



Book Review

Jordan, Rieke. 2019. *Work in Progress: Curatorial Labor in Twenty-First-Century American Fiction*. New York, NY and London: Bloomsbury, Hb. 196 p. £ 67.20. ISBN: 978-1-5013-4772-6.

Reviewed by **Dr. Alexander Starre**, Free University of Berlin, John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Lansstraße 7-9, 14195 Berlin, Germany, E-mail: alexander.starre@fu-berlin.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2020-2008>

Rieke Jordan's insightful and engagingly written study of contemporary multi-medial and multimodal narratives claims to address the "twenty-first century," yet it seems fair to say that *Work in Progress* more narrowly relates to the social, aesthetic, and technological situation of the most recent decade: the 2010s. Not only were the primary works of Jordan's three central case studies—Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012), the singer-songwriter Beck's *Song Reader* (2012), and *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013–2020)—published or released in that decade; the media ecology outlined in the book is also characteristic of the 2010s, with its co-existence of standardized and increasingly monetized digital platforms alongside supposedly obsolete but still vibrant analog artforms (and not so much that of the disorderly online world and the more experimental creations in hypertext and electronic literature of the early years of the new millennium). At first glance, it is surprising that Jordan builds her account of "American fiction" and "contemporary literature" (4) on a small and very idiosyncratic archive consisting of a graphic narrative (Ware), a whimsical collection of sheet music (Beck), and an indie computer game (*Kentucky Route Zero*). If Jordan's work can be said to address American literary culture, it does so by centering literature-adjacent storytelling and art rather than, say, mainstream novels. *Work in Progress* thus features several unexpected framings and argumentative strands, most of which, though, are well-founded and consistently thought-provoking.

The short "Preface" assertively calls the three multimedial key works "paradigmatic texts" that "rely on a provisional, if incomplete aesthetic experience that brings forward creative practices that are staged as new, digital, and contemporary, yet rely on earlier forms of interaction and participation which feel simultaneously open *and* predetermined" (xii). From these formal features, Jordan suggestively argues, we can extrapolate a novel conception of readership that includes multiple practices. Jordan variously refers to the new type of reader as archivist, archaeologist, musician, data-analyst, or collector, all of them converging in the guiding metaphor of the reader-as-curator. In this framing, the unfinished, dispersed works under discussion demand an approach to reading

that is indeed laborious, with each individual reader having to assemble a customized, one-of-a-kind experience from the scraps, fragments, and instructions provided by the work.

The opening chapter “Work in Progress: Curatorial Labor” performs the theoretical and conceptual heavy lifting to tie the three extended readings (chs. 2–4) together. Jordan expertly navigates through a host of critical literature, primarily stemming from three domains: first, reception aesthetics (Wolfgang Iser, Peter Brooks); second, literary and cultural sociology (Andreas Reckwitz, Mark McGurl, Jim Collins, Pierre Bourdieu); third, media history and archaeology (Wolfgang Ernst, Lisa Gitelman, N. Katherine Hayles). Most notably, Jordan here manages to outline a readerly perspective attuned to the “creativity dispositif” (Reckwitz) of contemporary society. Her reader-curators work within the affective parameters of the neoliberal economy, but, as Jordan appears to suggest, their active engagement with the peculiar works and formats also stakes out a resistant positioning set against today’s standardized modes of digital micro-labor (as modeled in likes, retweets, and other virtual engagements collectively sold to advertisers).

The three respective chapters on *Building Stories*, *Song Reader*, and *Kentucky Route Zero* contain wonderfully attentive close readings. Especially Jordan’s reading of Chris Ware forms a productive and original contribution to the already large body of critical work on the cartoonist. Her analysis of Ware’s full-page panels—she calls them “centerpieces” (56)—is especially lucid, exploring how the materiality of the page and the narrative mechanics interact to generate a profound meditation on techniques and technologies of memory. The chapter on Ware and the following one on the singer-songwriter Beck manage to unfold a broad panoply of (media-)historical contexts, cultural references, and sociological ideas spinning off from a single work and its paratexts. Since both *Building Stories* and *Song Reader* stem from the same American publishing niche devoted to design-heavy literary style and tied to imprints like McSweeney’s and Pantheon, the step to the digital game *Kentucky Route Zero* then seems a bit abrupt. The aesthetic affordances of this ambitious and often self-referential computer game do not seem to lend themselves to the same interpretive register of “curation” as the two fragmented print objects discussed before. Jordan, however, strategically stresses the literary quality of the game by calling its players “readers” and by associating its formal features with experimental literature and postmodern narrative. In all three analytical chapters, *Work in Progress* drills deep into the tangled narrative structures of the media texts, revealing how each is engaged in a larger cultural conversation about the affordances of medial materialities during today’s “late age of print,” as Ted Striphas has called it. What seems remarkable, however, is that with all its stated interest in the role of the *reader*, the study engages most thoroughly with paratextual commentary by each work’s *author(s)*. Compared to this

omnipresence of authorial voices, the reader-as-curator mostly remains a rhetorical construct. The study does not systematically address actually existing reader participation, except for a few brief asides, e.g. regarding the online site devoted to Beck's *Song Reader*.

One of Jordan's great achievements is the tone of her analytical prose, which manages to extract and deploy critical concepts from a large array of critics ranging from critical theorists Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Theodor Adorno to a very impressive arrangement of contemporary thinkers on digital culture. In all this, Jordan manages to balance genuine investment in and curiosity toward her primary objects with a fitting injection of dry humor, all of which is perfectly attuned to the artistic coteries and the hyper-competent, but painfully self-aware writers and readers characteristic of this slice of American literary culture. In some spots, especially in the footnotes, however, the text has a tendency to amass additional critical quotations and associate the argument with new lines of inquiry that do not, in the end, inform the analysis in meaningful ways. With its own distinct curatorial flavor, the study navigates between reception aesthetics, media archaeology, and literary sociology of a unique niche within corporate entertainment culture. The final chapter might have been a good place to sort these methodological strands and to render more precise the study's central claims about the medial, ethical, and political significance of reader-curators in the larger context of American culture; instead, the final "Coda" provides a glance at another highly suggestive phenomenon, namely the presence of cardboard in various predominantly digital contexts (Amazon shipping boxes, add-ons to gaming appliances). A unique media archaeology of the present, *Work in Progress* innovatively depicts American authors and readers grappling with the evolving materialities of literary culture in the digital age.