

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Men, Women, and Punctuation in Warhol's Novel *a*

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Everything stated or expressed by man is a note in the margins of a completely erased text.

— Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

My mind is like a tape recorder with one button – ERASE.

— Andy Warhol, *From A to B and Back Again. THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol*

Punkuation

Before emoji's, there was plain old punctuation. Long before capital 'D' meant 'big toothy sideways grin', ordinary commas, colons, and dashes instructed readers when to smile, weep, or frown. A semi-colon inserted in the dialogue of a 19th-century novel – the briefest hesitation in fluid conversation – was the expressive equivalent of a raised eyebrow. Typographic symbols themselves might be abbreviations of feeling; the exclamation point may originate from the Latin word *Io*, meaning 'joy', with the 'I' written above the 'o'. Can you imagine a world without brakes or punctuation?

The laws of correct punctuation stir heated opinion, often producing severe verdicts: only a fool riddles solid prose with careless little marks. *'If you write properly you shouldn't have to punctuate'*, admonishes novelist Cormac McCarthy, who admits only periods and the occasional comma into his sparse writing. A 1939 English style guide listed no fewer than 157 rules for punctuation. *'Punctuation should be seen and not heard'*, commanded another rulebook, suggesting that disobedience would merit the discipline due a misbehaving child. Elsewhere these non-verbal signs are likened to musical symbols: directing the text's rhythm; indicating when to change pitch or volume; eventually slowing the pace down and taking a rest.

Another music/language connection was adopted by Liz Kotz in her study, *Words to be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (MIT 2010), which draws together John Cage's nearly blank score for *4'33"* (1952) with 1960s language experiments, from Douglas Huebler to Andy Warhol, particularly his novel *a* (1968):

Warhol relocates reading as an experience of the murmur and babble, the lapses of attention and intelligibility, and the starts and stops of talk and noise and interruption that are the condition of meaning, but also its constant undoing.

How exactly did Andy Warhol load the page with ‘murmurs and babbles’, ‘starts and stops’, ‘noises and interruptions’? The answer, abundantly evidenced in Derek Beaulieu’s *a a novel* (2017) – this digitally erased version, which leaves only the additions of punctuation and incidental sound – is that *a* relied enormously on its team of uncredited transcribers. The active contribution of this fluctuating group of poorly paid young women is habitually ignored: negligible at best, risible at worst. Beaulieu’s pages envision a renewed assessment of their work, foregrounding the labours of this under-paid and under-aged Factory underclass.

For *a a novel*, poet Derek Beaulieu first scanned into Photoshop every page of the 1998 Grove Press edition and then digitally wiped them, manually erasing all unwanted text while preserving the typist’s insertions. Beaulieu is akin in spirit to another noted conceptual poet, Kenneth Goldsmith (also a Warhol specialist; coincidence?), who famously erased the words in Gertrude Stein’s essay ‘On Punctuation’, isolating on the page her floating commas, periods, hyphens, and apostrophes. Derek Beaulieu’s *a a novel* is similarly a stand-alone work of art, in some ways fulfilling with more rigor Warhol’s promise of ‘found’ text. But Beaulieu’s ‘words to be looked at’ importantly bring to light the labour/gender divide underpinning the machinations of the Factory. Beaulieu finally pays Warhol’s overlooked team their due tribute, and *a a novel* becomes a visually intoxicating treatise on an invisible, collaborative labour concealed within the folds of art history.

Boys Taping, Girls Typing

Consider Paul Carroll’s account of *a* in his sensationalist *Playboy* profile (Sept 1969), ‘What’s a Warhol?’:

Last winter, Warhol wrote his first ‘novel’. He calls it a. It consists of 451 pages of totally unedited manuscript transcribed from tapes Warhol made as he followed Ondine for 24 hours as he gossiped, quarreled, wooed and talked with friends, lovers, enemies, waitresses and cabdrivers.

At first, a strikes most as a bore. Most of the time you can’t tell who is talking to whom about what; moreover, all misspellings made by the high school girls who transcribed the tapes were religiously reprinted, as were all typographical errors; and at least a third of the sentences simply make no sense whatsoever.

But gradually two elements begin to fascinate. Ondine emerges as a witty, irreverent, and engaging character; and it becomes obvious that this is how most people actually sound as they talk to one another. a is a genuine microcosm of the world of words, fractured sentences, grunts, giggles, commands, pleas, rhetoric, pop-tune titles, squawks from taxi radios, TV-commercial diction, the oblique, sometimes radiantly direct idiom of the heart and the blablabla that surrounds us every day and often far into the night.

Carroll’s admiring tone is rare – most reviewers demolished *a* – but his chronicle of the book’s

production rehearses a familiar script. Despite halting at *a*'s self-description as a novel, Carroll repeats the publicity surrounding the book: that Warhol and Ondine adhered to a continuous 24-hour schedule (they didn't); that the manuscript was 'totally unedited' (it wasn't). Arnold Leo, the patient Grove editor who resurrected the languishing project, and Billy Name – Warhol's ever-loyal, multi-talented, resident Fixer – heavily reworked the first draft by adding speakers' names, italicizing sound, formatting text, and more. In Carroll's depiction, the all-female typing pool is a nameless and skill-free bunch, their typo-ridden contribution just another incidental layer of chaos in the creation of 'readymade' text. Recognizable only by virtue of their mistakes, the 'high school girls' are hardly acknowledged as contributing to the recreation of '*how most people actually sound*'. Ondine emerges almost miraculously as the novel's worthy star, surviving against all odds the inept editorial support.

Beaulieu's *a a novel* visually attests to the complexity of the young women's input, and the overlapping registers of meaning translated to the printed page:

- **non-verbal interjections:** (*Moxi laughs.*) (*he av y br eaths*) SNORE / SNORE (*Pause.*)
- **action and context:** (*on ph one*) (*rustling paper*) (*at a distance*) (*he blows into the microphone*)
- **tone of voice:** (*yelling*) (*slyly*) (*In a funny voice.*) (*whispers*) (*mimicky laughter*) (*Rink mumbles in a high voice*)
- **onomatopaiea, human:** (*Gasp.*) Gurgle. (*She wheezes.*) (*continues rapping in the distance*)
- **onomatopeia, machines and objects:** (*slam*) (*roll bang clang a oll bang*) (*Cr ack Br ack*) (*Click.*)
- **urban backdrop:** (*Sirens*) RADIO (*H O N K*) (*traffic*) (*Sink drains.*) (Rain.)
- **the indecipherable:** (Billy says something) (?) (blip/censor) (*Strange sounds –like a space craft conversation.*)

Some of the typist's insertions impress as well-worded and evocative:

- (*3 slumbering breaths*) (*rather Gregorian chant*) (*tatte r ed voice*) (*60-second pause and the sound of washing feet.*) (*Sighs of relief and music.*)

These read like private messages whispered from inside the text, or stage directions written by a poet. Plus the typists were required to disentangle distant, muffled, or overlapping conversations; identify multiple speakers' voices; and capture Ondine's rapid-fire stream-of-consciousness: '*je ne sais pas WHAT to do*'! Like the beleaguered princess in the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale, the young women were tasked with spinning Warhol's tangled heap of audio-tape into literary gold, with only the tricks of language to save them.

The typists presumed that, following their first rough draft, corrections would be made; this never occurred. According to Leo, most transcribing was done by Cathy Naso, Iris Weinstein, and 'this girl Brooky, whose last name we don't know'. In chapter 2 the young women are identified as Cappy Tano (a play on *capitano*, Italian for 'captain'?) and Rosalie Goldberg (later 'Rosilie',

‘Risilee’). On tape 18 Ondine addresses the girls directly as ‘Rosilie–Capry–and Gookie’. According to Vincent Bockris, Maureen Tucker – drummer for the Velvet Underground – was also enlisted, turning out to be a superb typist. Apparently she refused to type up any swear words: a cleaning-up of language which Beaulieu spreads to the whole text, bleaching out all spoken language. Susan Pile – a Barnard student and capable wordsmith who went on to contribute to *Interview* – began transcribing from chapter 15. The story goes that the girls sometimes softened unkind comments – but cranked up the nastiness in some innocent remarks as well. Warhol, they say, mischievously tweaked the manuscript this way too.

Rough and Ready/Rough and Readymade

Scholars and actors alike have expressed their gratitude for Shakespeare’s later punctuators, who modernized the bard’s words by transforming, for example, Shylock’s run-on

‘*What what what ill lucke ill lucke*’

into

‘*What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?*’

in *The Merchant of Venice*. No such appreciation for *a*’s punctuators, who figure in the anecdotal history as non-entities. Ondine half-jokingly claims to ‘admire those girls because they were ... complete slaves.’ In fact by job’s end they were paid – thanks to a raise – \$25 a week. Naso was also rewarded by Warhol with a *Flowers* painting and a *Self-Portrait*, making hers perhaps the highest paid after-school job in history. In his 1960s memoir *Popism*, Warhol refers somewhat condescendingly to ‘the little typists’ or the ‘little high school girls’, busy ‘transcribing down to the last stutter some reel-to-reel tapes of Ondine’ before proceeding to complain that the ‘little girls [were] *really* slow’. They hadn’t exactly been recruited for their ace secretarial skills. Like everyone else at the Factory, the principal qualification was a burning desire just to be there.

This was not the first time Warhol handed important jobs to willing adolescents. His teenaged neighbour Sarah Dalton had been entrusted with the initial edit of *Sleep* (1963), for example. Warhol had long relied on others, usually women, to do the talking for him since his mother Julia had handwritten his 1950s illustrations with her folksy scroll. Warhol rarely put pen to paper, confirmed by the paucity of his handwriting samples. Having spent his whole life in proximity to poets, Warhol was ‘*impressed with people who can create new spaces with the right words*’ – in this light, I am guessing, he’d have approved of the tracts of new space Beaulieu has opened here.

Warhol’s admiration for writing ability was heightened when another young woman, 23-year-old Gretchen Berg, turned up at the Factory in summer 1966 – about a year after Ondine’s initial taping – to record the artist and publish an interview. Berg’s sophisticated transcription

technique demanded considerable writing skill: rather than relay their conversation verbatim, she seamlessly merged her questions with Warhol's replies, filling in any missing words. The results were splendidly coherent – unlike *a*'s unreadable confusion – but at the cost of Berg's effacement from the text, despite co-articulating canonic Warholisms such as '*If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it*'. We now know these were mostly Berg's words, if extracted from Andy's spoken ideas. Quick to seize upon smart solutions, Warhol put Berg's technique to work for all his later books, from *THE Philosophy* to *Popism* and *The Diaries*, mostly scribed by the formidable Pat Hackett. Yet even the literary delights of *THE Philosophy* were received with unapologetic displays of sexism, evidenced in critic Peter Plagens' review:

The book reads like it's straight off the Dictaphone, transcribed in Lindy ballpoint drone, as though by an overweight 15 year-old White Plains school girl.

Such bare-faced misogyny was still thriving in the mid-1970s; no surprises then that the whole *a* episode is shot through with an earlier decade's open sexism. Apparently, one entire reel was confiscated and tossed in the trash by one of the typist's outraged mother: the classic female *killjoy*, to borrow feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's term. Lucy Mulrone's research has thrown this story into question, given that the claimed missing tape is safely accounted for in the artist's Pittsburgh museum archive. A glamorous headshot of Velvet Underground vocalist Nico graced *a*'s backcover along with a photo of Andy, but Ondine's rubbery visage is conspicuously missing. The blonde photogenic lead singer barely figures in *a*'s pages save for a single, late comment from Ondine. Plainly, eye-candy Nico plays 'beauty' to Ondine's 'talker' – the two kinds of people Andy liked best, here cast along an ancient gender-role divide.

With rare exception, jobs open to women at the Silver Factory were limited to typist, receptionist, or muse/actress. Jane Holzer was valued for her business sense, **Dorothy Dean for her intellect and quick wit**, and in later years Hackett and Paige Powell, for example, rose up the ranks. But onscreen female characters rarely stretched beyond the anonymous Pop-tart. In *Loves of Ondine* (1968) these are listed as:

Girl on Love Seat (Angelina 'Pepper' Davis)

Girl on Chair (Ivy Nicholson)

Wife to Ondine (Brigid Berlin)

Girl in Bed (Viva)

These women did not handle money, did not operate the *Screen Tests*' Bolex camera. For all his socio-creative forward-thinking, Warhol held notions of gender appropriateness that were fairly typical of a man of his generation.

Nonetheless Hackett, Pile and Naso remember Warhol as a kind and appreciative boss. Pile

recalls the Silver Factory as a relaxed and welcoming place, matching *Popism's* depiction of a typical afternoon:

On almost any day in '65 you could count on Billy there listening to Callas, Gerard writing poetry or helping me stretch, a great little high school go-fer with a Beatle haircut named Joey Freeman coming in and out with paint supplies, Ondine going back and forth from Billy to me to the phone, a few kids just hanging around dancing the afternoon away to songs like She's Not There and Tobacco Road, and there'd be Edie, maybe putting on make-up in the mirror.

The sunny, busy Factory-by-day contrasted with its dark, nocturnal evil twin: the bitchy, druggy domain of the Mole People. Warhol wanted to be a machine: perhaps a machine that never slept. Many important early works, from *Sleep* to *Empire* to *a*, attempt to track the long, empty, death-like stretch of mysterious night, which (according to Henry Geldzahler) Warhol feared. We might say Beaulieu's brightening of the page reassuringly turns the dark, wordy night into the bright hum of the transcribers' working day.

Lost in Space, Lost in Time

The New York Review of Books despised *a's* characters, dismissing them as 'void and verbose'; Beaulieu definitively tips that balance in favour of the void. His emptied pages seem to visualize the broad gaps of time concealed in the original *a*, whose execution extended considerably beyond the 24 hours advertised by the publisher. In fact, from beginning to end, the novel's time span totals well over three years.

The pair's first taping session occurred in August 1965 when Andy and Ondine set off on their downtown Bloomsday, planning to record straight into the next day. After about twelve hours however, Warhol grew weary, switched off the mike and went home to bed – never managing to witness deep night after all. Recording was resumed two summers later, in August 1967, and the printed book was finally published sixteen months after that. In many ways Beaulieu's yawning blank pages better represent the actual three-and-a-half-year gap.

That stretch was crucial in the Factory timeline. In the glory days of summer 1965 when the *a* chronicles begin, the *New York Herald Tribune* published a gushing Warhol article in its Sunday magazine, lavishing attention on the Silver Factory's impossibly groovy parties, hangers-on, and strange new glamour. Andy and Edie – New York's coolest pair – were featured in the society pages of *Time* magazine. Warhol-mania peaked in October 1965 at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art. Pandemonium broke out when Andy's glittering entourage arrived to a packed opening-night crowd, eventually requiring the art's partial removal from the walls and a dramatic rooftop escape.

By the time *a* was published the magical Silver Factory had shut its doors forever. Warhol

abandoned the silvered loft on East 47th Street in early 1968, moving into white-and-glass sixth-floor offices on Union Square. Edie had long departed, having dropped Andy for Dylan in February 1966, and the Velvets were now firmly in the picture, attested to by the sudden appearance of Lou Reed in *a*'s chapter 23. Gerard Malanga had slipped a long way down from his second-in-command status, never entirely recuperating Warhol's trust after selling fakes in Italy. And Ondine himself was a few months away from Factory exile, becoming *persona non grata* owing to his volatile temper unsuited to the new office-like atmosphere.

Most significant was Warhol's near-fatal shooting, on 3 June 1968; two days later Robert Kennedy was assassinated. While the attack returned Andy to front-page attention, public opinion had darkened. *Life* magazine replaced a planned Warhol cover story with a Kennedy feature, the managing editor reportedly blaming the artist for 'having injected so much craziness into American society', directly resulting in the Senator's killing. Echoing *Life*, an internal memo from *Times* art critic Piri Halasz accused Warhol's 'art and lifestyle' of helping 'to create the atmosphere that made the Kennedy shooting'.

Andy was still recovering from his wounds when preparations to publish *a* got underway. Warhol's 'unwritten' novel was opportunistically released on 13 December 1968, just in time for Christmas – the perfect gag gift, as Mulroney puts it. Reviews were uniformly painful, with *The New York Review of Books* remorselessly attacking *a* as

[...] the degradation of sex, the degradation of feeling, the degradation of values, and the super-degradation of language; [...] in its errant pages can be heard the death knell of American literature.

A sounded the bell-toll for Billy Name's tenure at the Factory too. After finishing work on *a*'s galleys, the once-indispensable Factory manager retreated into the darkroom, enduring a prolonged two-year exit which ended with a note pinned to the door: '*Andy – I am not here anymore but I am fine. Love, Billy*' – effectively erasing Name, from that moment forward, out of the Factory.

'Ondine that day was really strange ... like a normal person'

In 'Literary Warhol' (1989) – the first-ever analysis of Warhol's printed words – Phyllis Rose notes that Warhol's anecdotes typically 'begin with celebrity and end in insecurity'. These moods certainly bracket *The Tale of Ondine*. Within some three years of playing *Chelsea Girls*' explosive 'Pope of Greenwich Village', Ondine was quietly fading into middle age, having found employment as a mailman in Brooklyn. Among the most poignant of Warhol's recollections is his last encounter with Ondine, on the occasion of Judy Garland's open-casket funeral in summer 1969. Andy planned to tape his old pal's 'hysterically funny' running commentary. But, with his head and tongue no longer racing on amphetamine, Ondine stunned Andy with the tedium of his

conversation, saying spectacularly dull things like, ‘It’s very hot out, isn’t it?’.

Being with Ondine that day was really strange; it was like being with a normal person. [...] Sure, it was good he was off drugs (I supposed), and I was glad for him (I supposed), but it was so boring: there was no getting around that. The brilliance was gone.

Although by all accounts Ondine’s unique fabulousness did not quite translate from tape to type, *a* ended up immortalizing his speed-dependent brilliance before it waned forever into sobriety. His irrepressible spirit is perhaps best captured here in the scattered exclamation marks; the repeated insertions of (*laughter*) and (*Opera.*) – like shadows of Ondine himself: unpredictable, riotous, adrift in space.

Epilogue

Andy Warhol never taped others without their knowledge, in the same way that he rarely took a candid photo. He wasn’t so much interested in people as in how recording machines transformed them. By the early 1970s Warhol’s habit of non-stop recording took a sinister turn, in the form of Richard Nixon’s ever-rolling reel-to-reel machine and the secret recordings which eventually cost him the White House. In 1973 Rose Mary Woods, the President’s private secretary, claimed to have ‘accidentally’ erased 18-1/2 critical minutes of audiotape. But Woods’ attempt to play the blundering female – stupidly pressing DELETE for minutes on end, or mindlessly sprinkling punctuation like confetti – fooled no one, and Woods was cast by the media as Nixon’s in-house co-conspirator. The disguise of the inept girl-typist had worn thin.

And Ondine? Without Andy’s mike beneath his chin, without a haven at the Factory, the former underground star took to introducing college screenings of *Chelsea Girls*, later becoming a hotdog vendor at Madison Square Garden. Yet Warhol never entirely forgot him. In 1985 the artist visited Julian Schnabel in his studio; playing there were Maria Callas records. Andy’s mind drifted back to those glimmering Silver Factory days from two decades earlier: the only memory, they say, that brought tears to Warhol’s eyes. As he/Hackett write in *The Diaries*, while listening to the opera music Andy ‘*could almost see Ondine whisking around in the shadows*’ of the studio. Beaulieu’s pages are like photographs erased save for those flickering shadows. Or like sparks flying off Ondine’s once-volcanic life, captured by Cathy, Iris/Rosalie, Brooky, Maureen and Susan, then suspended on the page, midflight.

3499 words

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