

## Para//el Room

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It comes as no surprise that literature has inspired many great works of art. Whether it's the tradition of art criticism, book illustrations or text-based artistic practices (to name only a few), there is a long-standing relationship between art and writing. *Para//el Room* showcases the interconnectedness of the visual and the textual, with one perpetually invigorating the other. This exhibition is an extension and celebration of the bookshop at DNA artspace. Upon request, various artists sent one book title that has influenced their art practice to DNA. These books are labeled with the corresponding artist's name and displayed on two parallel tables at the centre of the exhibition space for visitors' perusal. Further complementing the inextricable nature of art and literature, there are eleven works by select artists accompanying their own suggested book titles among the larger central array of assorted novels, theories and reference books. This interdependent display puts art in conversation with its origins and perhaps highlights a creative process often grounded in intensive research.

After reaching out to numerous artists, the difficulty of selecting a singular influential book title was frequently remarked upon. Such an observation speaks not only to the boundless nature of inspiration and its infinite sources, but also to the complete and utter entanglement of art and literature with one another. Such entanglement is evidenced in Sandra Gregson's sculpture where the artist shredded *Ulysses* and sewed it back together as an affective, and performative, engagement with the act of reading. She literally remakes the story. In her artist statement, Gregson quotes Ali Smith: "Everything, sooner or later, transforms into story."<sup>1</sup> Smith's sentiment touches on the ways in which art is always already a story.

Perhaps the challenge of choosing one lone book to represent an entire art practice is what contributed to a number of theoretical texts (including Agamben, Kafka and Deleuze) cited as influential literature. These radical books have changed the way we think and understand things and are bound to remain deeply influential, both inside and outside the discipline of art, today. In addition to theory, DNA received diverse suggestions. Some of this literature is perhaps what one might expect. For example, creative novels and scholarly books, but also reference books. The Oxford

English Dictionary, as cited by Barbara Balfour, is a somewhat surprising source of inspiration. If inspiration is to be understood as an affected state of feeling, a creative force that compels, one might not expect a dictionary to trigger such a reaction—yet it does. Balfour uses terms and definitions as jumping off points for her artistic projects. The artist's print in *Para//el Room*, titled *Writing*, is part of a larger series, *Ex Libris*, of seven prints based on her personal set of bookshelves. Considering our use of the terminology we have available to us and the invention of neologisms, it is possible to see just how quickly a dictionary can open up a world of possibilities. From here, we might also conceive of the limitless possibilities of the creative process. But in this exhibition we don't actually see the process itself. Rather, we are left to imagine it as we are provided with only a point of departure (the book title) and a point of resolve (the created object). Of course the book itself is also a created object in its own right, underlining the complex, reciprocal relationship between the two mediums. Just as one informs the other, one also appears *in the form* of the other.

Both are a means of communication, both are attempts to express that which has no form of its own; namely, feelings, sensations and ideas. Sarah Nasby's artistic practice is rooted in exactly this attempt to give form to what we struggle to express. Art perhaps takes this concept further than literature as sometimes there are not even words that can truthfully express an idea. Jasmine Reimer's practice touches on and exposes moments "outside of normative language," and observes Gertrude Stein's maxim towards writing: "to obscure is to reveal." Reimer's *Shade* uses clay to conceal what might be in the foldable shopping cart. An everyday object transforms into the unfamiliar both from its galley setting and its combination with an unusual material. By making something foreign it opens up endless potential.

Often created objects, whether a book or a work of art, are returned to time and again for continued contemplation. Claire Scherzinger notes her own inspiration from Michael Ondaatje's writing. The artist hopes to embody the same circular narrative that Ondaatje employs in her own approach to painting. One can read the same book over and over and still find new meaning, mirroring the same results of continued return to artworks. Scherzinger believes this non-linear style is closer to the ways in which life unfolds. Her

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Smith, "The Hour and the Woman" (Harriet Martineau lecture, delivered in 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Luana Plesea, "Ballet Dancer Lizica Codreanu in Brancusi's Studio," World of Culture. Radio Romania International, 2015.

painting, *Lizica Codreanu Upside Down*, depicts a Romanian dancer and choreographer who was popular with avant-garde artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The swirling movement in this painting has a double function: it likely references Codreanu's dance profession, which recalls pivots, twists and spins in dance which, in turn, reflects Ondaatje's cyclical narrative style Scherzinger strives for. The continued return to, contemplation of and extraction of meaning from a literary or artistic work underlines a durational significance inherent in both mediums. It is only through such duration we might gain an increasingly enriched understanding of the ideas put forth in a particular object and gain new articulations. Patrick Howlett describes "the creation of art [as] a lived, evolving experience for both viewer and artist." This evolution also resonates with author and reader. Our understanding expands and develops by virtue of repeated contemplation.

Arguably, the recent ubiquity of e-books may contribute to this durational aspect due to their accessibility. Of course, this same ubiquity calls into question the very role, and possible extinction, of the printed book in contemporary society. However, an exhibition catalogue housed on a shelf at home, for example, is so much more than just a collection of bound pages and pictures. It is the memory of an experience in a particular time and place. Nasby's work is influenced by the ways in which souvenirs "stand in metonymically to represent lived experience." Fleeting experiences are made permanent. Books, then, are a kind of memory trigger that activate lived experiences and feelings—they are portals. This memory recollection is largely absent in online or electronic platforms, where the emotional attachment is replaced by a functional purpose. The printed book is not just a reading technology, but a socio-cultural technology.<sup>4</sup> They function as cherished souvenirs with immense phenomenological significance. Indeed, books are markers of identity and home-making, they are links to personal histories and they operate as part of a larger material ecosystem in the home.<sup>5</sup> Gregson expresses her interest "in the idea that what one reads becomes incorporated into identity," evidenced in her sculpture *Ulysses*.

*Para//el Room* meditates on and celebrates the book as a cherished item that still has a place today. The displayed books are dual purpose: they act as a kind of reference room or library, but also as art objects themselves. The bibliography of artists' book titles is digitally archived on DNA's website. It would be possible to recreate and even add to this selection in the future. *Para//el Room* is open ended by nature then since it has the potential to be ongoing. The exhibition is an opening up of the combined realm of literature and art, but it is also a literal opening up—of books. The ideas from which may stay with you longer after the fact.

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<sup>3</sup> Luana Plesea, "Ballet Dancer Lizica Codreanu in Brancusi's Studio," World of Culture. Radio Romania International, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Annika Hupfeld and Tom Rodden, "Books as a Social Technology," *ACM Digital Library* (accessed through Western Libraries), 639.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.