.

Maryse: *There is also “Se perdre,” which is in fact the “journal intime” that Ernaux kept during her affair with the Russian diplomat which is at the heart of “Pasion simple,” but was published a decade after the novel. She is knowingly giving form to her longing, and condensing her journal in a very mastered way, with “Passion simple.”*

Maude: Which is something I didn’t really do... I feel like the writing in my novel mostly follows the series of events that punctuated my life, and as such, there is no distance between the moment I experienced something and the moment I wrote about it. In Ernaux, you really feel the long moments of waiting between rendez-vous with her lover. In my novel, even though I

⁸⁵ Annie Ernaux, *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard—Quarto, 2011).

might have felt them, I have not written about them, this is not the angle of my book, the wait. But again, reading her novel, I really had this impression she was describing that exact emotion I was going through. I have realized recently that there is a difference between the story I wrote, the one I lived, and the one people read. There seems to be holes in the story that I fill with my memories of these events. Also, I often have a hard time remembering what I did and did not write. I probably should reread it! (Laughters) Because in the end, I feel like the book is more about a period of my life than an actual writing project.

Maryse: Your novel involves taking a risk, like Ernaux, because the novel put in jeopardy and troubled your personal life. As a result, your writing process impacted on your personal life, as a way to intervene in your reality. Or as you explain, “the further the novel was progressing, more often did the thought for the need of a radical change in [your] life was coming to [your] mind.”⁸⁶ And that change comes about with you choosing solitude between two men, between the two masculine characters, between your husband and lover... In order to find a space of your own to write and take a pause from the intensities of writing your life, you removed yourself from this context, and travelled overseas, to Prague. But once there, as you mentioned it to me, you were having a certain difficulty to finish the novel...

⁸⁶ Maude Veilleux, *Prague* (Montréal: QC Fiction, 2016), 60.

Maude: I didn't know how it would end, how to end it. I had the impression that travelling to Prague, buy my ticket, would become a performative gesture that would be significant enough to give weight to my project, or at least to give me a sense of direction for the project. I am superstitious, so I had the impression that I was so absorbed in my project, that I would magically find a way to end my novel, find an end just like that.

Maryse: Finding an end at the street corner while walking around Prague. Like a ritual, you prompted an event that helps you produce a rupture in the narrative.

Maude: There are only a few pages at the end of the novel about the city Prague because there was nothing for me there, not even a small link, except that I was skyping my husband and that I was trying to write, although I was somewhere else with the text. The distance had become way too vast because I was completely removed from the context of the drama that inhabited me, that inhabited the lives of my lover and my husband. I was in Prague, and it was like I had stepped out of the story of my life in order to write the ending of the novel.

Maryse: How productive was this distance?

Maude: It helped a lot, because I didn't know anymore how to pursue my project, and it was becoming psychologically difficult. It was a choice for the success of the book, but that financially, I could not really afford. I really needed to do this trip but once I got there, I could no longer tell why I did it. Even if I was going for a walk or visit a cemetery or a little café or a

nice castle, it didn't have anything to do with my novel to be there and walk around alone like a tourist. And the end was still not happening, there was no end. And I could not get myself to write a fictional ending. I could not conceive that I would write an ending where I would stay with my husband, for example, and not do it in real life. I had the impression that I would write something that would decide of the rest of my life. The sentence would be performative in a way that would not leave me any other choice than to do what it would say. That was putting so much pressure on me. It felt like a prophecy. I did not necessarily feel the need to be transparent toward the reader, but toward myself, and the project. But since the ending is more or less open, the readers want to know what happened, and often ask indiscrete questions about it, but I don't mind answering them...

Maryse: The question that come to my mind and appear to be moving the narrative of your novel forward is how to write in order to think about one's life, but also to intervene symbolically in it. What is the risk you are taking in "Prague;" isn't exactly to let writing intervene in reality, to change one's life.

Maude: Risk came before the book. It is the risk-taking in my marriage that provoked the writing of the book. It is through establishing the open couple that the book happened. So, there was already a risk in place without which the book would have never happened. But at the same time, it is through pursuing my writing project that I put myself at risk through a

series of various situations. There must always be a risk in order to write... It is exciting to be so absorbed in your work and disappear into it, to be ready for everything. The feeling that the book would have an impact on my life became so overwhelming. To know that writing my personal life would end up having an impact on it forced me to make real choices. Looking for an ending to the story was pushing me to make, well kind of, stupid choices. Again, I was absolutely obsessed with finding an ending that would not just be ending the writing. The writing forced me to provoke events in my life that otherwise might have never happened. With my first novel or with my poetry, I never felt like that.

Maryse: *Your literary/real life provocations are well encapsulated in another citation, but this time, in one from the field of visual arts. You mention singing "Wicked Game" like Pipilotti Rist in her art video "I'm a victim of this song." In the video, Rist sings Chris Isaak's song, but her voice doubles up to interpret the song a cappella, but in a completely hysteric voice, over the well regular, calm, interpretation. I find interesting that you specifically reference a work art from the tradition of feminist performance art. For me, this citation, being on the same page as the one from Ernaux, signals that the text becomes the documentation of a performance, and that you conceive your autofictional writing practice as performance art. Did you consciously cite Rist to expose the specificity of your artistic posture?*

- Maude: Oh no, I really didn't think of that. It's really just the pleasure of her singing that attracted me. It is true that I once had a practice in performance art, but I had to stop. It was too difficult to pursue both, so I decided to focus solely on my writing practice. At the same time, I am trying to get away from fiction and go towards something akin to an *énoncé performatif*, which is an approach to life writing.
- Maryse: *By énoncé performatif, you mean a performative utterance, as per Austin's definition, and which was useful to Sedgwick and Butler in order to untangle notions of performativity and performance?*
- Maude: Yes. Wow, it is interesting how I am coming back to performance through my writing practice. I never thought of it that way until now... Maybe it is of performance in how my writings are invested in reality, in the sense that theatre is of ketchup, of fiction, as much as performance is of blood, of the real. As such, my writing for *Prague* is really close to my performative attitude. Literature is a medium that forces you to have a perspective, meanwhile with performance, you live it, you do it, but it is someone else that has a perspective on it. There is language, and the exercise of writing, how to structure it to be closest to experience, and not in representation. That's why a lot of autofiction writers have a very surgical style – short, simple sentences, few adjectives – otherwise you fall into the superfluous, into the literary work, and autofiction is about making the literary work disappear. My literary work is exactly to make the literary work disappear, but I am not sure exactly how to get there...

Maryse: *Your novel is a work of literary autofiction, but could it also be a work of performance, documented in words, that merges art and life? Could your novel be an artist's books that makes visible an artistic attitude? Or, as you might not be considered an artist per se, could it be an artist novel without artist?*

Maude: I would love it to be! There is something that annoys me with autofiction, and I think it is the word "fiction." I understand that, because of language, we are always in fiction. Are we in a fiction now? It is as if I am trying to find the end of fiction. But with autofiction, you are always staying in fiction, which is how Serge Doubrovsky defines it... The end of fiction; I don't have any answers, but it is something I am looking for. I am obsessive about succeeding at writing something where there would be the least narration. Even in poetry there is narration. It would be some sort of degree zero...

Maryse: *In that, it would be a way to disinhibit writing from the conventions of literature? By freeing up language, would it get closer to life? What would that look like, just voices, just "la parole" in no given context? Pure subjectivity? Or what about "living your life" as a way to elude narration, evade representation and escape images?*

Maude: I tried writing in such a way to give the impression that I was removing narration as much as possible. In fact, there were only dialogues. But still, there was a sense of a certain narration. But what do you mean by "living your life"...?

Maryse: To live your life...

Maude: Ah, "living"! Yes, but how do you share that... I don't think it's possible with writing...

Maryse: Wouldn't it be possible with art though? In that the art project would be to live one's life as art, and then account for this experience in writing? I guess I am thinking of "a, A Novel" by Andy Warhol, which consists of transcriptions of conversations between Warhol and his Factory friends, recorded uninterruptedly for 24 hours straight on a tape recorder.

Maude: Well, to live life is an interesting idea! I would love it if there were cameras everywhere, filming me all the time! I like this idea of being watched, to write about an experience that is not going through me. A camera that would capture every moment, every possible angle, every possible detail, so nothing would escape its eye, and everything would be recorded. But there would be no one to join end to end all this video footage...

Maryse: Your desire to escape fiction, narration, maybe it is about escaping your interior monologue, your intimate narrative? You mention that you would "do everything for the text. The camera runs permanently. Videotaping myself eating. Videotaping myself writing. Videotaping myself looking at myself in the video. A paroxysm of narcissism. Make a novel out of the self. Make a novel to give oneself meaning."⁸⁷ How did you come to videotaping yourself as part of your writing practice?

⁸⁷ Maude Veilleux, *Prague* (Québec: Hammac, 2016), 83.

Maude: I still don't understand why I do that. I also don't remember how I started filming myself, but it happened naturally. It certainly all began with this project, with *Prague*. I became really obsessed with taking selfies too. I was always looking at my reflection to be sure that it was me who was there. Writing *Prague* led me to constantly observe myself, my action and it became difficult to discern myself from my fictional self. I became uncanny to myself. Is my reflection myself? The more I looked at myself, the more I became some sort of object at a distance. For a long time, I was feeling unsettled, like I was a malleable blob with which I could have done everything I wanted.

Maryse: *The artist as object...!*

Maude: I also started getting confused as to where my own will was situated. I kept wondering "what am I?" in a sort of psychosis of the self. My addiction to the book project became overwhelming and led me to bascule into fiction from too much self-analysis. To investigate mental constructions is where I find narcissism interesting, like with *Le livre brisé* by Serge Doubrovsky, or even works by Chloé Delaume or Chrisine Angot. In these books, the writer attempts to expose who they are by way of trying to understand who they are. To expose one's mental structure is not an easy process and can drive you sort of insane. I kept looking at my reflection to be sure it was me who was there. I even have a friend who gifted me a pocket mirror, so I can make sure I was still there. So, I guess that to support myself with

pursuing the project, I started recording my writing sessions with a video camera...

Maryse: It is interesting that videotaping yourself brought about a certain relief from your anxiety about writing... If you have the impulse to write about something that disturbs you, that makes you uncomfortable, is it because you feel there is something to dig in, the hint that there is material there to write from?

Maude: I often have the impression that if there is something I don't feel like writing about, I must write about it. This feeling certainly indicates that there is writing matter and that I have to rummage through it. I have to rummage through it in search of the limit between fiction and reality.

Maryse: Where is the limit between fiction and reality? Between yourself as author and as main protagonist of the novel, who decides to set the limit?

Maude: I am quite obsessed with the relationship between fiction and reality. My conception of reality is quite blurred. A memory, is it fiction? Everything that I remember feels not so real as much as it is a narration I constantly produce. And so, of my interactions with the world, I only know my own intimate version. I am an accretion of fiction. I am a fictional character. This impression that I will never attain reality makes me feel like I am a character, because in the end, I am always in fiction.

Maryse: I imagine the video camera pointed at you, painting your portrait as a writer, documenting your process of writing the novel, filming you while you are inventing yourself as a writer, sitting at your desk, by the window,

open to the view of a tree, a light breeze coming in and birds singing. The camera records your perfume, your performance of writing yourself as an artist. You are writing yourself as a fictional character. Interestingly, you state in Prague that you are “the only protagonist who wishes to be a personage of fiction in your story”.⁸⁸

Maude: Strangely enough, I didn't want any characters in *Prague*, but the process of writing in autofictional mode forcibly turns you, and everyone you write about, into one.

Maryse: *Dick Hebdige certainly wasn't into being turned into an autofictional character! Chris Kraus was embraced by the art world through writing herself as an artist in her novel “I Love Dick.” Interest in the fiction of her artistic practice received more attention than her actual film works. Writing about the challenges she faced as a woman filmmaker navigating the artworld has in fact actualized her desire to become one. It is by creating an image of herself as writer that she became an artist. To invent oneself as artist, to become an artist through the process of writing seems to a productive rite of passage for women. Is it Prague's central problematic, which is to ask how to write oneself as a woman artist?*

Maude: Your question reminds me of Patricia Smart's book *Writing herself into being: Quebec women's autobiographical writings from Marie de*

⁸⁸ Maude Veilleux, *Prague* (Québec: Hammac, 2016), 98.

l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcand.⁸⁹ One of her main observations is that all of the few autobiographies written by women in the history of Quebec literature present the reader with a sense of a fragile self. This might be the result of a lack of feminine representation in the public sphere where these writers are continuously asking themselves what their places and contributions are in/to society. As a result, their writings establish a feminine intimacy that was not yet present in Quebec literature, in the same way Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath's writings focused on feminine concerns. There is also this question that is very much present in Nelly Arcand's work, namely how one negotiates with what society imposes upon us as women and how what one is really. Because when we speak of identity, we are asking "who am I?" but also "how did I become who I am?"

Maryse: *And for most of history, straight white men have responded to these questions in place of women, and all othered individuals...*

Maude: Not only it is important to affirm oneself as woman but also as an artist, because no one else will do it for you. I have been partaking in a renewal of Quebecois feminist poetry which has taken a new tangent over the last four or five years. But oftentimes, male poets denied that our work is poetry. So, we needed to set ourselves up in situations where we were affirming ourselves as de facto poets to be taken seriously. Our poetry was

⁸⁹ Patricia Smart, *Writing Herself into Being: Quebec women's autobiographical writings from Marie de l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcand* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

deemed as foolish mostly because they didn't have the references, contemporary American poetry, to make valid criticism of our work. Why is it the male critic who decides what is or not poetry?

Maryse: Could we then say that the camera also served as to set the limit between yourself and the character that you are becoming in the novel, that you are in the process of writing, the process of writing yourself as a writer, and somehow protect yourself from any outside misogynistic criticism?

Maude: The camera was useful as a distancing and protective mechanism. It allowed me to embark in a performative mode of writing, so I could exist as an object of fiction within the space of the project. Another mechanism the camera provided was to summon a character within me. I think I dream to be a personage now. It is a new obsession that inhabits me. But as you say, to document my work as a writer with my video camera served to delimit the space and time of writing. The camera was also an apparatus to keep me anchored in the work. Turning the camera on was like entering on stage, into the space of fiction. Towards the end, I was even filming what I was going to write about. For example, I would install the camera in the living room, on a little table, and then have a friend over for coffee, and film our conversation without her knowledge. Then I wrote this exact scene, but without ever looking at the footage. I never looked at any of the footage, so the images were never helpful with the writing. Filming only helped put me in the writing mode. It was as if I needed the camera to attest that I was performing an action, a system I created that constantly

reminded me of the performativity of my writing process. It prepared me mentally and provided a clean cut between the moment where I was living my life and I was writing, otherwise it would have been too invasive. The novel, fiction, writing, it would have consumed every moment of my life. Yes, it probably had to do with defining the beginning of work, or the passage from life to work. Sometimes, I would even put make-up on to write, and I would dress up.

Maryse: Maybe the lipstick then is a marker that you are in character? I can easily imagine you whispering Maria Abramovic's "Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful" while writing... Creating a character out of yourself, using your body and subjectivity as object for your writing, doesn't that make your writing practice a form of dematerialized body art?

Maude: Yes, in a way it is. The relationship to the body became central to the project, as part of my process, but on a more intuitive level. I use my laptop video camera a lot too. It still happens that while listening to music, I will naturally put the camera on in order to look at myself in the computer screen but without necessarily recording. Just being there and looking at myself for a long time. It has for effect to ground me into my body. I look at myself to re-enter my body, and the camera, just like the mirror, plays that role. I am unsure if my depersonalisation episodes are caused by anxiety or by the split between my real self and my character self. So, filming myself serves many functions but most importantly, to be in my body while I write. So, in a way, the camera prevented me from

getting lost in this adventure that was writing *Prague*. It kept me sane and protected me during more difficult moments. Sometime after the book came out, when my computer died, I lost all the videos, and that made me cry.

Maryse: You lost all of them, without ever seeing them?

Maude: I was so sad. I thought it was a such a terrible loss, but it is so ridiculous since it is just footage of my face filmed for half an hour...

Maryse: Did you know that Marguerite Duras' novel "The Lover" (1984), which was initially conceived as an album of family portraits with a text commenting them, was supposed to be called "The absolute photograph," in reference to Roland Barthes' "Camera Lucida" (1980). I would like to read you this quote: "[Duras] is the only one to see this image she is speaking about because this image doesn't exist, it is an imaginary image, created in the aftermath through memories, impressions, the object that arouses the story shines by its absence, because it is more than just a photograph but a mental image."⁹⁰ Maybe that's what your project tends towards, an absolute video?

Maude: The absolute video, that's beautiful! Yes, we can think of my work that way.

Maryse: In fact, wouldn't videotaping yourself be useful to produce a clear and stable image, yet unconscious, of yourself as the writer, the camera

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Seys, *Ces femmes qui écrivent: de Madame de Sévigné à Annie Ernaux* (Paris: Ellipses, 2012), 329.

becoming the guardian of your identity as a writer and this ultimate moving image is a constitution of yourself as artist that is complete. So, you no longer have to doubt, and can just write. Maybe the camera helps you by putting the space of creation under surveillance, the artist under surveillance?

Maude: Totally! I love it! That's such a good lead... There is a proof, a video proving that I am writing!

Maryse: *The camera is your personal police, your superego as an object outside of yourself!*

Maude: This is so interesting! The truth is that I had made a backup of my computer before leaving for Prague, and fortunately, I found it again. Looking at these videos of myself writing, I could almost travel back into the writing of the book. During the difficult scenes, a wrinkle would appear in the middle on my forehead, while my seating position would look very uncomfortable. Something I came to realize was that I was writing with my body, and by losing the videos momentarily, I was losing the traces of my body living, going through the experience writing. The brain thinks, but the words are in our body...

Maryse: *Writing is listening to the body that speaks, which means being attentive to all the subtle voices, beyond the mind, coming from our bodies.*

Maude: The sentence traverses the whole body and links the mind to the body. In feminine literature, in Nelly Arcand's for example, we find a certain hatred

for the body. The videos reunite me with my body, allow me to be kinder with myself, and be able to create.

Maryse: So, filming yourself provided you pleasure?

Maude: Yes, and other emotions as well. During *Prague*'s post-publication blues, the presence of the camera, even when I wasn't writing, was helpful. I am writing about the fracture of the self, and how my relationship to the camera has helped me for my next project. In a way, the camera nurtured not only my practice, it provided me a form of care.

Maryse: I like how you developed an artistic methodology based on a technological tool. Maybe it would make sense to think of the triangulation between the camera, the writing and yourself as an intimist and discreet approach to feminine representation, the selfie in opposition to the male gaze. What else can you tell me about your relationship with your camera? What does it mean to put into words the traces of the pleasure the camera brings you?

Maude: I just bought a webcam. The lens is much better than the camera on my computer. In fact, I ended up experiencing a form of sexuality through the camera, as if I was in love with my camera. Not in love with the image of myself the camera sends me back but really in love with the device. I still have to think about what it all means, but I am in the process of tracing the origin of this sentiment. I spend around six hours a day in front of my camera, so I have a particular relationship with my webcam. I am in love with my little camera...

4 The Inner Image.

In the first year of my doctoral studies, I signed up for an individual workshop with author Sheila Heti, the writer-in-residence from the English Studies department, with an eye to developing my writing skills and gaining insight into contemporary literature. The text I submitted Heti for review was a dialogue based on an audio recording of my last conversation with my grandmother few months before she passed away. My first attempt at art writing, I had penned the piece in place of an assigned interview with an artist for an art criticism seminar during my MFA. More often than not, the editing sessions with Heti involved reading my text out loud together to assess the musicality of its phrasing. The workshop eventually progressed into rehearsals with two budding actresses from theatre studies and culminated in Heti organizing a final performance for departmental colleagues. The experience of hearing the voice of my grandmother emanating from a young woman was quite offsetting at first but as it turned out, the text was later published in my first poetry book *Where Wild Flowers Grow* (2015) by Kunstverein Toronto, who also produced an audio recording of it, interpreted by visual artist Vera Frankel and performer Liz Peterson, for my eponymous solo exhibition with the institution.

In parallel to working with Sheila Heti that year, I discovered the artworld she took part in Toronto, which was somewhere in between the prominent commercial gallery scene, the independent bookstores milieu and “Trampoline Hall,” the lecture series she used to curate. Obviously, I read her coming-of-age novel set in Toronto’s artistic community *How Should A Person Be* (Anansi, 2010), but also attended her talk *I’m a Very Sexy Baby* (2012) on the abject in women’s literature with Tamara Faith

Berger and Chris Kraus and saw *All Our Happy Days are Stupid* (2013) at VideoFag, Heti's "failed feminist play" from her novel. Overall, what struck my imagination and sensibility was how her practice was akin to thinking and making visual arts: she shared a studio space with visual artist Margaux Williamson, she made use of collaborative and performative methods of writing, and she embodied her novels. And as such, Sheila Heti had created a space of her own that accommodates her hybrid writing practice, at the intersection of theatre, literature and visual arts.

At the same time, the opportunity was for me to develop a series of experimental texts *L'image intérieure (The Inner Image)*, comprised here in this chapter. These pieces, while exploring the interiority of image making, are experiential examinations of the work of sculptors Valérie Blass, Liz Magor, Ulla Van Brandenburg, and performative photographers Moyra Davey and Francesca Woodman. Each piece makes use of writing methods adapted from a repertoire found in the history of visual art and literature. Automatic writing, dérives, collage, role-play and conversational games all still hold a central place in my art writing practice. During my artistic fieldwork, I glean and amass writing material that I later rework, as for me, writing as art is a studio-based practice that makes use of words as its material.

Writing as art means encountering art with the whole body in action, but also with all the senses. Indeed, my artistic strategies are meant to excite the senses until words are more easily expressed out of mind, out of body and onto paper. These performative gestures are in fact guided by a feminist methodology inspired by Irigaray's wish to "restore the relationship between sight and touch," which "stresses a revaluing of the

other senses.”⁹¹ This has for effect to decentralize the gaze away from vision and redistribute it over the whole body. This redeployment of the gaze to include all the senses as well as intuition, the visionary and the unconscious underlines *écriture féminine*’s “potential for the development of a syntax appropriate for women.”⁹²

Concretely, how does that feel like? For *Smoking to the Point of Something*, Toronto artist Jenine Marsh dressed in a costume combining elements featured in Liz Magor’s work with a stuffed toy lizard she was wearing on her head during our conversation. *The Unseen Film* was written mostly in situ at *The Little Shop* in Parc-Extension where I first had a conversation with artist Ulla Van Brandenburg, followed by a second excursion where I documented, in a poetically exhaustive list, every objects found in the many rooms that makes up this peculiar antique shop in Montreal. In *Hairplay*, my conversation with hairdresser Roxane Cheibs was held in the permanent collection exhibition space at the Montreal Fine Arts Museum where she gave me a live demonstration of her restoration techniques on a sculpture made of fake hair. And briefly, I wrote *She Who Walks* throughout my wanderings around the Vatican in Rome, Italy by recording my impressions on a Dictaphone while taking in all the sensations offered by my immediate surroundings.

⁹¹ Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 9.

⁹² Ibid, 13.

4.1 Smoking to the Point of Something.

When Toronto artist Jenine Marsh told me about her Halloween costume, I had to interview her in character, as Lizard Magor, to discuss the work of Canadian artist Liz Magor. With a ghostly appearance by curator Kari Cwynar...

Maryse Larivière: I would like to start by asking you who you are?

Lizard Magor: Really, or not really? I am *Lizard Magor*.

ML: What are these accessories you are wearing?

LM: I have a transparent plastic glove on a green paper hand glued to my purple-flower-pattern-over-greenery silk t-shirt, a broach attached above my heart with a *Ferrero Rocher* wrapper pinned underneath it, a plush hat in the shape of a lizard and an alien-green neoprene glove with black diamond-shaped nails.

ML: What about this thing hanging off your breast?

LM: Oh, it is a 3\$ price tag for the plush toy I wore as a hat when I first needed to be *Lizard Magor*. After drooping from my hat for a while, it fell onto my shirt, and I decided to just leave it there.

ML: Now, what is this hand on your t-shirt pointing to?

LM: It's pointing to the *Ferrero Rocher* wrapper/broach amalgamation.

ML: Your outfit is part of a larger body of work that consists of a series of opened gift boxes with the paper tissue unwrapped to reveal various tops and sweaters. Each of these garments is adorned with a glove or a paper hand pointing to a label or a tag.

LM: All pointing to where they were made, which is often China, or where they were being sold, which was in Vancouver.

ML: *So, who are these cardboard box people and what are they all pointing towards?*

LM: They are themselves. They do not represent anyone else. There is no symbolic representation within them. The objects speak for themselves and as simple, yet excessive, objects they have very simple, direct things to say that are both material and sensitive at the same time. That is what they are pointing at.

ML: *If you look at them closely, they are very self-contained, and they wear an irresistible melancholy. They are animated, yet they are nobody but themselves. They are not just packaged garments in an opened gift box. Each one of them has a personality that emerges through the layering of the tulle veiling, the matte sequins, the plastic credit card, the tickling feathers, the printed patterns, the smooth silk, the velvety chenille, the tactile embroidery, the fine weave, the loose threads, the dirty stains, the vintage slogans, the metallic candy wrappers, the dizzying polka dots and the dried-up cigarette butts.*

LM: Tiny and cheap details.

ML: *Colorful, yet dull...*

LM: Like one of these intricate gift cards with ribbons and layers of paper and cut-outs. Cheap, cheap, cheap, mass-produced gift card with a poem on the inside that is supposed to mean something to someone.

The feeling I get from the open gift boxes are the same as an unsigned card; beautiful, cheap and trying so hard to mean something. So hopeful that it becomes sad, beautiful and funny. It's very subtle... meaning here is more like a tingling sensation than a slap in the face. It is more of a suggestive or felt significance, yet it is quite specific. It is not hazy or vague, but it is not specific in the sense of being able to be expressed through language in a direct way.

ML: The suffocation of meaning, for an affective understanding of art...

LM: The bird is dead, the glove is paper flat, the blanket has moth holes. They are all on the discount rack of meaning. They are not devalued but outside of normal ideas of value, outside of the fancy display case of making meaning. Their real lack of value rots and sticks to their surface in a veneer that is isolated from the couture, value-making prestige.

ML: Why are you wrapping everything though? If it is not about showing off, then is it about protection and care? Looking very carefully, the motif that I see punctuating your work is wrapping. The birds are in a poly bag, the garments in silk paper, squished candy in their wrappers. The collection of all your furniture from an old apartment is all packed. The blankets are in dry cleaning bags - old blankets that are found, cleaned, repaired, expanded, folded and hung in a perfect way.

LM: There is an intimacy with the blankets that you can sense through the plastic bags, their warmth and value are palpable even though you know they have been rejected.

ML: *Your fingers and the needle are probing the moth holes. The moth holes are mended, attended to and cared for. To me, it feels like you project your desire onto these ordinary objects and the poly bags protecting them serve to uphold your cherished visions of them.*

LM: The fascination is certainly with layers... a clear thin covering that emphasizes the strange sensitive sparkles of things. And authenticity. I like the word "authenticity." It is a fuzzy term and you don't really know what it means. When someone is "authentic," you try to read that person and also the relationship you have with them.

ML: *The discarded blankets that have been patched up and made useful again, re-engaging the object into the world by unearthing its vulnerability. A sort of magic, when intuitions become real, or when excitement becomes muted in objects.*

LM: Or when a moment of a material-sensitive relation with an object can be seized within space. That's what the polybags are for... It is all about space, the space between the object and the mould, between the thing and its expectation.

ML: *The other frequent gesture in your work is casting. To a point where the viewer cannot tell what is real or what is a copy made from a cast. Why put everything into a cast, like a broken limb?*

LM: I never even thought about that! Ha, ha, ha! A cast holds the broken body, it holds it still, it is very sculptural in a sense, figurative, but not directly. It is an imprint of the immediate surrounding space. Though they are real objects, they are casts, like photographs of space, a space where you don't know what to expect.

ML: *Do you see the sculptures as broken extensions of yourself? A lot of the cast objects evoke the body, or its orifices, objects as extension of the body such as cigarette butts, or a piece of clothing.*

LM: It is about a body pushed to excess through cigarettes and alcohol, it certainly relates to the wounded body, the body in harm's way. It is about how there is affective knowledge that becomes tangible through an imperfection, through a hand that does not touch to receive a perfect sensation but feels what is simply there... It is a fascination that sits between whether the object is alive or dead, and it is really up to us to say whether an object is alive or dead, isn't it?

ML: *Or is it? What if objects could decide for themselves the state they were in, a state that was completely outside of that duality? Can't we let them speak for themselves?*

LM: A couch is not passive, it is actively working with you the whole time you have it. It is holding you in space, and the traces of that are found in the creases you make in the material. Over time, this level of potential gets activated for me. That is why I don't want to be the authority of what my sculptures look like. The material has all sorts

of things to tell me and a lot of it is bad news. I accept the cracks, the breaks, the discoloration, the bubbles. The material is quite busy talking about its business and what it wants to do. "I don't want to flow there, I don't want to fill this space, I don't want that." And the work and I go back and forth, and I need this imagined conversation to be visible and honor its fluidity, and I keep these static signs as evidence of the process and it is exactly in the shadowy folds the material goes into, these dark shadowy creases it fills in, these shadowy places are what make you believe in the surface of a sculpture. The image I am trying to produce is just the appearance of something, a surface only, and I want that surface to be as eloquent as possible so when you look at it, your eyes, your brain, your body, have seen something rich and complicated but you don't exactly know what to do with this complex experience.

ML: It consolidates the imagination, and nothing moves, and everything feels...

LM: Frozen. Sculpture has always been interested in holding on to a moment but in the complexity of how it is holding in space and time. In a way, sculpture is against a singular, unique and static image although it produces a similar desire and satisfaction as when one holds a photograph of something from their past. These many images submerge us from within and infinitely open the field of meaning.

- ML: The dry-cleaning poly garment bag gently lifted, or the Chanel suit jacket collar revealing the neck of an alcohol bottle, both are about revealing contrast in texture. It is to me a sort of eroticism that points towards a very minimal discrepancy between smooth aseptic textures of commercial goods versus the unruly weaves of natural fibers. It promotes a very sensuous and intimate relationship with the work, with enough room left for the ineffable...*
- LM:** It is a physical need to interact with the work, to hold a cigarette and bring it to your mouth, or the sound of the ice cubes crackling in a glass of whisky. Smoking and drinking are like breathing and eating, but as excess. Smoking and drinking are an excessive material fascination that goes beyond the necessary. My work is always a layer beyond what is normal or necessary.
- ML: Has your relationship to these materials in your work changed throughout the years? Do you still smoke? Smoking is so taboo now.*
- LM:** I don't think I smoke. Maybe it's just as taboo as showing a dead animal or that proximity to death like casting a real, dead, newly born fawn. Or having a stuffed bird, maybe that proximity to death is what makes that work alive.
- ML: You don't seem like an intellectual smoker or drinker to me, but the work promotes an introspective mood with whiffs of tobacco and alcohol. And suddenly, you are overwhelmed by this desire of oneness with the work, un sentiment océanique. Can you explain that?*

LM: It comes from ritualistic behaviors of low-level of addictions; lighting a cigarette or lifting the drink to your lips.

ML: *What are your rituals?*

LM: I spend a lot of time touching things, ribbons, fabric, plastic and appreciate their texture.

ML: Have you ever put yourself inside a plastic bag?

LM: I'm not too romantic with my relationship with the material. I think it is more of a friendly thing.

“There is so much in the inherent materials and objects that Lizard works with, there is meaning in them and she works with them and she creates a thing between the sense and the meaning, the real and the not real.”

LM: I feel like my ghost is here...

LM & ML: (Laughter)

ML: *That godly voice, what could it be?*

LM: All I know is that I don't want it to be speaking in...

ML: *Tongues?*

LM: That's exactly what I want... Obviously there is a way of making meaning through symbols and representing and through codes. Sort of building on information by re-arranging codes or symbols. And there are ways of making meaning that are more physical or phenomenological, which is maybe more tangible and present but more primitive because it has to do with your body and there is no

right way... Understanding is not to make knowledge but to make meaning differently.

ML: What does it mean to make meaning for you?

LM: To make an object that has its own ability to define its own meaning. It can self-determine its own voice or way of contacting you. The gift that can give itself, the glove that can touch you.

ML: The chocolate that will melt in your mouth.

LM: The cigarette that will kiss you. The drink that will drink you.

ML: Cheers!

4.2 The Unseen Film

First a conversation with Ulla von Brandenburg, transformed into a discrete performance at The Little Shop, then all these incorporated into a presentation at the Power Plant, Toronto, and afterward, concluded as a brief but productive exchange with David Dorenbaum.

Ulla von Brandenburg's *The Little Shop* is a film that I will only ever feel gazing inward; a film composed of flickering images emerging from all senses, an internal illumination. The enumeration of all the different collections contained in *The Little Shop* anchors this intimate projection of the store and home, an authentic place, a very special space. An antique store located in Park Extension, Montreal, The Little Shop was first established nearly fifty years ago by Ann Silverstone, an art dealer in Montreal in the 1930s, and her life-long friend Phylliss Lewis. The utterances detailing the invisible images inside me are ignited by the warmth of the Alsatian porcelain cup, white, translucent, delicate, a flowery lace motif around the rim, slowly coming to my lips with a sip of hot tea. Each morning, the cup I was given years ago by Ulla brings back contemplation, a moment here and then, afar and now, a remembrance in search of a lost thing. Holding on to the cup, without thinking, an intuition persists, and magic is revived at the instant of taste. The febrile circumstances of art occur; texture, light, and ambiance are beaming outward, in secret, sugary images of the sensible unfolding in a film loop to conjure the face of a woman, the heart of a space, her parted lips.

Ashtrays

Bouquet of silk flowers

Eiffel tower models

Statue of Liberty miniatures

Black feather dusters

Quilts

Dresden porcelain figurines

Jewelry boxes

Children tea sets

Flags

Architect triangular scale rulers

Beaded vanity bags

Blown glass balls

Film cameras

Ship models

Pipes

Salt and pepper shakers

Wedding cake toppers

Harmonicas

Cassette players

Scissors

Fedora hats

Bowler hats

Styrofoam heads

French berets

Casques

Headbands

Turbans

Fascinators

Fur collars

Cocktail dresses

Sequin dresses

Bracelets

Watches

Alarm clocks

Pearl hatpins

Costume jewelry

Small carpets

Dress gloves

Leather goods

Silk scarves

Broaches

Souvenir thimbles

Snowing globes

Sea captain wood statues

Nutcrackers

Russian dolls

Raggedy Ann dolls

Mickey Mouse dolls

Beanie Babies

Barbie dolls

Miniature chairs

Teddy bears

Bedraggled blankets

Christening gowns

Christian crosses

Cabbage Patch Kids dolls

First communion capes

Crocheted lace blankets

Handkerchiefs

Vests

Ties

Belts

Scarfs

Pullovers

Nightgowns

Pajamas

Pillows

Corset bra boxes

Nighties
Reels of thread
Wedding dresses
Terry robes
Fleece sheets
Stuffed puppet hands
Seashells
Tupperware containers
Wicker baskets
Wool combs
Straw hats
Decorative parrots
Perfume bottles
Candles holders
Vintage panoramic photographs
Niagara Falls

In 2005, Ulla was awarded a residency stipend by the city of Hamburg, allowing her to travel to create new works. She could have chosen any city, but Montreal intrigued her. First introduced to The Little Shop by her cousin, Ulla would go hang out there around teatime, at the end of the afternoon, and would spend time with the shopkeepers. She didn't have many friends beyond a few acquaintances from the local art scene and her cousin's family, so her time

with the women at the store - most of them still very active although in their late seventies and early eighties - was an opportunity to socialize. The conversations amongst them were a host of simplicity and pleasure that would incite Ulla to fix perfume on to the image. During one of her visits, Ulla documented the shop, extracted the tender features of each objects in the house with her Bolex 8mm film camera, and at its center, the women drinking tea together - a film set out to be the expression of an intimate world, a community of women. The deliberate sincerity of these interiors, in reality and on film, is crystalized in the quiet assemblage of the many disparate things the space brings together. This remarkable setting creates a discreet political space through which to deploy the profuse imagination this community shares, with each other, with the objects, a diffuse resistance. Objects are organized in a specific order, in categories, each room dedicated to a unique collection. The quilts, a whole wall of vintage quilts, folded and piled on a table, all the way up to the ceiling. This wall, a point of convergence in the front room; some quilts are especially old and humorous, some date all the way back to the 1900s. Affective tissues, collection of collections, the lace room, each room is organized thematically with a collection of objects that relates to its original function, and the camera embracing all of the things displayed in each room, filming these different collections, caressing the whole place with its cyclopean eye, an invisible oeuvre Ulla returns to incessantly, the space behind the curtain that opens onto poetic praxis.

Portraits

Handbags

Suitcases

Weekenders

Make-up cases

Jeans

Dress pants

Booties

Rubber overshoes

Fur vest

Fur coats

Canes

Backpacks

Baskets

Hatboxes

Day dresses

Sundresses

Long-sleeve dresses

Polka dot dresses

Skirts

Shorts

Stripped shirts

Charmeuse dresses

Hard hats

Gift boxes

Motorcycle jackets

Leather jackets

Sandals

Running shoes

Getas

Blazers

Trench coats

Raincoats

Dust coats

Bowling shoes

Ski boots

Snowshoes

Kitten heels

Grand boubous

Stilettos

Garbage bags

Slippers

Moccasins

Knee high boots

Ankle boots

Riding boots

Ponchos

Jean jackets

Vests

Babouches

Soccer shoes

Clothes hangers

Mink stoles with head

Cigar boxes

In the main room, on the first floor, the site of their reunion consists of two armchairs, a pouf, a side table with a telephone, porcelain teacups and saucers, a kettle, a tin box, pens, receipts, and a notebook. Ann, in her eighties, probably late eighties, recorded all the transactions from the store in a notebook. She wanted to remember, taking notes of everyone that would come through, and of everything they would purchase and maybe there would be some notes about their discussions or noteworthy anecdotes guests would share with her. She wanted to remember, account for this community that was created, all these objects, her collections, all the people passing through The Little Shop. She recorded everything in these notebooks, noting the daily history of the life of her shop. Opened nearly fifty years ago, the store presented an outlet for Ann and her friends to be together, a space for women to be together, sitting around, sitting together, talking together, weaving their personal narratives into the lives of these inanimate objects. Since Ann passed

away, her daughter Jill runs the store; she keeps it all alive. She is also in the film. She is in the film and in the store, with all the objects her mother garnered throughout the years and the dust, unsettled with every shuffle of things and unfolding of the quilts. Recently, Ulla was looking to include the film *The Little Shop* in an exhibition of all of her twenty-four films. All of Ulla's films are uncut; they are all seamlessly edited in camera, and presented as is, in a loop. The soundtrack to all of her black and white films is a voice-over of the artist singing hypnotic songs she wrote herself, or simply silence. Except for *The Little Shop*, which has a recording to match the moving images. But the cassette with these women's voices that she wanted to use for the soundtrack could not be found. It was lost; it is still missing. *I cannot show the film without the voices*. Without the recording of the women's voices, their discussions, the film cannot be shown, Ulla will not show it, or it would feel incomplete, devoid of emotions. Loosing something, and never finding it again; what opens up is a negative space, what is left is an enigmatic thing, almost. A place recessed behind the scene of imagination, loosing something and finding it right there, the lost voices of the women, the conversations that the women were having that day documented using a tape recorder simply put on a table while they were having tea. Maybe the cassette is in a box somewhere in Ulla's studio, maybe we will hear the voices again, see the lively faces again, amidst the discrete murmurs of the objects. Maybe the slowness of its apparition in words, its silence, both amplify this invisible oeuvre. Loosing something and finding it right here. Nearness is palpable.

Maps
Mixing bowls
Gravy boats
Tureens
Salad bowls
Punch bowls
Fish bowls
Sugar bowls
Creamers
Coffee pots
Lids
Serving plates
Dinner plates
Chargers
Cake plates
Saucers
Teacups
Mugs
Water glasses
Wine glasses
Flower vases
Flowerpots
Tumblers

Shooter glasses

Eyeglasses

Washbasins and pitchers

Tomato-shaped jars

Bonbon trays

Vinyl records

Tape cassettes

VHS tapes

Tea towels

Dish clothes

Aprons

Curtains

Mannequins

Wool blankets

Umbrellas

Picnic baskets

Lamps

Cushions

Books

Bookends

Rolls of fabric

Fabric swatches

Cocktail shakers

Juicers

Spatulas

Turners

Tongues

Fry pans

Saucepots

Cocottes

Roasters

Griddles

Cake plates and domes

Wallpaper rolls

Paper bags

Busts

Marble sculptures

Magazines

Tableaus

Frames

Art books

Paintings

Woven wall hangings

Photographs

Winter jackets

Seashells

Birdcages

Banjoes

Bongos

Mirrors

Clothing irons

Girl with watering can

The film Ulla made that day is an oddity within her filmography. A documentary film, *The Little Shop* very much stands out from her other works. This film yields the inexhaustible metaphorical potential of the quilts, the unconscious image behind all of her films, an appetite for fleeting images, for buoyant pieces of felt. Ulla holds on to the pursuit, to all the quilts she ever bought there, as many quilts as she could afford, in fact she might have spent a small fortune on them. Those quilts, you may have seen them in her films, in her exhibitions, they probably are quilts she acquired from The Little Shop. She showed her whole collection of quilts in an exhibition once. She always uses the same quilts over and over in different iterations of her work. The quilts often reincarnate in hand-made clothes, a piece of felt, a curtain, a shawl, a blanket, a flag, in a kaleidoscope of presences, hiding the darkness behind, and the question of who is standing behind, holding them up, remains. The quilt, an ongoing conversation of colors, echoing her thinking of what it feels to experience what it means to be there, the atmosphere, within the shop, within herself, a foundational space in her artistic trajectory. Returning after

ten years, Ulla found the store almost intact, barely changed, much the same, over time, an intimate space, an objective world of sensations that is inside, a place of vulnerability, of experimentation that she wishes she could keep to herself, but that she could show in its entirety, the whole place. The store is a bit of a museum, or even a work of art, and sometimes, a character. She wants to purchase the whole thing if it ever was to be dismantled, she would like to keep it together, and I leave the space, the space that is inhabited, that is turned into an exhibition, it is already an exhibition, a collection of obsessions, a fictive museum, desire operating through losing something and never finding it again, the difficult return, a film you will never see because she cannot find it there, because it is inside of her here. I think we hear her singing. It is her voice, yes, I hear them talking.

Ropes

Ladders

Vests

Tin boxes

Cutting boards

Calipers

Umbrellas

Ties

Ribbons

Quilts

Bracelets
Sticks
Masks
Cylinders
Capes
Steps
Eyeballs
Propellers
Origami birds
Floor tiles
Tarpaulins
Magnifying mirrors
Silk scarves
Velvet curtains
Drum mallets
Elastics
Stools
Sea conches

4.3 Hairplay.

The Director of Conservation greets me as I walk in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts by the side entrance. Once I sign the register and obtain a visitor's pass at the security desk, he proceeds to guide me through a maze of empty halls and galleries populated only by a few technicians, busy checking the installations. He leaves me in the contemporary gallery, amid a room covered in transparent drop sheets, where I find Roxane Cheibes, a professional hairdresser, who is touching up a work by Valerie Blass, "She was a Big Success" from 2010. She is hairsetting the outsized, caricatural wig atop the mannequin's one arm and two legs that together compose the sculpture. Standing on a short ladder, Roxane is delicately combing the flyaways and complements her styling gesture with aerosol spray. There, a quiet tingling sensation in the back of my mind, the soft pschiit sounds of her titivations intermittently punctuate our entire conversation.

Maryse Larivière: Together with the conservator, you did some research on hairspray formulas. I imagine you were concerned with finding the right product to restore Valerie's sculpture?

Roxane Cheibes: We were looking for a hairspray that sets hair without stiffness. Some aerosol hairsprays are composed of a lot of alcohol or polymers, but worse, some contain essential oils and fragrances. We certainly need to avoid that the sculpture ends up smelling like cheap perfume!

Maryse: Right! That would be weird if the work would suddenly smell like artificial coconut or vanilla, even though the idea of an ambrosial space for art is appealing to me.

Roxane: Yes, that would be completely absurd, especially in a museum where conservation and preservation protocols are meticulously observed. I usually make it a point to never use hairspray at the salon. It goes against my ethics, but here I am spraying away...

Maryse: *Woah! You are spraying it all over, and there are a lot of fumes...*

Roxane: Yes, I have to use a lot of it, but it is necessary.

Riiiiiiiiitttttt (sound of metal door closing down the entrance to the gallery)

Maryse: *Would that explain why they just closed the fire shutter, to prevent the vapours from leaking in the rest of the museum? We are locked in the room now!*

Roxane: No, they are just doing some emergency tests while the museum is closed. But we must cover all surrounding artworks to protect them from incidental mists. Hairspray used to be very potent, but the way I apply it now is much subtler. Let me give you a demonstration. *Pschiiit! Pschiiit! Pschiiit!* This is exactly how to dispense it, in small sprays, keeping my finger on the aerosol nozzle! Look at all these little droplets on the plinth; thankfully we were cautious enough and put plastic sheeting over it. As I said, I am not a fan of hairspray, but I don't have a choice to use it because gels or pomades are too greasy, and dust will stick to the hair. With hair lacquer, we discovered that dust just slides off the sculpture! So, with my tail comb, I gently push the flyaway hair back into place. I use a metal comb because a plastic one would create static electricity and is also harder to wash. I start

from the base and go up. I have this feeling it is best to follow the sculptural movement upward. So, I tuck in all the flyaway under the other hair with the comb, and smooth them over with a little spray of lacquer *Pschiiit!* to lock them in. The lacquer gives extra shininess, but you can't put too much of it otherwise the hair won't hold together anymore. I often need to take a few steps back, in order to see the sculpture at a distance to make sure there is no more frizz sticking out of it. I must work very slowly, so slowly it's almost never-ending. I have to say that it never feels truly perfect. The secret is to go very, very slowly. It looks like an easy thing to do but it's actually quite complex to complement and complete Valerie's gesture.

Maryse: *How often do you have to come in here to style the sculpture?*

Roxane: There will always be tiny hairs falling out of this massive sculptural beehive that I forgot to solidify the last time around. It would probably be best to retouch it every three weeks otherwise it might get out of control. In areas where hair gets thinner, I have to camouflage the sparseness by gently moving some of the strands. I do not replace or add hair to the piece. All I do is to clean the headpiece, brush off dust and tame unwanted flyaway hair caused by the turbulence in the museum atmosphere from the ventilation system, static electricity and the movement of visitors! The coiffed hair also gets messed up because some shorter strands tend to slide off the structure even though they were originally tucked in with hot glue underneath longer

ones. The spray helps a lot to resolve and stabilise them. So even if visitors don't touch the piece, this very fragile and delicate artwork will always require a lot of care. *Pschiit!*

Maryse: In our eye-minded culture, the tactile value of a sculpture must be experienced at a distance, yet Valerie's piece seems to arouse in the viewer a keen interest, to a point where it was noticed that some will try to touch it. Why is that the case?

Roxane: There is an intimacy to the work that somehow invites the public to want to touch it. The plinth, which is in fact an integral part of the piece, promotes greater proximity between the work and the viewer. The sculpture appears to be precariously standing near the edge of the plinth, even though it is quite steady in reality, which suddenly positions viewers within the personal space of the sculpture. This proximity coupled with the liveliness of the composition seems to compel the viewers to seek bodily encounters with the work. So, this might explain why the body of the sculpture has been vandalized a few times. I was flabbergasted when a finger was completely torn away from the sculpture's hand. I also noticed a recess in the foot that is recent damage, which means someone firmly pressed on it. As for the wig part of the sculpture, sometimes visitors try to pull on hair strands, but it has never been truly damaged.

Maryse: Unlike museumgoers, though, you are entitled to touch the sculpture. In fact, your responsibility is to resurface these glamorous and

voluminous locks and gently care for its most vulnerable extensions.
Are there any similarities between hairstyling and sculpting?

Roxane: More than anything, I relate to the way Valerie moves her whole body to prompt the transference of her vitality into her sculptures. The level of abstraction of her thought process transpires in the intensity that passes from her body and into the work, and back. This movement with her body, while natural for Valerie, produces quite an unusual gesture to observe. Suddenly, the vibrancy of the materials becomes one with her, travelling from the sculpture into Valerie's body in a sort of feedback loop!

Maryse: *The images Valerie has in mind about the work, as abstract as they might be, travel through her whole body and find their way into the work?*

Roxane: During studio visits, I have witnessed, and you have too, the unique manner in which she carries her body while she manipulates materials and how that movement extends into sculptural forms. This is a process of thinking through the body that materializes in space, and it seems like she has developed it intuitively, without her even noticing. This embodied logic is palpable in the present work through the ways in which Valerie experimented with hair as a solid material, curving the thousands of strands into perfect arcs contouring the Styrofoam balls. I keep thinking about how the passage of images, or imprints, through Valerie's body is what gives the work its intensity, its

affective charge. Her bodily intensification confers an interiority to the sculpture, which is manifested in the bulging hair, a soft weaving of tensions, a slow and profound implosion. But all this hair standing in for a face, a head, a chest, leaves me wondering where has this woman vanished to?

Maryse: The disarticulated nude body parts — a body without a body — perform a rather unusual pose with her pubis lifted up in the air, and the excrescence of hair gently lofted above it... What if we were presented here with a mass of body hair? What about the cascading locks of hair being a signifier that rearticulates the body into the formulation of a feminine imaginary?

Roxane: This hirsute Artemis of Ephesus certainly provokes excitement! Her fluid mound of unctuous protuberances covered in black luscious mane speaks to the logic of her desire, of feminine pleasure. The sculpture takes up a lot space in the gallery for its hair presence radiates in such a way you have to engage with it. It's funny that everyone working here is talking to Valerie's sculpture as if it was a person. Colleagues stop by my work station to tell me how much good I am doing to her, how much she needs to be cared for, that it is cool that I am taking care of her and that a professional hairdresser is working with the conservator. Once my work was done, she would get a lot of compliments. Oh, she's so beautiful!

Maryse: Do you have a pet name for the sculpture, like the way you would call a close friend something affectionate?

Roxane: The museum staff here always call her “the wig”, but I don’t think she likes to be referred to like an object. I feel she wants to be treated like a person. I feel close to her as a unique being, close to her body, her hair, her spirit too. I have worked on a dress made of real human hair, and such an animate material gave me the impression it was becoming alive. Here I work with artificial hair yet my rapport with her allows me to think that she is her own being, through my work with her, she becomes real and alive.

Maryse: Does she tell you her secrets sometimes?

Roxane: She tells me some things, some little things. She confides her sadness to me. She feels like a little animal in here, and long for her return to her natural habitat, her home, wherever that might be. She scorns me when she feels I’m not visiting her often enough. But every time, she always ends up demanding that I leave her alone, that I let go of her...

Maryse: And how do you feel about that?

Roxane: It makes me feel uncomfortable to know she is not feeling good being here, and the awkwardness of her position and nudity leaves her vulnerable here. I can relate to how exposed she must feel. I’m sensing she is tired of holding it together.

Maryse: If only she could gently fall apart, on the ground and relax a bit...

Roxane: Or stand up again, push herself up with one arm, start walking on her high-heeled legs towards the exit, and leave this mass of hair behind her, on the ground, unravelling in a soft puddle.

Riiiiiiiiittttttt (sound of metal door opening the entrance to the gallery)

4.4 She Who Walks.

Personal Pilgrimage, an early sketch of the present text, was previously featured during the Trampoline Hall Lectures curated by Jon Davies, in Toronto, on March 7, 2016.

I am walking, walking at an idle pace that opens up my field of attention. I am shedding all of the images imposed upon me with a quiet stride. My mind is suffused with the citrus scent of the cypress trees after a gust of wind brushed a soft flow of air across my face. I am savouring the last licks of my chocolate gelato while I am wandering around the green heart of the smallest state in the world. The garden leads to the promise of my journey: the sculpture gallery in the long loggia of the Chiaramonti Museum. And near the entrance, nestled high up above a shelf of antique busts of Roman emperors and gods, here I find the bas-relief of Gradiva.

Gently lifting the hem of her dress, Gradiva is depicted in a forward motion, with her left foot striking the ground while her right rolls from heel to toe. The didactic panel for the marble relief is a reminder that my personal pilgrimage to Rome is following Sigmund Freud's steps nearly a century later. For the psychoanalyst, the Gradiva figure embodied the very notion of a cure through love. Yet my fascination with her image, "her immobile divinity,"⁹³ rests on the influence of her unique footstep. The tranquil flight of Gradiva has left its trail across the many instants of "Le rire de la Méduse," Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* manifesto. And standing below Gradiva, I find myself transmuted by her gentle, silent assurance resounding through me.

⁹³ Marilyn Manners, "The Vagaries of Flight in Hélène Cixous's *Le Troisième Corps*." *French Forum*, vol. 23, no. 1, (1998): 101–114, www.jstor.org/stable/40551995.

Determined to take a photograph of the sculpture, I swiftly convince the guard to lend himself to this ludic performance; on a chair there I stand on my tiptoes, with my arms extended to hold my medium-format camera as high as possible above my head. As I press the shutter release, the perfect vertical alignment of my body with the chair and the camera forms a reconfigured sensorial apparatus. Simultaneously, I notice that the sounds of the camera shutter harmonize with the chorus of lovesick cicadas coming through the window frames of the open-air museum. Slowly, I too, attune to their buzzing and clicking noises. I reverberate with the vibrations of their tymbals, a drum-like instrument built in the abdomen of the cicadas. My corporeal listening further dissolves the fluid, permeable boundaries between my body and my environment. And my visiting with the cicadas enlivens my metamorphosis into an affective experience, into “a creative excess of intensity.”⁹⁴

I continue my stroll, and all along, the song of the cicadas heralds my route to making stories, benign histories rewriting the past to make our present radically different.⁹⁵ My personal pilgrimage acts as an improvisational methodology for art writing, for magic to happen, for desire to become real, for being with the world. I am heading to the mythical *Maldoror* bookstore, and I hum along the shrills of the cicadas, performing an insectile sonic narration, talking-thinking-walking-buzzing around the eternal city to retrace Francesca Woodman’s labyrinthine photographic journey with Moyra Davey⁹⁶. And departing from *Il Museo del Louvre*, I chase after poet and performance artist Valentine de

⁹⁴ Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 45.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Pavonelli, in conversation during a studio visit in Banff, August 2017.

⁹⁶ Moyra Davey, *I’m Your Fan* (London: Camden Art Centre, 2014).

Saint-Point who guides my time travel experience as I follow the map of historical events held by the Futurists throughout Rome that opens up gateways to imaginary worlds right before me. Further along, I find another *Bocca della Verità*, an old sewer grate, hidden in a very small courtyard, totally isolated, in Sant'Angelo, right at the edge of the Roman Ghetto. It is even more gorgeous and evil and magic than the original, gigantic marble mask, and there is no line up to see it. I do call this one *Bocca della Falso*, as it bites off your hand when you stick it in its mouth if you speak the truth.

A flight, a *dérive*, I am walking, and in silence, I am continuously conversing with art, with nature. I am agile, curious, on the *qui vive*, absorbing everything in my surroundings, taking in all the sympathy of the worlds around me. I easily witness how culture is already inscribed in nature, which is where art is, in the natural world, which is no longer simply a metaphor but an active collaborator in the elaboration of counter-narratives, of speculative fabulations. These stories are a modest, yet ambitious revolution brought about by the entrance of *écriture féminine* into scientific, philosophical discourses. And with enthusiasm, these women thinkers, “they stay with the trouble,”⁹⁷ and “*elles font des histoires et elles s’entêtent*”⁹⁸! I am an accomplice, and I am laughing. I am definitely free; are you with me?

97 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: making kin with in the Chhtulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 126–133.

98 Vincianne Despret & Isabelle Stengers, *Les faiseuses d’histoires; que font les femmes à la pensée?* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2011).

5 Conclusion: Artist's Novels without Artists?

I was in France, immersed in Paris' cultural offerings, when Catherine Millet's novel was released, and it immediately made sense to me that *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* was an artwork. Not only was her novel deemed "the most explicit book about sex ever written by a woman,"⁹⁹ it was written in such a way as to reference conceptual art, performance art and conceptual writing. Already then, I was sensing the performative affinities between novels such as Annie Ernaux's *L'usage de la photo* (Gallimard, 2005), Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* (J'ai Lu, 1999; cinema adaptation, 2000), or Marie Darrieussecq's *Truism* (P.O.L., 1996), and artist's books such as Sophie Calle's *Double jeux* (Actes Sud, 1998) and Valérie Mréjen's *L'agrume* (Allia, 2001), that I all found comparable to the performance photography of Nan Goldin's slideshow *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), or Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80). All these works, by performatively writing the feminine subject in words and/or in images through a wide range of artistic practices, were exemplary of autofiction, an artistic movement of which Catherine Millet's novel represented the apogee.

La vie sexuelle de Catherine M., the sexual memoirs of the prominent art historian and director of *Art Press* magazine Catherine Millet, represents a perfect example of how a novel can simultaneously be a literary and a visual art object. *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* documents Millet's sexual adventures from the 1960's and 1970's, a period in her personal life that was largely inspired by the optimistic and utopian spirit pervasive

⁹⁹ Edmund White, *Inside a Pearl; My Year in Paris* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 41.

in the art world at the time.¹⁰⁰ She has described her creative writing practice as influenced by minimalist and conceptual art, while her artistic attitude is informed by the performances of Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, and Gina Pane. *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* is aligned with a tradition of artistic formalism, structured through an abstract thematic for each of the four chapters – “number,” “space,” “folded space” and “details” – while the tone is analytical and detached from emotions in describing her sexual emancipation.

The author of many art history volumes, but more significantly of *Contemporary Art in France*, a historical account of art beginning with Conceptual art, Millet was very much aware of the development of the movement of feminism, conceptual art and performance art. Consequently, her creative writings are informed by her practice as an art critic and historian. In fact, Millet’s art writing is unique for her discussion on art from a subjective yet critical standpoint. Exposing the writing process that enabled her to produce art without having to be a visual artist, Millet explains that she found herself writing *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M*. as a result of “spending a lot of time, as a critic, looking at the world from the perspective of artists.”¹⁰¹ She made such an effort “to penetrate as far as possible into the intentions of the artists” whose work she researched that at some point, she felt the need to find her “own way through all the paths offered to [her] for her own exploration.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Millet, *D’Art Press à Catherine M.: Entretiens avec Richard Leydier* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 198.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Millet, *Riquet à la houppe, Millet à la loupe* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 54.

¹⁰² Ibid, 55.

Through her novel, Millet documents, in a roundabout way, a very unknown reality of the art world, a “flouté” portrait of the parallel activities of the private side of the art world. For French scholar Annie Richard, Catherine Millet’s intimate and personal investigation is comparable to Sophie Calle’s artistic process; the level of personal engagement involved in Millet’s work situates it within the realm of performance as it puts her body at risk.¹⁰³ Indeed, Millet’s project, while informed by a knowledge of art, consciously exposes in public the very private and guarded experience of participating in group sex which is emancipatory for her in a play of interconnected gazes, that in turn form an abstract and fragmented portrait of herself. At the intersection of autobiography and autofiction,¹⁰⁴ this portrait is used to critically challenge received notions of the feminine while taking on a radical position on feminine sexuality as a performance of institutional critique against patriarchy. And as such, Millet temporarily inhabits the visual artist’s body, in a critical feminine posture, through the writing of her sexual memoir.

Reading the novel *I Love Dick* a decade later was nothing less than a revelation as its author Chris Kraus enunciates what Millet only suggests, that is to say: art writing equates performance art. Published in 1997, *I Love Dick* captures the zeitgeist of the 1990’s American art scene through a series of letters written in collaboration with her husband, the academic Sylvère Lotringer. The novel is an epistolary account of Kraus’ unrequited love for a colleague of her husband, the cultural critic Dick Hebdige. In *I love*

¹⁰³ Annie Richard, *L’autofiction et les femmes; un chemin vers l’altruisme* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013), 74.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Dick, Chris Kraus both documents and perform a unidirectional game of seduction that is meant specifically to reference the performance strategies used by Sophie Calle in the production of her artist's books. In fact, Calle's work is cited as prime example of the novel's artistic framework; "Uh, it's a Calle Art piece. You know, like Sophie Calle?"¹⁰⁵ Not only that, *I Love Dick* can also be understood as the ingenious script for a performance that was never turned into a video art piece, and of which the overarching narrative recalls Sophie Calle's art film *Double Bind (No Sex Last Night)* (1992) in how it underlines feminine desire as a creative force. Chris Kraus' novel further aligns itself with Calle's film by clearly articulating complex yet humorous insights on the status of women artists, where the lover's dismissive silence and rejection become a stand-in for the prevalent misogyny of the artworld.

Characterized as a manifesto,¹⁰⁶ *I Love Dick* makes it possible for the exclusion of women artists to become a radical posture performed by Chris Kraus, allowing her to critically reclaim control over her representation. The epistolary, an important trope of *écriture féminine*, is a literary device that Kraus uses to confound reality with fiction in elaborating her self-portrait as an anti-hero. In doing so, she debunks the myth of the genius male intellectual and questions the gender politics in the intellectual project of Semiotext(e). Kraus' novel demonstrates how powerful is the process of mythologizing one's life in an autofictional novel, and how the performance of the self is both a political and artistic project. As such, *I Love Dick* stands as a political and philosophical project

¹⁰⁵ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1998), 49.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 144.

that includes the emotional, intimate and the personal, and uses “the material of her life — the narcissistic, confidential, confessional — to seek this “a-personal meaning, to seek something larger, more universal that has always been denied to women.”¹⁰⁷ For Kraus, writing *I Love Dick*, in which she depicts herself as a struggling artist going through an existential journey, becomes an emancipatory process. It is through giving artistic agency to her fictional self that she becomes celebrated in the contemporary art world.

Now, what really never crossed my mind is that Millet’s and Kraus’ novels would not be considered artworks because they are not visual artists. In fact, from the day the book came out in the spring of 2001 and up until I read Chris Kraus’ novel *I Love Dick* in 2012, I was unaware that my conception of artist’s novels had been a pure fantasy, that the novels I am interested in are works of art only to me. Spontaneously, I had made-up in my mind a new category that combined performance art and creative writing, which I assumed everyone was calling “art writing.” The same goes for the artist’s novel, which I imagined to be the artistic output of the practice of my brand of “art writing.” It never appeared to me paradoxical that Millet’s and Kraus’ novels were an artwork even though they were not visual artists. Nevertheless, that remains the accepted way of understanding such works; authors write novels, while “artist’s novels” must be written by visual artists. But within such a framework, how can we think of Kraus and Millet’s novelistic outputs if not this joyously absurdist proposition: as artist’s novels without artists?¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Leslie Jamison, “This Female Consciousness; On Chris Kraus,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/this-female-consciousness-on-chris-kraus>.

¹⁰⁸ This is a direct reference to and an inversion of the genealogy of “artist without artworks,” a research project by Jean-Yves Jouannais that focuses on artists whose practice do not produces any material objects. Whether informed by a dandy, dilettante or Dada attitude, these artistic practices range from living-one’s-

Moreover, no one has really noticed how *I Love Dick* and *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* are artist's novels that grew out of women's writing because of the way Chris Kraus and Catherine Millet have situated themselves with respect to the field of visual art, that is, because they both asserted themselves as literary authors. These two authors have been de facto assimilated into the literary world because they were writing novels. It is indeed quite natural to think of their practice outside the realm of visual art, mostly because of the way that they have been accepted into a certain canon of literary history.

But what is most disconcerting to realize is that none of the aforementioned novels are included in artist-scholars David Maroto and curator Joanna Zielinska's *Book Lovers*, a research-creation project initiated in 2011 that inventories artist's novels. The project's publication *Artist Novels* (Sternberg, 2015), edited by Maroto and Zielinska, catalogues novels by Leonora Carrington, Tracy Emin, Keren Cytter, amongst many others and includes novel excerpts from Yayoi Kusama, Jill Magid and Lindsay Seers. But with *Double Game* as the sole title by Sophie Calle in the index, which misrepresents it by including Paul Auster as co-author, and with the essay "Dear Reader: The Novel's Call to Perform" by Barbara Browning only briefly discussing how Sophie Calle and Chris Kraus' performances become a novel only with the support of a male collaborator, namely Paul Auster and Sylvère Lotringer, the project *Book Lovers'* oversights bring to light the exclusion process still at work in the contemporary art world.

life-as-art to destroying-one's-work-as-art, but equally includes imagining-one-self-as-artist, a narrative that can be found within the page of a novel...

How can a novel such as Chris Kraus' revolutionary art project *I Love Dick*, which is today heralded as much "a cult feminist classic"¹⁰⁹ as a mainstream cultural phenomenon,¹¹⁰ be kept out of the "artist's novel" historicization project? Why are Chris Kraus' or Catherine Millet's novels not receiving the same reception by scholars as their visual artist counterparts? With Catherine Millet' "art sex" book and Chris Kraus' "conceptual-fuck"¹¹¹ novel achieving critical and commercial success, respectively selling over a million copies worldwide and translated into more than a dozen languages, what more will it take for their practice to be legitimized as contemporary art?

Trying to understand Chris Kraus *I Love Dick*'s recent revival 30 years after its initial publication, it is with these questions that I have come to flesh out my specific contribution, namely the creation of a new framework, *The Simultaneous Book*, where *écriture féminine* and art writing coalesce, where artist's novels are being arrived at through art writing, where autofiction promotes new ways of producing theory, where feminism expands the definition of institutional critique and where the book-as-exhibition opens up to the experiments of the novel-as-performance.

Essentially, *The Simultaneous Book* is concerned with proposing alternative ways of telling feminist stories that are "testing the limits of art-historical knowledge [through]

109 Emily Gould, "I Love Dick: the book about relationships everyone should read," *The Guardian*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/02/i-love-dick-sex-chris-kraus-men-women-book>.

110 Jeni Fulton, "The revival of Chris Kraus and her novel I Love Dick," *Sleek magazine*: (5 May 2017), <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/chris-kraus-interview-i-love-dick/>.

111 Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1998), 21-22.

working collaboratively to create a shared space that pushes at the boundaries of the discipline”¹¹² while being sensible to the seamless metamorphosis of *écriture féminine* into art writing and their subtle variations found within the practice of every generation of women art writers. Such a renewed perspective on the place of women’s writings in contemporary art calls for what Canadian art historian Erin Silver describes as “alternative modes of history-writing that can accommodate the types of histories that collect and agitate around feminist and queer art practices and cultural identifications,”¹¹³ with the particular shape *The Simultaneous Book* takes is basically meant to perform and enact the exact posture of women’s art writings discussed within its pages.

So as for an ending, here is a vision that seems improbable even though it was real: in a sort of choreography, as I am walking from one university library to another in downtown Montreal to fetch the many books necessary to the research behind *The Simultaneous Book*, a young woman passes by me on my left side. I immediately notice she sports one of these trendy transparent PVC mini-backpack which daringly shares its content: Virginie Despentes’ book *King Kong Theory*. All the while, crossing the street at the intersection, another woman carries her clear-vinyl tote bag on her shoulder which reveals two books: Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick*. And at last, yet another young woman holding firmly a translucent jelly-PVC

112 Victoria Horne and Amy Tobin, “An Unfinished Revolution in Art Historiography, or How to Write a Feminist Art History,” in *Feminism and Art History Now: radical critiques of theory and practice*, Victoria Horne & Lara Perry, eds (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 39.

113 Erin Silver, “Epilogue: out of the boxes and into the streets—translating queer and feminist activism into queer feminist art history”, in *Otherwise; Imagining Queer feminist art histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 201), 382.

shopper that gives away all the things that's inside it: wallet, smartphone, keys, makeup case. Snuck amidst all of the knick-knacks, the faintly-pink book *Une pièce à soi*, Marie Darrieusecq's recent translation of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which open-endedly queries the possibility for "Woolf's flux and images to be of the order of women's writing" as a productive investigation that incessantly shapes the writing practices as well as the life of women.¹¹⁴ This joyous dance of books proposed by these stylish young women is the latest reconvergence of the secret society of women's art writers, which ultimately highlights both performance and writing as a space of visibility for women artists.

¹¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Un lieu à soi*, tr. Marie Darrieusecq (Paris: Denoël, 2016), 17.

Portfolio

My research-creation projects are invested in the processes of thinking and making art through the sinuous paths of feminine desire, the wandering fluxes of nature and culture, and the concerted and agential relationship between mind and body. My art writings articulate these concerns in the form of the book works, which are inter-genre works that enter into dialogue with the traditions of the artist's book, the parallel text and *écriture féminine*. My artist's books are published as the key element to my art installations that have been presented in galleries, artist-run centers and museum institutions across Canada and abroad.

The portfolio images *Figure 1* to *3* document my performance *Froufrou* which was presented in the context of Françoise Sullivan's retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in January 2018. My poem *Froufrou* reimagines the Françoise Sullivan exhibition in a bucolic garden setting with fanciful sculptures in various animal shapes and hallucinated companions in secret conversations with life. The poetic language in *Froufrou* discreetly intensifies the special place held by nature in Sullivan's art. On the occasion of the performance, a small artist's book *Froufrou* was distributed to the public alongside Sullivan's sculpture work.

The following images in the portfolio, *Figure 4* to *7*, document my artist's novel *Orgazing* and its accompanying exhibition, *Under the Cave of Winds*, presented across Canada—Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017; Optica centre d'art contemporain, Montréal, 2018; Or Gallery, Vancouver, 2018; Gallery 44, Toronto, 2019. In addition to the artist's book *Orgazing*, the installation *Under the cave of Winds* includes a parrot perch converted into a film screen for an original 16mm black-and-white film featuring a

captive artist on a foreign island, a suspended quilt that serves as a screen for a 16mm colour film featuring dreamlike landscapes and sensual feminine reveries, a bird-singing lamp streaming the cooing of a woman longing for her estranged lover and an attractive red heart-shaped metal fence that obstructs and deters the viewers from entering the space of the exhibition. The exhibition *Under the Cave of Winds* is centered around two silent 16mm films that fragmentarily chronicle the tribulations of a fictional female protagonist. The more detailed narrative surrounding the protagonist's journey out of isolation can be accessed through reading the artist's book *Orgazing* while experiencing the installation. In brief, *Orgazing* reveals the story of an artist, scholar, and whistleblower held in captivity on a remote island made up of austere geological formations whose time in confinement allows her to initiate a new trend in research – one where knowledge production transgresses beyond linguistics and graphicism to become pure sound: telepathic singing.

Portfolio images *Figure 8 to 12* record the two-person exhibition *Gossip Garden* developed around my artist's book *Hummzinger*, a series of love poems on the theme of hummingbirds. *Hummzinger* was initially published by Galerie Division, Montréal in 2016. Presented in 2017 at the Walter Philips Gallery at the Banff Centre, *Gossip Garden* brings together feminist and ecological concerns articulated through tableaus, film, painting, sculpture and rot. My contribution to the exhibition involves a series of sculptural playgrounds and toys for hummingbirds structured into ornithological stations for the critical observation of feminine ornamentations. Additionally, *Gossip Garden* features a 16mm colour film I directed in collaboration with Vancouver-based artist Tiziana La Melia.

The next portfolio segment, *Figure 13 to 16*, documents the sound installation and eponymous artist's book *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, produced by Kunstverein Toronto in 2015). A sound installation, *Where Wild Flowers Grow* is composed of a series of colorful sculptures from which are streamed stories and poems in birdsong excerpted from the book on the relationship of love and artistic creation.

Finally, the last two portfolios, *Everything We Talked About Last Night, And Our Experience of the World as Something Strange, is a Liberation* presented at Art Metropole, Toronto in 2013 (*Figure 17 to 21*) and *Something has to Change for Everything to Stay as it is* presented at Parker Branch, London, in 2012 (*Figure 22 to 24*) are two artist's books that both present scripts for a performance that imagine art otherwise while playfully unsettling normative discourses on art and its histories from a feminist perspective.



Figure 1. *Froufrou*, performance, 8 minutes, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2019.



Figure 2. *Froufrou*, artist book cover, 4.5 in x 6 in, 2 pages, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2019.



<p>Elle, Dans son jardin, Les mots en suspens Sur son corps.</p> <p>De haut du ciel, Un oiseau la guette, Bourdonnant à voix haute, Il vole en rond au-dessus De cette scène.</p> <p>Elle s'arrête S'engage, S'énerve, Sans tête Pour voir Elle aussi De cette vue à vol d'oiseau, L'expansive de sa nature.</p> <p>Oiseuse, Elle refuse D'extraire la culture De la manille De la nature Pour faire objet.</p> <p>Une pensée ruelle Sur sa joue : Ce n'est pas parce que Nous n'écouons pas la vie Qu'elle se nous épie pas en retour.</p> <p>Elle peint, montagne, Tandis que les saisons Se dansent</p>	<p>Et que le châssis se fenestre De rochers. Elle sculpte, saline Elle écrit, Brindille, bleuets, à la bouche.</p> <p>Elle, Dans son jardin, La syntaxe À même la vie,</p> <p>Cette décharge neuronale, Cet ornement De la vie émotionnelle, Ce sentiment de perception Se déroule en elle, Froufrou, Roulan de Force vital.</p> <p>Elle, Dans son jardin, Immobilité, sous l'effet De l'enquête perceptive,</p> <p>Elle parle, oiseau, De elle au je, Elle danse, oiseau, Plume par plume, Elle sculpte, oiseau Une branche de millet, Spirale Suspendue à son cou.</p> 	<p>Oiseau répond, Elle rentre Dans une subjectivité aviaire, Secret sensible, Et par ses vocalises, L'oiseau Signal La présence d'une amie.</p>  <p>La complexité de son chant Révèle Un contexte culturel riche, Essentiel à la création De relations amoureuses.</p> <p>L'oiseau, A bien des émotions, Et son chant, Toujours différent, Fointe sa voix à elle.</p>  <p>Et puis il se pose Sur la plante spirale Sculpture amalgame Spirale plante verte De plastique,</p> <p>Alors que son Son plaisir à elle est de Trouver la façon d'exprimer</p>	<p>La spirale, ce « Passage d'un élément Au travers d'organismes Animaux et végétaux, De l'atmosphère, le sol, les océans. »</p> <p>La spirale, Chute en usage, Pastille espigole, Joueur, l'oiseau Texte aussi la spirale La ville en mouve Margroires Ce rose en tandem Cœur en élan Coupe grignote</p> <p>La spirale Hors du cercle, Peschois, Qui vacille, Récanier coisneur, Cœneux jaunes Qui se répète</p> <p>La spirale, Architecture animale, Abréviation glissade Boule léoue D'où jailli l'eau en Doo de lichettes Source de la vie de création Qui défile À chaque instant, À chaque décision.</p> 
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Figure 3. *Froufrou*, artist book (inside), 4.5 in x 6 in, 2 pages, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2019.



Figure 4. *Orgazing*, reading, 15 minutes, Optica centre d'art contemporain, Montréal, 2018.



Figure 5. *Orgazing*, reading, 15 minutes, Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017.



Figure 6. *Orgazing*, installation view, Or gallery, Vancouver, 2018-2019.



Figure 7. *Orgazing*, artist's book, 13 cm x 18 cm, 64 pages, Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017.



Figure 8. *Hummzinger*, performance, *Garden Gossip*, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Arts, Banff, 2017.



Figure 9. *Garden Gossip*, installation view, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Arts Centre, Banff, 2017.



Figure 10. *Garden Gossip*, installation view, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Arts Center, Banff, 2017.



Figure 11. *Hummzinger*, artist's book (cover), 9.5 cm x 15 cm, 38 pages, Division Gallery, Montreal, 2016.



Figure 12. *Hummzinger*, artist's book (inside), 9.5 cm x 15 cm, 38 pages, Division Gallery, Montreal, 2016.



Figure 13. *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, installation, Kunstverein Toronto, Toronto, 2015.



Figure 14. *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, installation, Kunstverein Toronto, Toronto, 2015.



Figure 15. *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, artist's book, 13 cm x 20 cm, 144 pages, Kunstverein Toronto, 2015.



Figure 16. *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, artist's book, 13 cm x 20 cm, 144 pages, Kunstverein Toronto, 2015.



Figure 17. *Everything We Talked About Last Night*, performance, 10 minutes, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2013.



Figure 18. *Everything We Talked About Last Night*, book launch, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2013.



Figure 19. *Everything We Talked About Last Night*, artist's book, 10.5 cm x 14 cm, 20 pages, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2013.

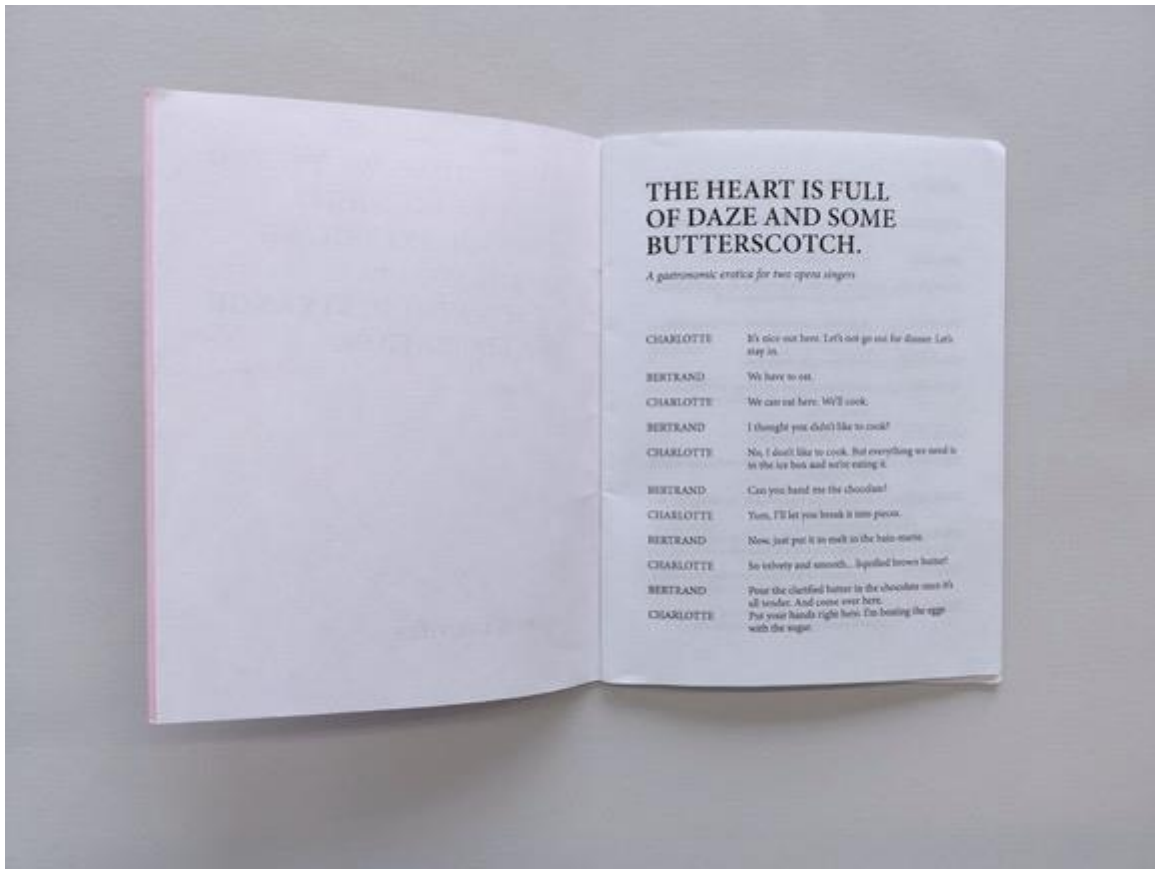


Figure 20. Everything We Talked About Last Night, artist's book, 10.5 cm x 14 cm, 20 pages, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2013.



**EVERYTHING WE TALKED
ABOUT LAST NIGHT,
AND OUR EXPERIENCE
OF THE WORLD
AS SOMETHING STRANGE
IS A LIBERATION.**

An Interview with Dov Charney.

Maryse Larivière: Yay! You had a good day today?

Dov Charney: Hey you sweetheart, yeah, ah, yes!

Productive?

Every day is productive. Yeah. Super productive.

And uh . . . Hey, hey! Where is your shirt?

We're talking on Skype, so it's just like face to face. I thought I'd be me and just wear my underwear. If I wasn't home, I would be

Figure 21. *Everything We Talked About Last Night*, artist's book, 10.5 cm x 14 cm, 20 pages, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2013.



Figure 22. *Something Has To Change for Everything To Stay As It Is*, performance, 10 minutes, Parker Branch, London, 2012.

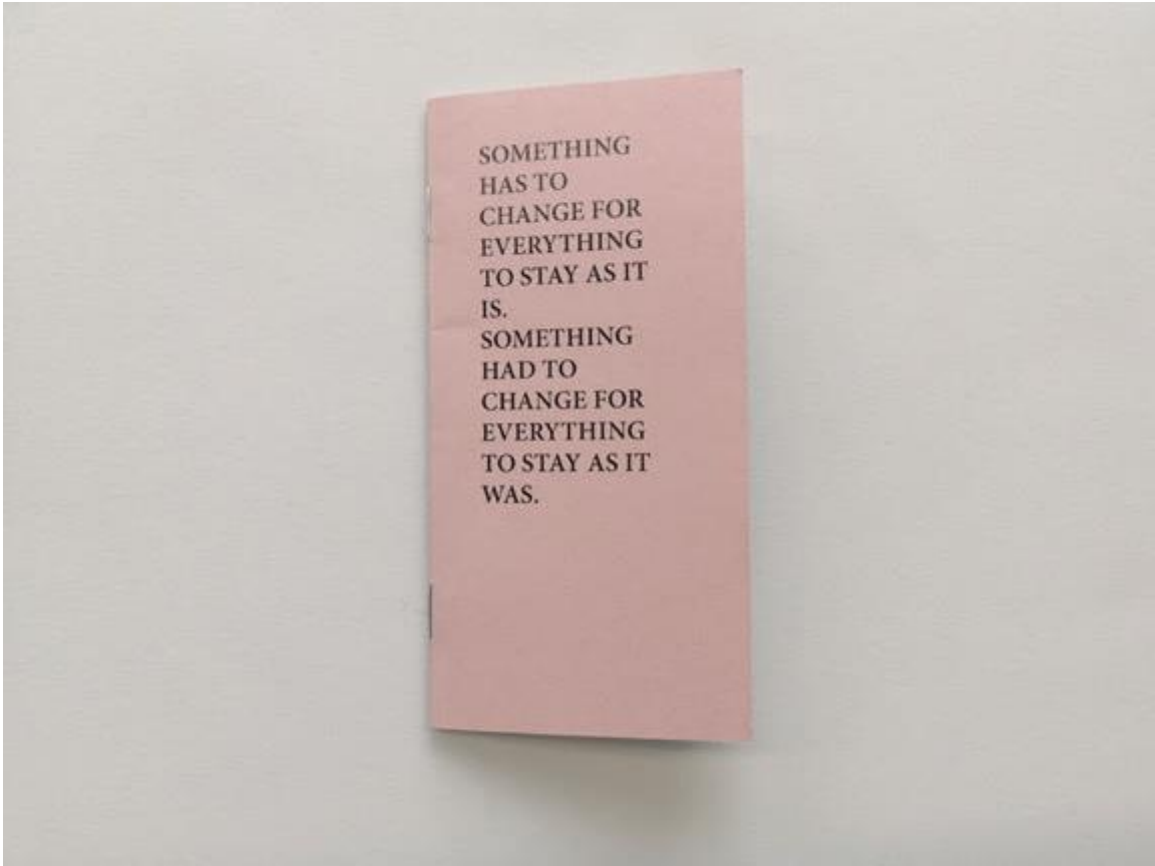


Figure 23. *Something Has To Change for Everything To Stay As It Is*, artist's book, 7 cm x 14 cm, 16 pages, Parker Branch, London, 2012.

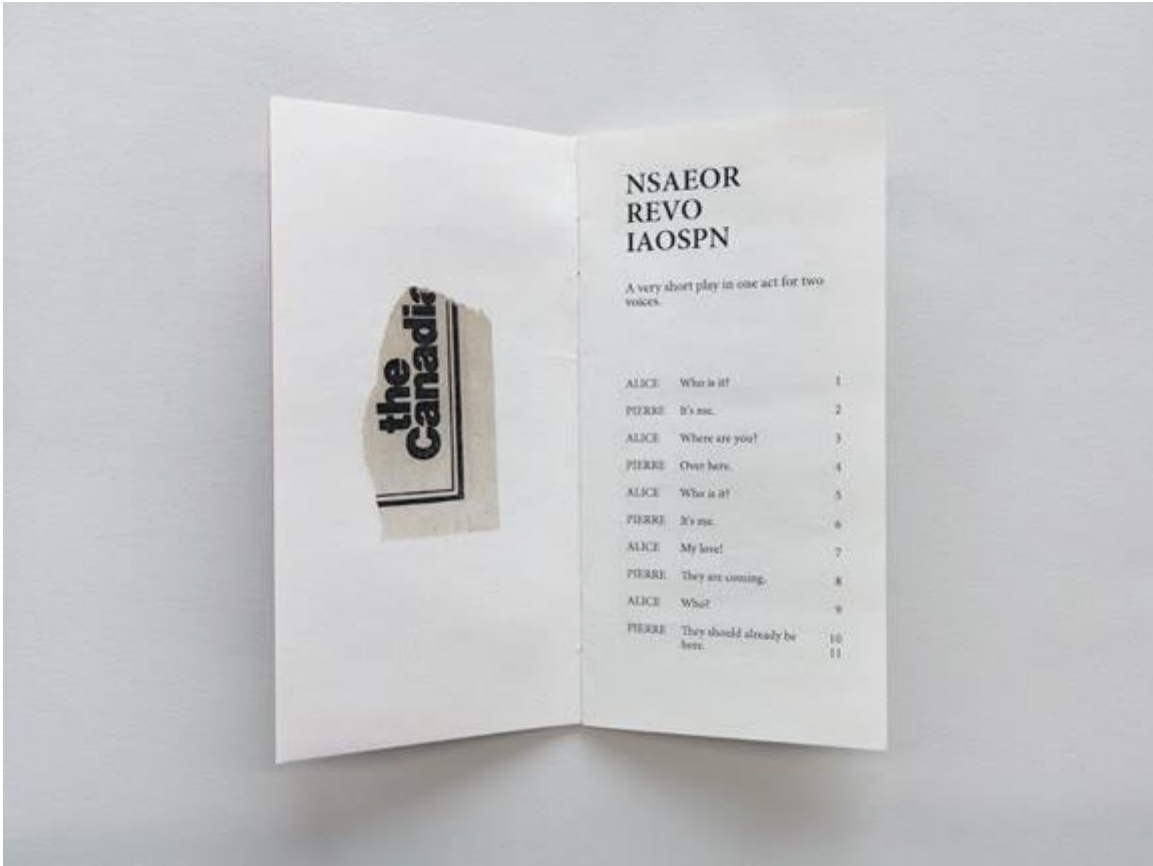


Figure 24. *Something Has To Change for Everything To Stay As It Is*, artist's book, 7 cm x 14 cm, 16 pages, Parker Branch, London, 2012.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
1997-2001 B.F.A. Studio Arts, Major Photography

University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
2009-2011 M.F.A. Studio Arts

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2011-2019 Ph.D. Arts & Visual Culture

Honours and Awards: Ontario Graduate Scholarship, Western University
2012, 2013, 2014, 2015

Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University
2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015

Lynne-Lionel Scott Scholarship in Canadian Studies in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Western University
2015

Mary Routledge Fellowship, Western University
2015

Graduate Student Teaching Award, Western University
2014

Visual Arts Department Graduate Travel Scholarship, Western University
2011, 2012, 2013, 2014

Provost's Academic Support Fund, Western University
2012, 2013

Graduate Entrance Scholarship, Western University
2011, 2012

Publications:
(selection)

Froufrou, Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal, 2018

Orgazing, Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017

Hummzinger, Galerie Division, Montreal, 2016

Where Wild Flowers Grow, Kunstverein Toronto, Toronto, 2015

Everything We Talked About, Art Metropole, Toronto 2013

Something Has to Change, Parker Branch, London, 2012

Exhibitions:
SOLO (selection)

Orgazing, Or Gallery, Vancouver, 2019

Under the Cave of Winds, centre d'art Optica, Montréal, 2018

Under the Cave of Winds, Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017

Echoes from the Bosom, DNA Art Space, London, 2017

Where Wild Flowers Grow, Kunstverein Toronto, Toronto, 2015

B.I.B.L.E. Artlab Gallery, Western University, London, 2014

Something Had to Change, Parker Branch, London, 2012

Exhibitions:
GROUP (selection)

Refiguring Worlds, Birch Contemporary, Toronto, 2018

Garden Gossip, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Centre, Banff, 2017

In Some Far Place, The Room Art Museum, St. John's, 2017

A Pool is Water, Galerie Division, Montréal, 2016

Down to Write you This Poem, Oakville Galleries, Oakville, 2016

Talking back, Otherwise, Art Museum, University of Toronto, 2015

Readings:
(selection)

Zutique 3, Godberg – Gamma, Montréal, 2017

Tower of Babbles, Art Metropole/Edition Art Fair, Toronto, 2017

Never The Same: What Else Can Art Writing Do?, Contemporary
Calgary, Calgary, 2017

My Caveat, Your Excavation, Untitled Art Society, Calgary, 2017