

“The Book Lovers”

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VISUAL ARTISTS HAVE long flirted with the written word: Consider the phenomena of the artist-as-critic, book-as-object, and document-as-artwork.

In “The Book Lovers,” curators David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska—an artist and art historian, respectively—define the “artist novel” as a distinct literary form. Far from a nostalgic meditation on the changing nature of publishing, this exploratory exhibition frames the novel as a contemporary extension of social practice and research-based art. Compact and infinitely reproducible, the artist novel

challenges traditional forms of visual “authorship” in the same manner that the printed multiple, video, and photography have done. But while the market has more or less absorbed those forms, “The Book Lovers” asserts that the category of artist novel retains a slipperiness and contingency ripe for examination.

Maroto and Zielinska construct the exhibition around a growing body of evidence—a curated selection of more than 130 artist novels displayed on tables in the center of the space. This book collection, recently acquired by M HKA, in Antwerp,

is available for perusal; readers may also consult an online database—a practical, though less seductive, option. The books range from *α, A Novel*, 1968, Andy Warhol’s transcript of his daily conversations, to recent narrative experiments like the science fiction novel *Philip*, 2007, collectively written by a group of eight artists, and curated by Mai Abu ElDahab. Spanning artistic generations and geographies, the archive contains books by authors like Yayoi Kusama, Stewart Home, Sophie Calle, Pablo Helguera, and Maroto.

Eight installations by



RIGHT:
Roe Rosen
A page from
*The Stained
Portfolio*,
1927–28, by
fictional artist
Justine Frank.
Gouache
and pencil on
paper, 13 x 15 in.

OPPOSITE, TOPLEFT:
Lindsay Seers
*It has to be this
way (Tarot)*,
2012. Nine
photographic
prints displayed
in a wood and
Perspex vitrine,
each 6 x 4 in.

contemporary artist-authors fill the rest of the space. These works fall into roughly three subcategories: the novel as project documentation, research object, or complement to traditional art objects. Jill Magid’s *Becoming Tarden*, 2009, and Julia Weist’s *Sexy Librarian*, 2008, document performative practices that frame the author as an unlikely femme fatale, whereby the novel serves as an empowering tool to avoid self-objectification. A selection of prints accompanies Magid’s redacted account of her infiltration of the Dutch secret service as a commissioned artist. Weist’s humorous collection of discarded library books—some shaven down to piles of dust—refers to her double life as librarian and artist. Goldin+Senneby’s *Looking for Headless*, 2010–ongoing, began as a research-based investigation of offshore tax havens but has become a premise for staging scenarios during exhibition runs and launch parties (including for “The Book Lovers”) in off-site spaces, that are then narrated in subsequent chapters. More conventional novelistic premises provide the creative backstory to standalone objects like Lindsay Seers’s humorous tarot cards, 2012, and Tom Gidley’s ceramic *Masks*, 2010–13.

Roe Rosen’s project, a body of work attributed to the fictional Jewish-Belgian profeminist Surrealist pornographer Justine Frank, best synthesizes these three tendencies. The complex output includes the novel *Sweet Sweat* and drawings, supposedly by

Frank, as well as a monograph and related criticism of her work. A searing critique of art history’s blind spots, the work exposes the unspoken and thoroughly gendered criteria that elevate certain artists while marginalizing others. In this exhibition, video testimony by the translator of Frank’s monograph (Rosen in drag) denigrates Rosen’s practice, accusing him of appropriating Frank’s subversive visual lexicon, which fuses Jewish iconography and pornographic tropes, in his nonfictional (and much maligned) installation *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995–97.

Ambitious but not exhaustive, “The Book Lovers” raises important questions, as yet unanswered, about the production and circulation of artist books. Some artists have distributed their books for free or at low cost via print-on-demand services, online, or through independent publishing means. Other books are published in limited editions or at exorbitant prices. Rather than being an untroubled category, artist novels highlight the growing economic precariousness of artistic labor and the willful fetishization of the book object at the moment of its obsolescence—a reification all too familiar to artistic practice. Situated between the mass-produced object and high art work, the artist novel is neither easily assimilable to literary publishing houses or the machinations of art discourse—a difficult position, to be sure, but one that inspires critical leverage. —WV