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### ARTS & CULTURE

## Sexy Librarians, Secret Service, and Tangents: With “The Book Lovers”

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### Part I: “The Book Lovers”

On a Sunday afternoon in March, when the rest of New York’s art world was swarming through the [Armory’s annual art fair](#), I found myself lurking among the stacks at St. Mark’s Bookstore, thumbing through literary reviews and scanning the crowd for a familiar face. I was waiting to meet with David Maroto, a Spanish artist who recently cocurated an exhibition of artist novels—“The Book Lovers”—at the Elizabeth Foundation. Once I found him, nose deep in a book, we meandered to an empty bar and talked about art, novels, experimentation, and engaging the public.

David is an artist with strong, creative convictions and a healthy distrust for art institutions. We met five or so years ago at an artist residency, and it is serendipitous that he should be one of the curators of this show. Or perhaps it is just a demonstration of how small our circle is—a tribe within a tribe, the small overlapping area of the Venn diagram where visual art and writing intersect. David thinks this is a growing field, that the novel has run its historical course and is an empty vessel for artists to pick up. I disagree that the novel is defunct, but it does seem that the book form is full of potential for artists and becoming an increasingly popular choice of medium.

“Artist novels” is a vague genre, so David and his cocurator, Joanna Zielińska, define it as any work 20,000 words or longer in which the narrative is moved primarily by text rather than images, and written by someone with an active visual art practice. Some of the results could simply be novels with art-world insider lines such as *Sexy Librarian*’s “he could make her more emotional than a Félix Gonzáles-Torres retrospective,” but David and I are both most intrigued by the books that are a critique of the form or an active expansion of the artist’s studio practice. It can provide a path into the art for the uninitiated and build additional layers of insight and complexity. As David put it:

[The novel] is an access door to their practice. Everybody knows how to read a novel, and if you start from there, you could access the rest of their artwork ... I have a feeling that many artists also use the novel as a tool to create their own mythology—the air, the atmosphere that connects their work.

For “The Book Lovers,” which is just one of a series of shows that this project will produce, the curators chose eight of the artists and asked each to contribute a visual piece or two that connected with their text. I was immediately struck by the formal elegance of Jill Magid’s text-based prints, in which the descriptions of individuals started to disintegrate or fall through space. In the next room was a video by Alexandre Singh, tarot cards laid out by Lindsay Seers, and works by five other artists, all vastly different—it was a little hard to digest. David admitted that this was maybe not the most effective method, but showing this work is challenging: How do you get inside of a novel within a gallery or museum setting? And how do you deal with what he called “the institutional inadequacy” of museums and galleries to encourage a more extended engagement with an art piece?

David again:

The spectator becomes a reader. It is full of consequences in the amount of time required, the amount of attention and engagement with the work. Instead of going and consuming artworks, like in an art fair, like in the armory or a biennial—one, two, three, four, five, like pills, which doesn’t make any sense at all and you have to consume them as quickly as possible—instead of that, these artists create a narrative body of work where one piece brings you to another. And it needs time to unravel those connections.

Even as an artist and avid art viewer, I am not immune to the pill-popping attitude. This is why I enjoy teaching in galleries, why I write and why I visit the studios of other artists whenever possible—I want the extended engagement, but it is hard to achieve. In my conversation later with Jill Magid, she tells me that both she and the Tate Liverpool curators were very happy when people did actually sit and read her first book, *One Cycle of Memory in the City of L*, when it was exhibited at the Liverpool Biennial. She suggested that this may have succeeded because she created an installation—an aestheticized reading area—of a black room with black office chairs.

Making my way back into the Elizabeth Foundation's first room, I picked up a book from a nearby shelf and started reading it, only to find out that this book was part of Julia Weist's installation, and I was being harshly scolded for touching the artwork. When I confessed this to the artist later, she assured me that it was a common problem and actually an interesting indicator of just how connected we feel to books—that we break the cardinal and ingrained rule of *do not touch the art*, so easily when the art is a book. But she did also point out that everything in that installation is very precisely measured out and that my wayward hands may well have disrupted the aesthetic.

Having been reprimanded by the gallery assistant, I headed to the reading library section of the exhibition, where a collection of 140 novels lay out on two long tables. But I no longer felt comfortable sitting down and diving into any of the books, and I was not excited about having to put on white gloves to touch them. As David said, "You take the novel, you don't read it in a gallery—you read it at home before you go to bed. It goes beyond the institutional space of art." Which is precisely why this is such a potentially exciting direction for artists: "They can reach eventually an audience that is outside of the art crowd. It becomes public art."

In conversation, both David and Jill use the word democratic to talk about books because they are more accessible and cheaper than your typical piece of contemporary art. It is interesting that after decades of critics and artists bemoaning the commercialization of the art object and moving away from easily consumable, living room-ready art, we find ourselves at a moment when two radical and cutting edge thinkers are wondering how to get back into the bourgeois home. But I understand; ultimately most artists want to communicate. Art objects are completed when they are viewed, cared for and considered. Like a good novel, art wants to be taken to bed.

## Part II: Julia Weist

"The public library is the party that everyone is invited to," Audrey began, watching his reaction closely. ... A pure bibliophile wouldn't find Audrey's theoretic absolutes of virtue cheesy or flat, but would echo her awe at the small miracle of the public library's omnipresent beneficence. "It is without doubt the ultimate sculpture. Politically relevant yet poetic, historic and contemporary with accommodation for constant progress."  
—*Sexy Librarian*



Julia Weist is trained as an artist and holds a Masters in information and library science. Her studio is compact and highly functional. Every inch of the space feels used and considered. There is no clutter. I can feel the love of order, the pleasure of analyzing and a mind that likes to cross-reference and categorize. I can't help but wonder how much of *Sexy Librarian*—her fictional romance novel experiment—is autobiographical.

The first three chapters of *Sexy Librarian* were a frustrating process: I felt ashamed to be reading it so I couldn't bring it on the subway, and I was constantly scolding the writer's language and clunky use of adjectives, but I wanted it to be more than just a clever idea. Thankfully, four chapters in, the writer relaxes and gets down to the business of actually telling a story without worrying so much about "the blatantly sexual nature of the situation." In the artist's epilogue Weist reveals that after three chapters of writing while consuming only romance novels, she wrote the rest while consuming the classics. The shift is clear—and has left my preconceived notions of the romance novel unaltered.

Weist's primary interest was not writing or romance, but rather the process of deaccessioning. Deaccessioning happens frequently in libraries and art museums: works that are no longer relevant leave to make space and provide funds for newer work. It is the ignominious state of becoming irrelevant and unessential. "[It is] this process that happens every day in libraries across the world but that is completely invisible. It is this very physical process that is very different from what happens, for example, online, where it is totally immaterial. There is no physical evidence of information passing out of currency there." But in libraries, that record is heavily physical. One of Weist's pieces in "The Book Lovers" was *Lumber: Form and Content (100 books)*. This piece consists of two piles of fine saw dust, the results of sanding down the meat and the spines of one hundred unwanted books. The aroma of those piles was striking—the musty smell of old books, an irrefutable reminder that information ages.

As Weist researched this process of deaccessioning for her art practice she felt that she needed to put herself through the process of attempting to write a novel. So she sat down and wrote a standard three chapter submission, and mailed it off to publishers. And why romance? "Romance novels, possibly with the exception of mystery, have the fastest turnover rate in libraries ... it was logical that if I'm studying deaccessioning, I should go to the epicenter of that practice." It is also quite funny. Not only is her book a "critical edition" of a romance novel—you will have to read *Sexy Librarian* to understand the story of how, despite its author's inexperience and the narrative's upfront acknowledgement of STDs, the book finally came to be published—but romance novels and contemporary art seem to be diametrically opposed to one another: one is meant to be churned through fast, the other (ideally) requires slow engagement; one is mass media, the other limited edition.

Though Weist has not repeated the *Sexy Librarian* experiment, she continues to investigate how information ages and cultural currency fluctuates, largely through the use of discarded books, but also through insightful interventions into existing, but not yet canonized, art pieces. For instance, she remade Doug Aitkin's *99¢ dreams* as *A Dollar Fifteen Dreams* to reflect the changing realities of the economy. She took Haim Steinbach's piece *and to think it all started with a mouse*, which originally referenced the American relationship to Disney, and subtly shifts it to become a discussion of Apple and our evolving relationship with personal computing and graphic design.

To accompany these interventions, she created printed "takeaways" that elaborate on her train of thought and expand the art beyond the gallery walls. These brochures mingle personal anecdotes with official documentation, company brochures, and images of the original artwork in question. Though these pieces wouldn't qualify as novels for the *Book Lovers* database, they serve a similar purpose, giving the viewer a deeper level of insight into the work, revealing the layers of research and investigation that inform each final piece, and building a simple narrative around the artist's process.

Weist is a patient artist and many of her pieces, like the romance novel experiment, take years to complete; though we are bombarded with information at a rapid pace every day, the examination of how that information degrades or matures is a study that unfolds slowly and carefully. Currently, she has multiple pieces that are incubating in her studio, waiting for the right moment—the right piece of information or chance encounter—that will complete them. Like the "perfect sculpture" of the public library, these are artworks that document the passing of time, looking to the past but accommodating change.

### Part III: Jill Magid

I long and seek after  
—Sappho fragment

Jill Magid is smaller than I'd imagined, and heavily pregnant. At first it is hard to visualize this same woman as the one whose eyes I have been reading through—the spy hunter who is tough as nails, the journalist willing to be kidnapped in Afghanistan, the artist who wrote "I want to shoot my audience, or bring it to a funeral." But once we start talking her eyes focus in on me like a hawk. Yes, this is the same woman.

She has the "corner office" in her studio building, flooded with the kind of natural light that painters daydream about. In front of these large windows is a long, wraparound desk, piled high with papers and books. On the other side of the room a skull sits on a podium amongst sketches and plastic wrap. A neon sign in cursive script hangs by the door. "I see myself as a writer *and* an artist" she declares. "I would love to see the books in Barnes and Noble, and not just in Printed Matter." But Magid's work is difficult to categorize and therefore, I imagine, difficult for a publisher to monetize. To catalogue something—in a library, a museum, or a database—makes the information easier to find but also tells the viewer/reader what to expect. I enjoy the ambiguity and potential to be surprised, but publishers probably do not.

Magid's art practice aims to build personal and intimate relationships with large institutions. In *Becoming Tarden*, Magid is hired by the Dutch Secret Service to "find the face" of the organization. In an attempt to understand the agency and get closer to its center, Magid meets with eighteen spies over the course of a year and "processes their personal data" by asking them about their religion, health, sex lives, etc.

No names are used throughout the book and most specific information has been removed; the organization thoroughly censored the original manuscript, scared by the level of information that Magid had actually uncovered. This censorship leaves some pages entirely blank. At the beginning this creates an atmosphere of invisibility and omnipresence. It disorients the reader and heightens the seduction of the spy—there is always something more to be known and spaces to be filled in. Over time the tone becomes increasingly sensual. "My journey has led me back to him. I am in a love story, or a story of love and fear and mirrors, all facing my favorite spy yet reflecting nothing." If you can imagine a meeting point of the blurred and disorienting identities of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*—in which the roles of criminal and law enforcer are unsettlingly interconnected—and the intriguingly fragmented remains of Sappho's lyric and alluring poetry—kernels of desire that are only rendered more tantalizing by their lost lines—that point might be *Becoming Tarden*.

The organization refers to revealing an agent's identity as "burning the face." One of the artworks that Magid produced for the commission is a series of prints in which she took the descriptions of each of the spies that she met with and censored them herself—imagining what would be removed before the agency had actually gone through the process itself. She then used these as maps from which to make neon signs of the incriminating descriptions. The signs are installed on the floor and glow a dark and seductive red. It is interesting that though the Dutch agency censored the book, they saw little danger in the artwork itself. "The word on the page is offensive to them but once it becomes aestheticized as neon it's no longer dangerous. With the Dutch Secret Service, if you want to hide something make it art."

It is precisely Magid's role as an artist that makes her scenarios so interesting. As she points out, she is not a sociologist or a journalist and is thus not beholden to the rules of either profession. She is a renegade, both insider and outsider. "That's how I know something good is happening—when I'm pushing away and being seduced at the same time. It's that internal conflict."



In Magid's most recent project, *Failed States*, she starts out going to Texas to investigate a sniper story and ends up becoming the witness to a bizarre shooting at the state capitol. Unlike *Becoming Tarden*, where the book and art work are tightly interwoven, here the two elements bounce off of each other into almost entirely separate territories: the book centers around Magid's relationship with a journalist who has reported from war zones and offers to take Magid on assignment, while the show focuses more on the theatricality of the shooting incident. Both explore (and penetrate) the membrane between a war zone and domestic American life, but each explores that border from a different angle. The tangible point of contact is Magid's Mercedes station wagon, which she had armored for combat and at one point parked in the lot of the Capitol Building. The book opens with her driving this beast, remembering breast-feeding in the back, but now feeling it cold and heavy around her. In the installation shots, the manicured lawn and stately dome rise in the background; is this Texas's very own Green Zone?

At one point in *Failed States*, she and the journalist (who she refers to by his initials throughout) debate the different roles of visual art and writing. CT claims that writing is a craft, that even Nabokov was following concrete patterns, and concludes: "Writing does not have the spookiness of abstract painting because what abstract painting conveys is open-ended—the viewer can bring any meaning to it—but a book is intentional; the writer is trying to communicate something specific." The compelling nature of art is precisely the openness that CT describes, but I disagree that words are necessarily more or less precise than an image; something is always slipping through the cracks between words.

Describing her process, Magid says "I think of writing a lot like drawing; that it is about observing and being aware." The way that the books and the artwork intersect varies from show to show, but she always wants the viewer to feel that there is room for interpretation—to feel that it is okay to approach the work without having read the book and thus find their own meanings in the visuals or vice versa. The objects "go off on their own tangent which I often find inspires me to make more related objects or to be looser with how I'm approaching my writing."

The tension between concrete narrative and poetic interpretation is present in both her texts and the objects, and Magid plays as fluidly with language as she does with visuals, emphasizing double meanings or misinterpretations, refusing to ever wrap things up neatly. Using text and image together, she edges closer to defining a reality that will always slip away—and will always be stranger than any fiction.

*Alex Moore is a writer and artist living in Los Angeles. You can read more of her musings about art and artists on her blog, [Fantastic Heliotherapy](#).*



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