

NABOKOV, VLADIMIR VLADIMIROVICH  
 THE ORIGINAL OF LAURA  
 (DYING IS FUN)  
 PS3527.A15 O75 2009

TROY GRONSDAHL, LEE HENDERSON  
 AND ÈVE K. TREMBKAY:  
 BECOMING BOOK

*Writing in the Margins*  
 by Blair Fornwald

Reading transforms the author's text into the reader's mnemonic. We all read differently and carry thoughts, memories and inferences, as well as a unique cadence and vocabulary. Diligence implores us to read all of the words in a prescribed order, while impatience compels us to skim the boring parts and cut to the last chapter, moving from sentence to sentence like a bee pollinating flowers. As we read, we disrupt the unity of the text; we momentarily and invisibly change it as we traipse, stumble, wander, or float through the neat arrangement of words on the page.

*Lee Henderson  
 Refinement Pavilion  
 #1 [Nabokov,  
 Vladimir Vladimirovich,  
 The Original of Laura  
 (Dying is Fun).  
 PS3527.A15 O75  
 2009], 2010  
 mahogany, aluminum,  
 and ash  
 22.9 x 15.2 x 15.2 cm*

Michel de Certeau describes a reader as someone who “insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation,” whose tangential wandering “makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment,” a place that is not ours, but that we occupy and furnish with our “acts and memories.”<sup>1</sup> A complement can be found in the writings of semiotician and literary theorist Roland Barthes, who makes distinctions between classic “readerly” text which is written, printed, bound and published as a book, and the temporal and invisible “writerly” text, which is “*ourselves writing*” as we read.<sup>2</sup>

*Becoming Book* is an exhibition about the text that reading produces. It brings together three artists, Troy Grondsahl, Lee Henderson, and Ève K. Tremblay, who engage with texts in a manner that approaches the writerly. Their objects and images articulate the plurality of the text and the subversive, erotic, and political dimensions of finding the plural within the presumed singular. Their idiosyncratic readings acknowledge and validate the agency and productivity of readers and other consumers.

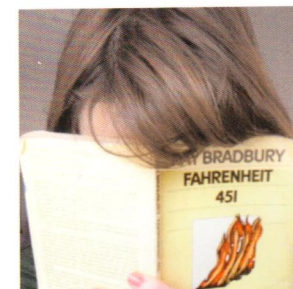
The exhibition takes its title from Ève K. Tremblay’s work, *Becoming*

*Fahrenheit 451*. In this ongoing project, begun in 2007, Tremblay carries out a fictive act described in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*.

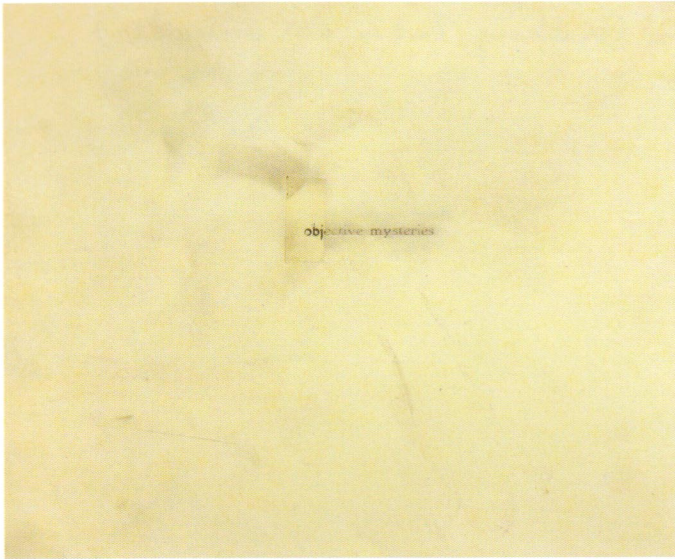
Bradbury’s science fiction novel describes a dystopian future where books are illegal, and an underground cadre of “book people” who commit important texts to memory, covertly preserving their contents. Bradbury’s book people explain how “bits and pieces of history and literature and international law, Byron, Tom Paine, Machiavelli, or Christ...” are kept safely hidden in the minds and memories of the collective, who imagine themselves as “nothing more than dust-jackets for books.”<sup>3</sup> The story spurred a question for Tremblay: what book would you become?

Tremblay reasoned that since *Fahrenheit 451* contains the idea of the destruction of all books, it therefore also contained the “potentiality of all books.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, becoming *Fahrenheit 451* would be tantamount to becoming all books.

Tremblay’s attempts at memorization are variously enacted and documented, in live performance and video, and in photographic self-portraits of the artist consumed in the act of reading. She is photographed with her tattered book: in her studio, on a park bench, standing on the Red Hook piers, with her eyes focused



Ève K. Tremblay  
*Facebook*, 2007  
 4.4 x 4.4 cm pigment  
 print on 38.0 x 28.0  
 cm photo rag  
 Courtesy of Galerie  
 Hugues Charbonneau



Troy Grondsabl, *Make way for magic! Make way for objective mysteries!* (detail), 2011, print ephemera (cover sheet), 30.5 x 24.1 cm

intently on words or closed as if willing the text to memory. Other images depict just books: in one tiny photograph, Tremblay's copy of *Fahrenheit 451* is folded into another book, the pages of the two texts rubbed up against one another. Its title, *Reading Each Other*, hints at the anthropomorphic nature of the project: books becoming people, becoming animate and living. The processes of memorization leave ephemeral traces: Tremblay's excessively annotated copy of *Fahrenheit 451* (every word of every sentence underlined, highlighted, or otherwise demarcated) is sometimes exhibited as an artifact. Tremblay also exhibits elaborate handwritten and illustrated mnemonic scrolls, drawings of the memory palaces that help translate words into pictures. She

wrote letters to Ray Bradbury, inviting him to her exhibitions and performances and telling him about the project in great detail. The author, who died in 2012, did not reply. The letters are presented as another artwork, photocopied on bond paper and pinned to the wall.

This surplus of visual information paradoxically brings the invisibility of Tremblay's real work – the work of reading, forgetting, rereading, and remembering – to the fore. The real stuff of this project is what Tremblay refers to as “*the invisible to the human eye work* I did with trying to sculpt grey matter in my brains.”<sup>5</sup> This practice involves committing words not only to the eyes and brain, but also to the voice and the body, interiorizing the text.<sup>6</sup> She becomes-



Troy Grondsabl, *Objective Mysteries*, 2012, melted letterpress type, approx. 3.8 x 2.5 x 0.6 cm

book by “transforming words into images, repeating word after word and replaying the invisible movie in my mind, saying the words in a low voice so they would stick to a narrative.”<sup>7</sup> The words become a chant: incantatory, blissful repetition.<sup>8</sup>

Barthes notes that “the word can be erotic on two opposing conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness (in certain texts, words *glisten*, they are distracting, incongruous apparitions...).”<sup>9</sup> While Tremblay's reading is excessively, extravagantly repetitious, Troy Grondsahl's reading of Paul-Émile Borduas' *Le Refus Global* is conspicuously austere, eloquent, almost crystalline in its unexpected brevity.

*Le Refus Global* is an impassioned manifesto calling for the total refusal of conservative religious attitudes in Quebec. Signed by Borduas and fifteen others, including Jean-Paul Riopelle, Françoise Sullivan and other artists associated with *Les Automatistes*, *Le Refus Global* both identified and further affected a radical change in cultural attitudes in the province, playing a key role in the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and ushering in Quebec's modernity. Its tone is emphatic and impassioned, filled with righteous rage (“To hell with holy water and the French-Canadian tuque!” Borduas writes.)<sup>10</sup> Its belief in the possibility and necessity of change, of the birth of “a new collective hope,” brought forth by the “splendid anarchy” of Quebec's young and growing class of creative dissidents is sincere.<sup>11</sup>

Gronsdahl's reading of the manifesto is twice decontextualized: he reads a translation in English, a language less poetically permissive than the original French, and he reads it more than sixty years after its publication, in an era less optimistic. His responsive gestures are both melancholic and (perhaps self-consciously and self-effacingly) utopian, focusing on an all-caps directive:

MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC!  
MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE  
MYSTERIES!<sup>12</sup>

The spirit of the manifesto is distilled so that it resides in two glistening excerpts: *magic* and *objective mysteries*, reproduced by Gronsdahl in lowercase letterpress type. The words are embossed and debossed on white paper, forming neat diptychs. The dirty coversheets, bearing the traces of *magic* and *objective mysteries* also form a diptych. Nearby, two archival bankers boxes, tied with perfect butcher's twine bows, are placed in an acrylic case. The label indicates that there are sixteen *magic* prints in one box, and sixteen *objective mysteries* in the other.<sup>13</sup> Upon completion of the prints, the metal letterpress type was melted into two sparkling silvery blobs, quite literally made of *magic* and *objective mysteries*. It is as if these elusive properties are inherent in the

words we use to name them.

Gronsdahl's gestures distill the spirit of the manifesto, but they also diffuse it, inviting viewers to consider the utopian and ultimately political dimensions of recognizing the magical and mysterious in the quotidian and the everyday. He writes his own spare text, one that has many points of entry. What it lacks in specificity, it gains in its ability to, as Barthes describes, signify the multiple, to "appreciate what *plural* constitutes it."<sup>14</sup> By making the words from the manifesto signify more broadly, Gronsdahl's work finds its bliss in "de-politicizing what is apparently political and politicizing what apparently is not."<sup>15</sup>

The most incendiary (literally and figuratively) works in the exhibition belong to Lee Henderson. Like Gronsdahl's *Make Way for Magic! Make Way for Objective Mysteries!* Henderson's *Refinement Pavilion* series constitutes a reading of the social and political circumstances surrounding the publication and dissemination of text. In this case, Henderson has refused to read the work proper, opting to burn it instead. In doing so, Henderson proposes a refinement of literary canons, generally designated as the sum total of an author's works. Each *Pavilion* is comprised of a first-edition copy of a book published



Lee Henderson, *Refinement Pavilion* #2 [Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. PZ3.K11 TR], 2010, pewter, aluminum, silver, and ash, 25.4 x 15.2 x 15.2 cm



*Troy Grons Dahl, Lee Henderson, and Ève K. Tremblay, Becoming Book, 2013*

posthumously, against its author's wishes. Henderson acquires these rare and valuable books as supply and finances allow, and then cremates them, unread. He then seals these ashes in urns that are labeled with the name of the author, the title of the book, and the Library of Congress call number designated for each title.

A first-edition copy of Vladimir Nabakov's *The Original of Laura* (*Dying is Fun*) resides in a cherry wood box that would not be out of place in a gentleman's smoking room. Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is in a dignified brass pewter vase, classically Greco-Roman in form and minimally adorned. A wooden urn resembling a Protestant jewelry box sits open, awaiting the ashes of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson* – when Henderson finds a way to purchase one of the 500 first copies, which sell for around \$30,000 USD on the rare book market, he will destroy it, in retroactive accordance to the author's wishes.

Henderson's gesture is at once an empathetic response to a person's last wishes, and a writerly revision of the canon. He assumes a position of reader-as-editor, and in doing so redefines, albeit poetically and contingently, what might constitute the complete "work" of an author.

As Michel Foucault points out, "a theory of the work does not exist, and the empirical task of those who naively undertake the editing of works often suffers in the absence of such a theory."<sup>16</sup> Does an author's "work" consist of everything that was written? Unedited manuscripts? Correspondence? Notes? To-do lists? Nabakov's son Dmitri published the manuscript for *Laura* after over thirty years wavering over the implications of honouring or denying his father's requests. If Kafka's literary executor Max Brod had acted in accordance to the author's wishes, all of his major novels would have been destroyed. During Emily Dickenson's lifetime, fewer than a dozen of her poems were published; *The Complete Works* consists of nearly eight hundred poems, extensively edited and published posthumously by her sister, Lavinia. Henderson's symbolic refusal to accept these texts as "work" underscores the moral and intellectual dilemmas of the first readers of these texts.

The artists in *Becoming Book* disrespect the univocality and wholeness of the text. They read past the surface of the page, or beyond its margins. Their respective "readings" undo language, through excessive repetition, excessive condensation, and total destruction.

For Barthes, the pleasure of the text comes about when:

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary.<sup>17</sup>

Little Schrödinger cats all, these works both signify and refuse to speak; they are both disciplined and ornery. On one side, we are presented with spare, concise, and elegant forms: a well-composed suite of images, three sculptures on floating shelves, minimalist prints framed and hung in pairs, artifacts in vitrines, a musicological presentation to contextualize and justify. On the other side, the works allude to invisibility and anarchy: words consumed by the body and consumed by fire, sealed up, hidden. As Barthes notes, "(n)either culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so."<sup>18</sup> Tremblay, Grondahl and Henderson's works are situated in between these edges, on the margins of the text, and it is here that they find their bliss.

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 4th ed. (Toronto: McClelland, 1968), 137-138.

<sup>4</sup> Ève K. Tremblay, Letter to Ray Bradbury, 30 November 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ève K. Tremblay, Letter to Ray Bradbury, 12 December 2011.

<sup>6</sup> "We should try to rediscover the movements of this reading within the body itself, which seems to stay docile and silent but mines the reading in its own way: from the nooks of all sorts of "reading rooms" (including lavatories) emerge subconscious gestures, grumbings, tics, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body... To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a 'modern' experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor." de Certeau, 175-176.

<sup>7</sup> Ève K. Tremblay, quoted in Daniel Baird, "Words of Fire: Ève K. Tremblay and the dystopian classic *Fahrenheit 451*," *Canadian Art*, 29: 1 (Spring 2012), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Paul-Emile Borduas, "Total Refusal," in *Total Refusal/ Refus Global: The Complete 1948 Manifesto of the Montréal Automatists*, trans. and intro. Ray Ellenwood (Holstein, Ontario: Exile Editions, 2009), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Although it is not made explicit in this presentation, Grondahl informs me that he made a suite of prints for each of the signatories' mothers. Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*