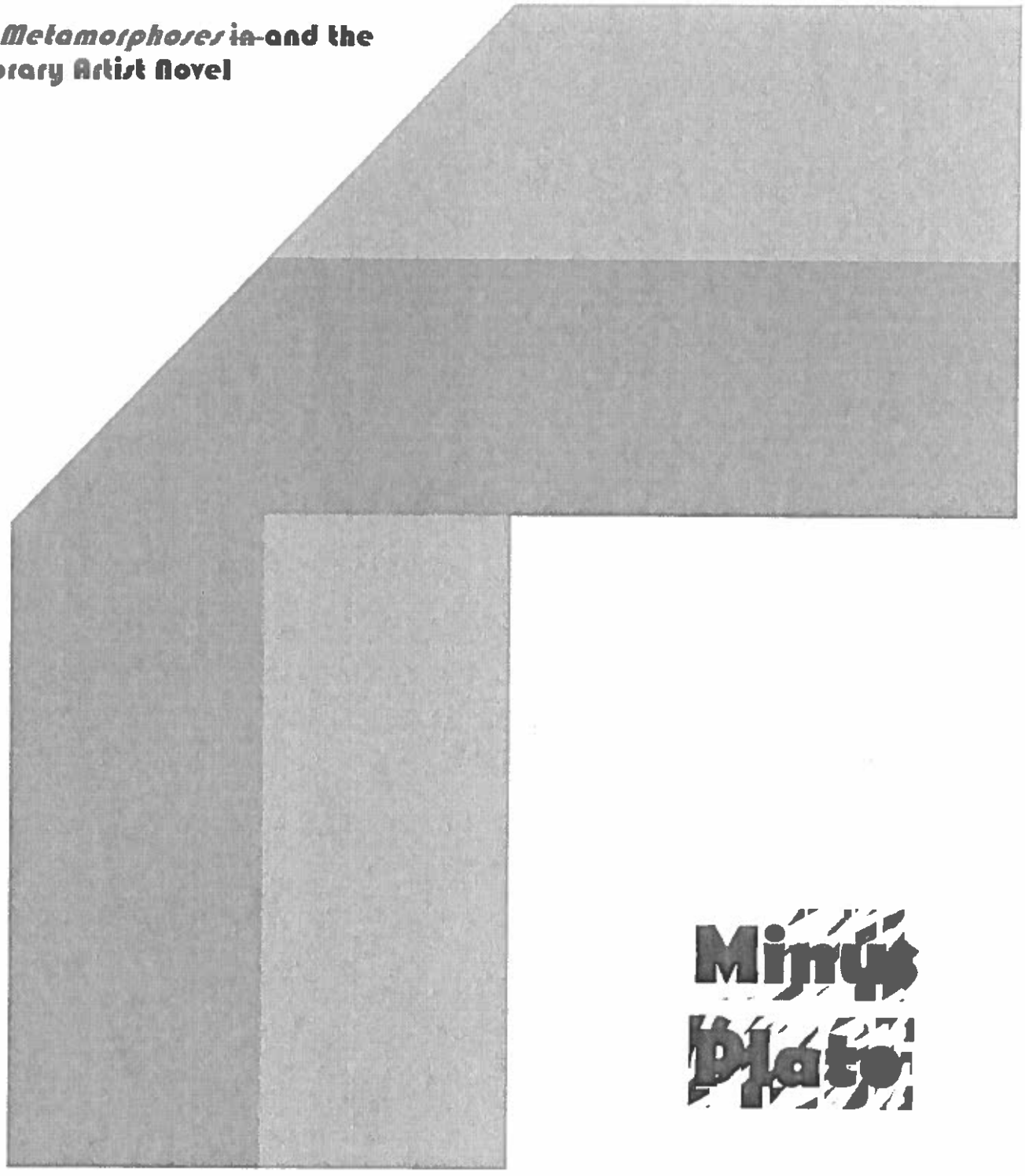
"A is for 'Orses" (Not for Asses):

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* ~~in~~ and the Contemporary Artist Novel



Minus Plato

THE GOLDEN ASS

APULEIUS



TRANSLATED BY SARAH RUDEN

and an excruciating death at that, is all lined up for you by decree of these bandits. That undertaking will require no great effort. You see that ravine nearby, and the needle-sharp slivers of stone sticking up in it? They would fly through you before you hit the ground, and, limb from limb, disintegrate you. That's because that heroic horse-poetic of yours, while giving you the appearance and career of a donkey, clothed you not in a donkey's hard hide but a membrane as thin as a leech's.

"Why not finally act like a male anyway, and take measures for your survival while there's still time? You have a superb chance for escape while the bandits are away. Are you afraid of that half-dead old woman on guard duty, whom you can finalize with a single kick, lame as your leg is? Yet where in the world can you flee, and who'll give you refuge? But what a dumb, asinine worry! Who among travelers wouldn't like to take someone along as his transport?"

27. Within the next second, I gave an enthusiastic tug at the strap by which they'd tethered me. It broke, and I began to shoot away in four-footed flight. But there was no escaping the sly little old vulture's eye. When she saw me loose, she mustered up boldness unusual for her age and sex. She caught my strap and fought to yank me around and drag me back. But no compunction guided me. I had in mind the bandits' murderous plans. Inflicting some backward kicks, I dashed her to the ground. Nevertheless, prone as she was, she clung stubbornly to the strap and followed me for some distance in my speedy course by insisting I drag her. But from the start she commenced, with howling shouts, to plead for help from a stronger hand than her own. Her sobbing cries were not salutary: the emergency force she sought to rouse in her defense did not exist — no one was there to render her assistance except the lone young captive girl, who at the summons of that voice ran out and saw, by Hercules, an impressive entertainment staged before her. A crone had the role of Dirce, and she was hanging not from a bull but a donkey. Inspired with resolve worthy of a man, Charite ventured a glorious deed. She wrenched the strap from Dirce's hand, clucked me calmly out of my bolting impetus, mounted me competently, and urged me into a further surge forward.

28. Given my independent passion for escaping, on top of my enthusiasm for freeing the girl, and also the encouraging advice in the form of rather frequent blows, my four feet pummeling the ground rivaled a racehorse's. I tried, while running, to whinny in reply to her caressing murmurs. And under the pretext of scratching my back, I bent my neck back several times and tried to kiss the young thing's fine feet. Then, sighing and anxiously lifting her face to the sky, she spoke:

"Ye gods on high, at long last grant me aid in these perils. Fortune, you are too harsh: leave off your savage attacks. This anguish, these humiliations I have undergone are sufficient propitiation for you.

"And you, guardian of my liberty and safety, convey me home unharmed and restore me to my parents and my comely betrothed, and what thanks I will tender, what honors I will render, what food will I present! First I shall comb out this mane of yours properly and decorate it with my own girlish trinkets. Then I will comb your forelock and part it prettily. The laying of your tail bristles has been neglected, leaving a scraggy conglomeration. With tasteful care, I will smooth them out. You shall wear a spangling, resplendent multitude of gold medallions like the heavenly stars and celebrate your triumph in a joyful civic procession. And every day after that, I shall bring, in my own silken bodice, nuts and other delicacies with which to cram my redeemer.

29. "And the exquisite food and deep leisure, and the richness of your life overall, your glorious prestige will find lasting celebration. For I shall cause to be fashioned a monument, an everlasting witness of my present providential deliverance, and I will dedicate that painted image of this escape, hanging it in the forecourt of my

[illegible] tale of the Princess Fleeing [illegible] the Back of an Ox will enter into oral literature. The [illegible] persons will embellish it for all time. You, a donkey, will [illegible] the wonders of old, and on the factual evidence you can [illegible] be convinced that Phrixus crossed the strait [illegible] that Arion navigated the sea on a dolphin, that Europa [illegible] out on a bull as if it were a dining couch. And truly, if [illegible] the shape of a mooing ox, then may he [illegible] the countenance of a man or the visage of a god.

While the girl worked over this theme thoroughly, blending [illegible] with her prayers, we came to a fork in the road. Tug- [illegible] my halter, she made a mighty effort to steer me to the right, [illegible] because this was the way to her parents' home. But I knew the robbers had gone in that direction, toward the rest of their loot. I struggled resolutely against her, this unspoken remon- [illegible] mind.

"What are you doing, wretched girl? What are you up to? Why, are you in such a hurry to go down to the realm of the dead? And why do you want me on my feet? It's not only your destruction ahead, but mine."

There we were, pulling [illegible] ways, disputing boundaries, and the ownership of ground — in this case, a roadway — when the bandits appeared, weighed down with their booty, and caught us red-handed. By the brilliant moonlight they'd recognized us from far off, and now they greeted us with cynical laughter.

One of their company addressed us. "Whither are you so [illegible] tripping, by the light of yonder moon? Aren't you afraid of the ghosts and demons abroad at the dead of night? Were you [illegible] to pay a visit to your parents, virtuous little virgin that you are? You're all alone, poor thing, but we'll protect you. We'll [illegible] you a shortcut to where you belong — we'll pay it you come [illegible]."

[illegible] another of them, following up those words with action,

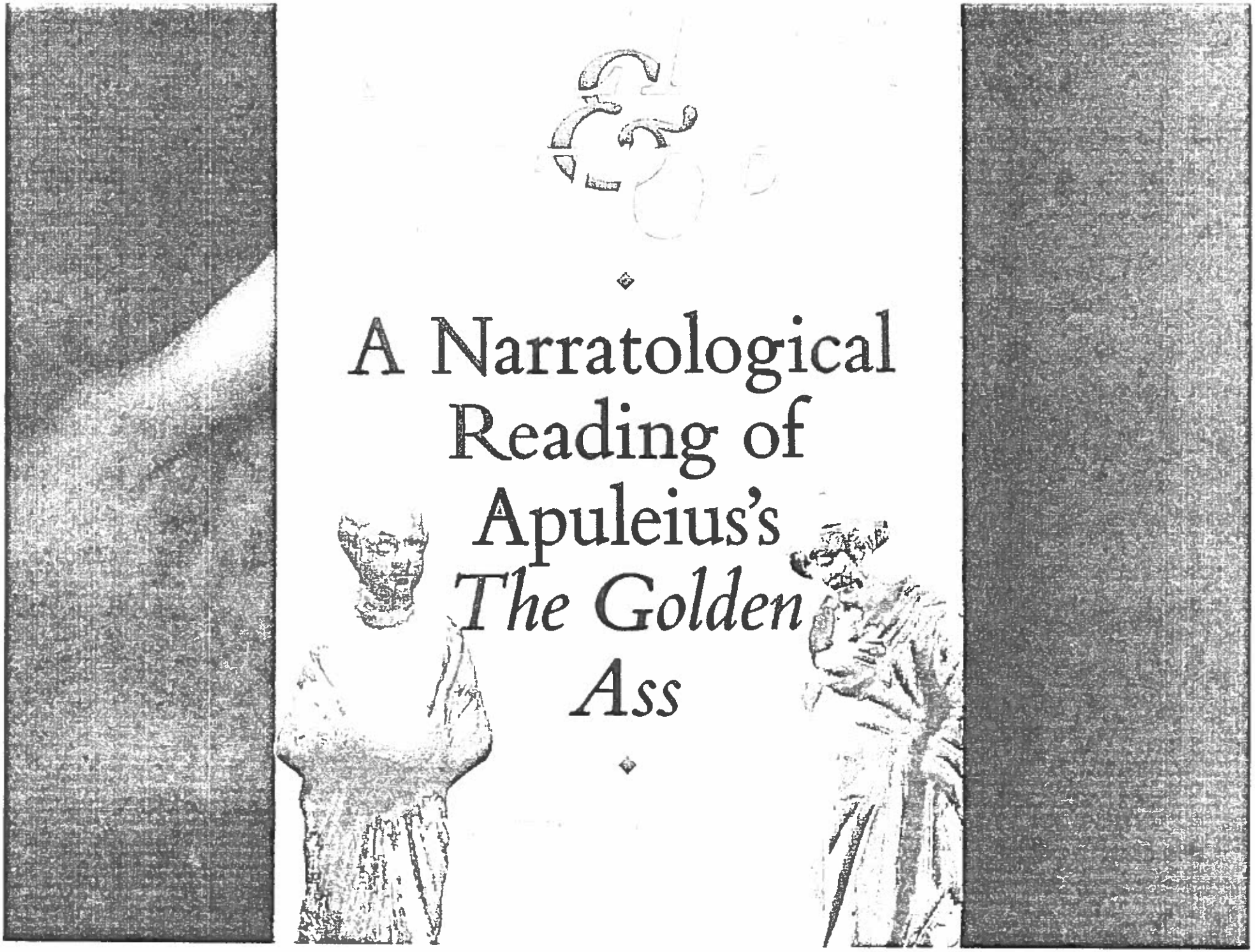
grabbed my lead and wrenched me in reverse. He didn't spare the usual blows, inflicting them with the knotty staff he carried. Then, as I was hurrying back — which would hardly have been my first choice — to the place where death awaited me, it occurred to me again that my hoof was in pain, and I commenced to limp, with my head bobbing up and down.

"Look at you," said the man dragging me. "You're reeling and staggering again. Those putrified feet of yours can run away, but they don't know how to walk! Just a bit ago, you were breaking the winged Pegasus's record."

This genial comedian of a guide led me along, brandishing his cudgel, until we arrived at the outer fortifications of the bandits' home. And there she was — the old woman, a noose around her neck, hanging by a branch of a towering cypress. They hauled her down, trussed her up with no fuss in her own scrap of rope, and tossed her headfirst over the cliff. They then lost no time in eying the girl spread-eagled and assaulting the supper the wretched hag had prepared with a care that defied her plans for death.

31 Even before, in their fierce gluttony, they'd made a massacre of the meal, they started to deliberate over which punishment of us would satisfy them. As usual in rowdy company, opinions varied; and they were as follows. One man voted for burning the girl alive. A second lobbied for throwing her to wild animals. A third urged nailing her to a cross; a fourth expounded on the benefits of mangling her still-breathing flesh out of existence with assorted tortures. There was, at any rate, an unambiguous and unanimous decision to put her to death.

Then, when the general tumult had settled down, someone embarked on a calm disquisition: "It wouldn't be in keeping with the policy of our association, nor with the usual humanity of our individual members, nor, certainly, with my own sense of restraint, if I were to acquiesce in your rage, which is uncivilized and out of proportion to this crime. Beasts, crosses, fire? Why, she doesn't merit



A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*

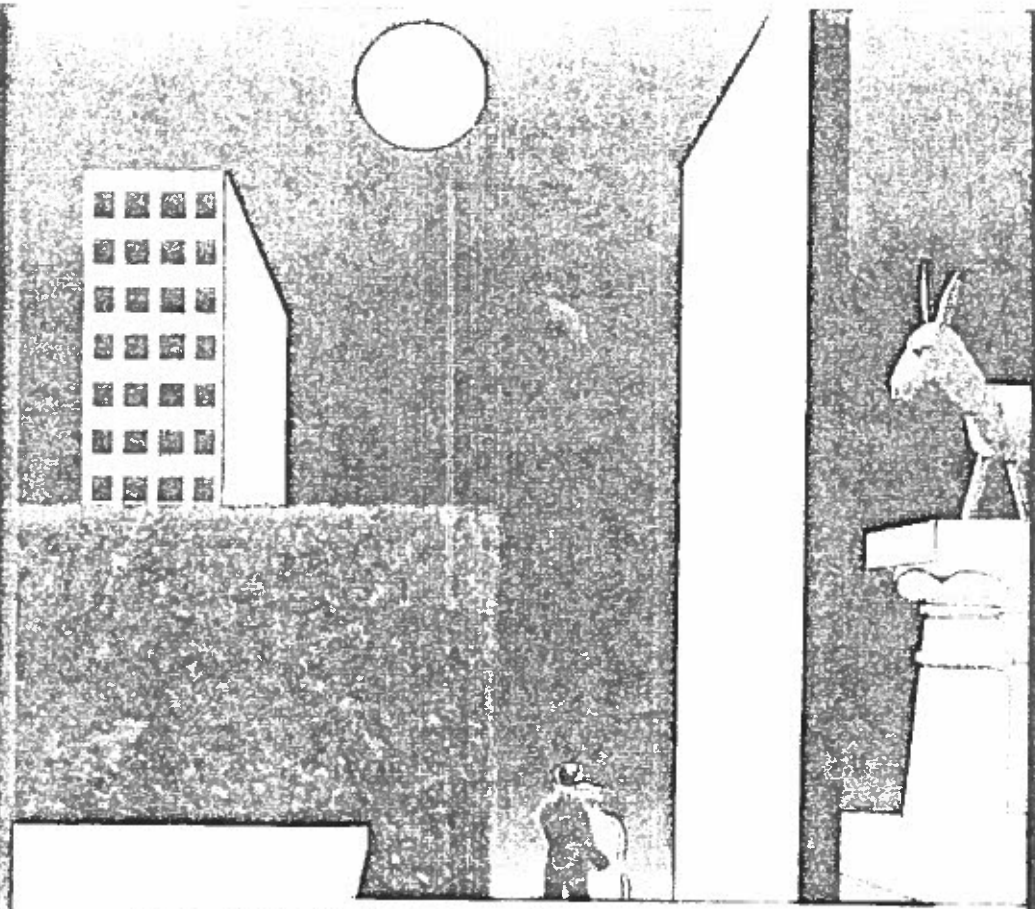
The pun at the end of the autobiographical digression breaks the illusion of consistency by the laughable claim "I was the braying speaker." The comparable moment in Book 11 is perhaps the god's reference to Lucius as "Madaurian," which similarly shatters consistency. Both *rudis locutor* and *Madaurensem* are significant jokes about one of the premises of our reading, viz., the identification of a coherent narrator. The author Apuleius writes throughout as if he really were Lucius (though most readers must assume that that is a fiction) and similarly Lucius speaks as if he really had been an ass (ditto). Both *rudis locutor* and *Madaurensem* could be called a sphragis, a stylistic signature guaranteeing the authenticity of the text, and both are equally unthinkable. They balance each other: *Madaurensem* invites a prereligious view of the author behind Lucius to whom Lucius's career in some sense really applies; *rudis locutor* invites a more cynical appreciation of the author's distance as one who riddlingly conceals and reveals not his African identity but his asinine identity.

The autobiographical digression, then, is vague for a purpose. The peculiar uninformativeness of its contents *(inox, puer)* is preparation for a joke. The silliness of it is abysmal, not at all the important statement it has usually been taken for. Further, the references to Greek become Latin are also given a double meaning: "In fact this very mutation of voice [from human to asinine] already answers to the equestrian acrobatic science I here essay."[35] The "already" *(iam)* now becomes more pointed: "This very pun that I have just [*iam*] made about the transformation of the narrator's voice from sweet whisper to shocking bray is a sample of the knowledge you may expect from my circus."[36]

The "knowledge" *(scientia)* of an acrobat who leaps from one galloping horse to another or from a moving horse to the ground and back again is that which enables him to predict and respond to the animals' independent motion. The Apuleian leaps of the mind are therefore dyness to the second degree. The *auctor*'s ingenuity is not an independent variable but a response calculated in relation to the cleverness of others—of the Greek *Lucius, or the Ass* of the *actor*, of the

[35] *... [illegible] ... equestrem acrobatae ... [illegible] ... [illegible] ...*

[36] Equestrian acrobats: in my translation and Lucius' many prepuces comes from *callidus Eutrapelus* a permissus trained to jump off and onto cantering horses and to somersault from horse to horse.



CAMBRIDGE CLASSICAL STUDIES

Apuleius' Platonism

The Impersonation of Philosophy

RICHARD FLETCHER

CAMBRIDGE

ventriloquised by our Platonist author (Apuleius). However, the reference to the transseers sets up a second part of Lucius' response which in turn is ridiculed by Milo and inverted in *De deo Socratis*. Here again we cannot read *De deo Socratis* as the 'master text' for the dialogue between Lucius and Milo. Because the fictional narrative 'implicates' the same text for two sides of an argument. Moreover, this fictional scene contributes to the protreptic force of *De deo Socratis*, whereby it is not simply the recognition of *daemones* as intermediaries but the cultivation of your own *animus* that matters: just as it is not simply listening to wonderful narratives with your ears, but also with your *animus*. When philosophy 'appears' in the form of a lecture, a name or a situation, we are manipulated into first recognising a manifestation to be philosophical work and then witnessing it being parodied. But, as the case of *De deo Socratis* shows, the truth cannot be so simply mapped onto a specific decontextualised passage or a 'philosophical work'.

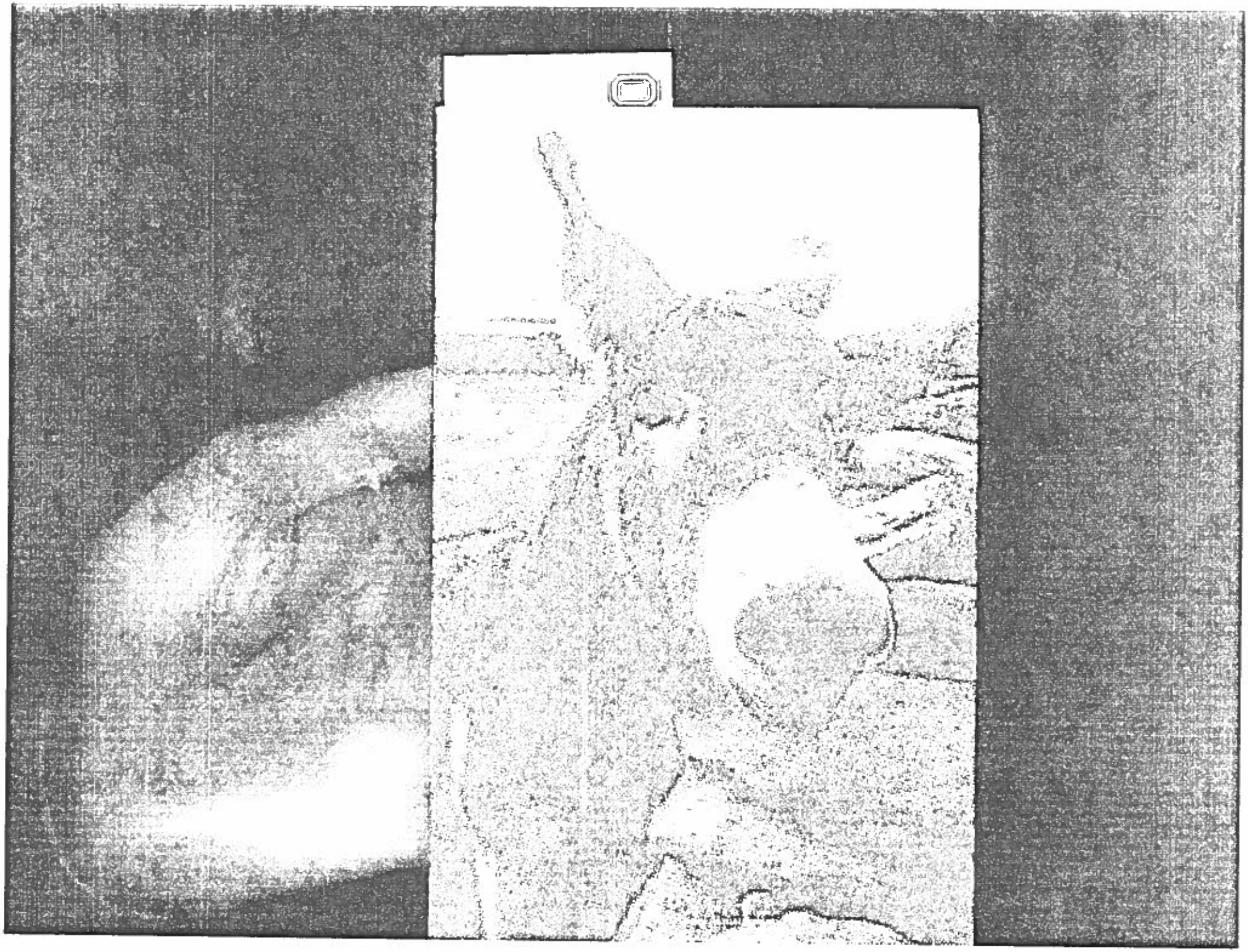
This section intimates that any discussion of Platonism in terms of general references and developments in the *Metamorphoses* is insufficient. Instead, I would argue that we must see the basic narratological force of the novel in terms of Apuleius' Platonism as we have witnessed it develop across the corpus. In the spirit of previous approaches to Apuleius' Platonism, such Platonist total readings have been offered and, on the whole, rejected. For example, where Penwill described the *Metamorphoses* as 'a Platonist's personal account of how he finally escaped from the cave of delusion into the sunlight of reality',[27] in direct opposition, though borrowing Penwill's basic pattern, Winkler argued that Apuleius ultimately abandoned his Platonic and Isiac project (adopted to follow Plutarch) because 'by the time Lucius-Apuleius comes to tell his tale, the cult of Isis and Osiris appears to him as deluded as the pursuit of

witchcraft'.[28] These basic Platonic narrative patterns, authorised by their particular conceptions of Apuleius' Platonism, in their positive and negative manifestations, delineate the general dichotomy of interpretations of the final Isis book as split between serious and comic reading. But they also gesture towards the more nuanced methodological possibility that my book has aimed to sketch.

As we have seen, Apuleius' Platonism as the impersonation of philosophy works as a powerful mode of characterisation. His corpus replays a core narrative about how philosophy became Platonic philosophy and how the philosopher becomes a Platonic philosopher. The peak of this trajectory is how Apuleius ultimately achieves a position to speak his brand of Platonic philosophy. Apuleius' tells this tale in *De Platone* as well as for himself on trial in the *Apologia*. This narrative is encapsulated in the dual formation of Platonic philosophy as both Socratic in the *labor*, the filing down with *ratio* and Platonic in the *elegantia* of its dressed up *oratio*. But the *Metamorphoses* is not a narrative about a philosopher. Neither protagonist – Lucius *actor* nor the narrator – Lucius *auctor* – can by any (well, almost any!) stretch of the imagination be classed as philosophical characters. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the *Metamorphoses* cannot offer a 'narratology for philosophy', a theoretically nuanced account of how philosophy operates *as* a narrative.[29] Rather than the metaphysical narrative of the escape from the cave or the failed Platonist narrative of the Isis-Osiris cult as yet another delusion, the *Metamorphoses* can offer an insight into how both operate in tandem as stages of the idealised philosophical narrative. By weighing in on the *Metamorphoses* I am committed to seeing Apuleius' Platonism as a methodology. I will first show how Winkler takes one approach to Apuleius' Platonism by making the Socratic figure the poster-boy of his aporetic reading; then I shall explore a typical response to Winkler that privileges the allusive texture of the novel as establishing a horizon

[27] Kenney (2003) 168 n. 165.

[29] I thank Lin Gunderson for this slogan which he used to characterise my work at the delivery of a talk in Toronto.



"Aren't you sometimes frightened at being planted out here, with nobody to take care of you?"
"There's the tree in the middle. What else is it good for?" asked the Rose
"But what could it do if any danger came?" Alice asked.
"It could bark," said the Rose.
"It says 'Bough-wough!'" cried a Daisy.

F.R. DAVID

Editorial

"There is nothing that men make a greater noise about, in our time especially, than what they generally profess least of all to understand." John Toland, 1696

If Words, *in those felicitous examples of the species in question ascribed to Eli Robert Fitoussi (born on the first of January 194- in the Northern Tunisian town of Menzel Bourguiba) truly* Don't Come Easy, *there are really only two possible paths for art (and culture more generally) to take to circumvent the abyss of potential Deathlike Silence – for silence really isn't golden, but the easily misunderstood (and mythologized) absence of life instead – that is lodged at the very heart of Language as the all-encompassing, all-defining fact of human existence, the fabric of the world* (pace *Lacan*) *we are all born into: either we agree that, to dust off a well-known nugget of Wittgensteinian wisdom, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" and 'invent' the pernicious illusion of transcendence in the process, which appears to promise a world after and beyond language (and believe us, there is none) – or else we try to revert to a world of language before words, or to* invent *new languages made up of old utterances.*

One day, a history of modern, twentieth-century and contemporary art will (hopefully) be written from the point of view of its hot-cold, love-hate relationship

with the realm of the spiritual, with transcendence and the various regimes of religious experience – a history of art's eternal doubt as to whether it is part of the disenchantment of the world (our guess, our hope) or of its continuing re-enchantment instead.

It is clear, of course, that we are once again finding ourselves to the far right side of this endless pendular motion – a simple fact attested by the sheer number of exhibitions currently devoted to the sacred, the occult, the mystical, the magical, and its various aesthetic accoutrements and manifestations (belief, darkness, ecstasy, enigma, metamorphosis, shadow play, silence…), and symbolically enshrined (no pun intended) in the belated induction of latter-day Capitalist Realist Gerhard Richter into the pantheon of ecclesiastical artists – a reference to Richter's *Kompendium* design for the Cologne Cathedral, named as the defining artistic event of 2007 – and not for some arid cynical reason – by none other than Benjamin Buchloh, once the foremost Marxist art critics of his generation who will perhaps be best remembered for his ruthless dismantling (back when such an operation was still deemed necessary, in the salad days of postmodernism) of the Beuys myth. Never before has the art world been as willing, ready and able as today to truly believe (clearly the operative verb here) Bruce Nauman on his word when he asserted that "the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" – the spiraling neon sign which greeted visitors (pilgrims?) at the entrance of the *Traces of the Sacred* exhibition

held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris last spring. (Another striking instance of mass conversion took place in the turbine halls of the Tate some years ago, under the all-seeing solar I of Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* – but we can't get bogged down in that right now.) Here, precisely, lies the reason why Wittgenstein's famous dictum "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" – as the elliptical closing sentence of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it is of course left open to a potentially endless variety of interpretations; yet out of respect for the taut, rigorous logical structure of the *Tractatus* itself, these interpretations should ideally be treated with continuously renewed sobriety and structural skepticism – especially with regards to those interpretations that appear all too ready to jump to mystical, obscurantist conclusions – has been the subject of so much outright and outrageous abuse, and why silence – the absence of speech and the haughty depreciation of its reason – has been so wrongly overrated. To those who are flocking (back) to the spaces of art because they have been called, erroneously and rather unimaginatively, the churches of the post-secular world, where all come to assemble and bow down before the mute gospel of art's profound mysteriousness, to all those craving for the comforting, uterine darkness of the cultic, we would like to say that (apart from the obvious and the obviously important, namely: "Attention! There is no God!"), although words don't come easy, silence – the darkness of language – is not the answer. To all those who have



Artist

Edited by
David Maroto and Joanna Zielińska

Roland Barthes, Matthew Brannon,
Barbara Browning, Marie de Brugerolle,
Angus Cameron, Guy de Cointet,
Henry J. Darger, Liam Gillick,
Kenneth Goldsmith, Christopher K. Ho,
Yayoi Kusama, Jill Magid, Ralph McCarthy,
Tom McCarthy, Ingo Niermann,
Seth Price, Cheng Ran, Valérie Rousseau,
Lindsay Seers, Seth Siegelaub,
Monika Szewczyk, Jan Tumlir

Novels

In the study of the relation between literature and the visual arts, the novel hasn't been a focus of study. While poetry has enjoyed a preeminent position in delving into this relationship, the novel hasn't gotten as much serious attention. For now, we'll have to leave the reason for this to speculation. But artists have been writing novels for a long time; Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Francis Picabia, and Dorothea Tanning are just a few examples. Although the fact that artists write novels is something that we will constantly consider and acknowledge in this book, the intention behind *Artist Novels* is more specific. In recent years, a significant number of artists have turned to the novel with more ambition than to simply produce a piece of narrative fiction. There are multiple ways to explore this phenomenon, but we have opted for setting the tone with some passages from Roland Barthes's *The Preparation of the Novel*, a series of lectures at the Collège de France between 1978 and 1980. Barthes approached the process of writing a novel (his own in fact) as a fantasy, and he wondered about the conditions under which it is possible to realize the desire-to-write. Translated in our own terms: What causes the desire-to-write in visual artists? What is specific to the artist novel?

Like a spiral that becomes wider at each turn, the structure of *Artist Novels* moves in circles around the object of its research. The departing point is an analysis of the space of the page, which reflects on the literary aspects of the artist novel. This notion – the space of the page – is gradually expanded to the space where it is read. Visual artists create different strategies to integrate their novels into their artistic practice. These usually include a wide range of media, such as installation, video, sculpture, drawing, performance, painting, and the novel itself. Treating them all on the same level implies a redefinition of art practice. Accepting the novel as a legitimate medium in the visual arts also raises questions for art mediators: How can we curate artist novels? Are art institutions prepared to show a kind of art that is eminently narrative, that requires an active, protracted engagement from the spectator?

The spectator is now in fact also a reader, which brings the outlined spiral toward issues of distribution in public space, and to questions about how, or even if, we can understand the artist novel as a form of intervention. There are two additional sections: "First Published" and "The History of The Book Lovers." The former presents a selection of excerpts from artist novels, which were until now, for different reasons, not available to the wider public (never published, Henry J. Darger, published but rare, Guy de Cointet; published only in Japanese, Yayoi Kusama; concealed by the artist in his artworks and thus only accessible to a few, Matthew Brannon). The latter additional section, on the other hand, is an overview of the diverse projects developed within The Book Lovers: exhibitions, public programs, performances, a pop-up bookstore, a symposium, and, of course, the collection and database of artist novels. Last but not least, we are including a bibliography of artist novels. It is still in progress and thus incomplete, but we believe that it can be a useful contribution to knowledge in this area. Thanks to the many points of view from a select group of artists, writers, curators, and scholars, *Artist Novels* strives to demonstrate that literature, when treated by visual artists, can take place well beyond the space of the book.

David Maroto and Joanna Zielińska



Expanded spiral of narrative fiction

from Conceptual arts

ok Lovers' interest lies in
ifferent ways in which
in artists' projects. Here,
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are interrelated and find
:e in its narrative. As Daniel
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Another relevant example
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Two processes are at play: the writing of a novel and its visual counterpart and the art project that is created in parallel. Although in their novels there might be references to a literary tradition, the artists' approach is more fundamentally coming from the visual arts. The creation of an artist novel doesn't differ from any other artwork. Both processes influence each other as they evolve within the same body of works. In 2011, Cally Spooner produced her novel *Collapsing in Parts* over a period of eight months. She shared the writing process with her audience, which could follow its evolution periodically in a series of public events organized by the artist under the name Footnotes – performances, films, a reading group, and a group show acted as footnotes to the text in progress.

There is a public dimension inherent to the novel format. Artists make use of its potential for mass distribution in order to enlarge the possibilities of reaching an audience beyond institutional art spaces, such as galleries and museums. The kind of engagement that artist novels requires differs the usual spectator's experience within the white cube. Reading a book can take weeks. It becomes a life experience that happens in one's daily environment. One takes it to bed, reads it on the train, while eating, and so on. Narrative fiction is a valid means of conveying complex contents in an accessible form. From this point of view, artist novels might respond to the artist's need to reclaim a lost territory, the one that mediates between the artwork (that relates to the novel) and the spectator. Instead of delegating the production of a text that bridges the gap between the audience and an artwork, which often brings obscurity to that artwork through highly specialized critical jargon, some artists have decided to take the responsibility to write a text that mediates between artwork and audience in an accessible format, like the novel. The artist novel offers itself as a comprehensible medium to an

audience that is – at least potentially – wider than the usual "art crowd."

The Book Lovers strives to create knowledge about artist novels. In our numerous conversations with artists, we noticed that most of them are oblivious to other artists who also write novels. This is an unusual situation. After all, it would be natural for an artist who makes her first video art piece to learn some basic history of the medium in order to add something significant to what has been done, and not to naively repeat experiments that already have been carried out. This is clearly not the case with artist novels. The lack of knowledge gives no references or models to work upon. While it is true that such circumstances render every creative strategy unique and marks the present as a very exciting moment, the creation of knowledge is necessary in order to open up future perspectives for those who decide to explore the, as yet, uncharted area of artist novels.

1) http://ensembles.mnka.be/ensembles/the-book-lovers.

2) AA Bronson, *Lena* (Northampton: Taurus Books, 1968); Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, trans. John Ashbery, Mark Polizzotti, et al. (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992), first published 1929; Keren Cytter, *The Amazing True Story of Moshe Kimberg* (Paris: Onestar Press, 2009); Salvador Dalí, *Hidden Faces*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2007), first published 1944 by Dial Press; Yayoi Kusama, *The Hustler's Grotto of Christopher Street*, trans. Ralph F. McCarthy (Berkeley: Wandering Mind Books, 1984). See appendix at the end of this publication for the complete bibliography.

3) Goldin+Senneby and K. D. *Headless* (Berlin/New York/Stockholm: Sternberg Press/Triple Canopy/Tensta Konsthall, 2015); Jill Magid, *Failed States* (Portland, Vancouver: Publication Studio, 2012); Mai-Thu Perret, "The Crystal Frontier" in *Land of Crystal*, ed. Christoph Keller (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2003); Rose Rosen [Justine Frank, pseud.], *Sweet Sweat* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009); M. Anthor Penrod [Lindsay Seers], *It Has To Be This Way* (London: Matt's Gallery, 2009); Benja Seror, *Mime Radio* (forthcoming 2014); Alexandre Singh, *The Marque of the Third Stripe* (Rome: Preromanbritain and Monitor Gallery, 2010); Cally Spooner, *Collapsing in Parts* (Birmingham: International Project Space, 2011).

4) Daniel Kuntz, "Texting: The Artist as Writer as Artist," *Modern Painters* (Summer 2011): 54–60.

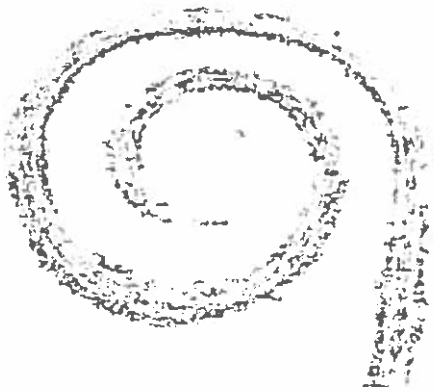
5) T. J. Demos, "Openings: Goldin+Senneby," *Art Forum International* 49, no. 7 (March 2): 252–54.

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on the wall or in





DISPERSION

the street, but avant-garde work is often illegible without institutional framing and the work of the curator or historian. More than anyone else, artists of the last hundred years have wrestled with this trauma of context, but theirs is a struggle that necessarily takes place within the art system. However radical the work, it amounts to a proposal enacted within an arena of peer-review, in dialogue with the community and its history. Reflecting on his experience running a gallery in the 1960s, Dan Graham observed: "If a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of 'art' It seemed that in order to be defined as having value, that is as 'art', a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine." Art, then, with its reliance on discussion through refereed forums and journals, is similar to a professional field like science.

What would it mean to step outside of this carefully structured system? Duchamp's Rotorelief experiment stands as a caution, and the futility of more recent attempts to evade the institutional system has been well demonstrated. Canonical works survive through documentation and discourse, administered by the usual institutions. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, for example, was acquired by (or perhaps it was in fact 'gifted to') the Dia Art Foundation, which discreetly mounted a photograph of the new holding in its Dan Graham-designed video-café, a tasteful assertion of ownership.

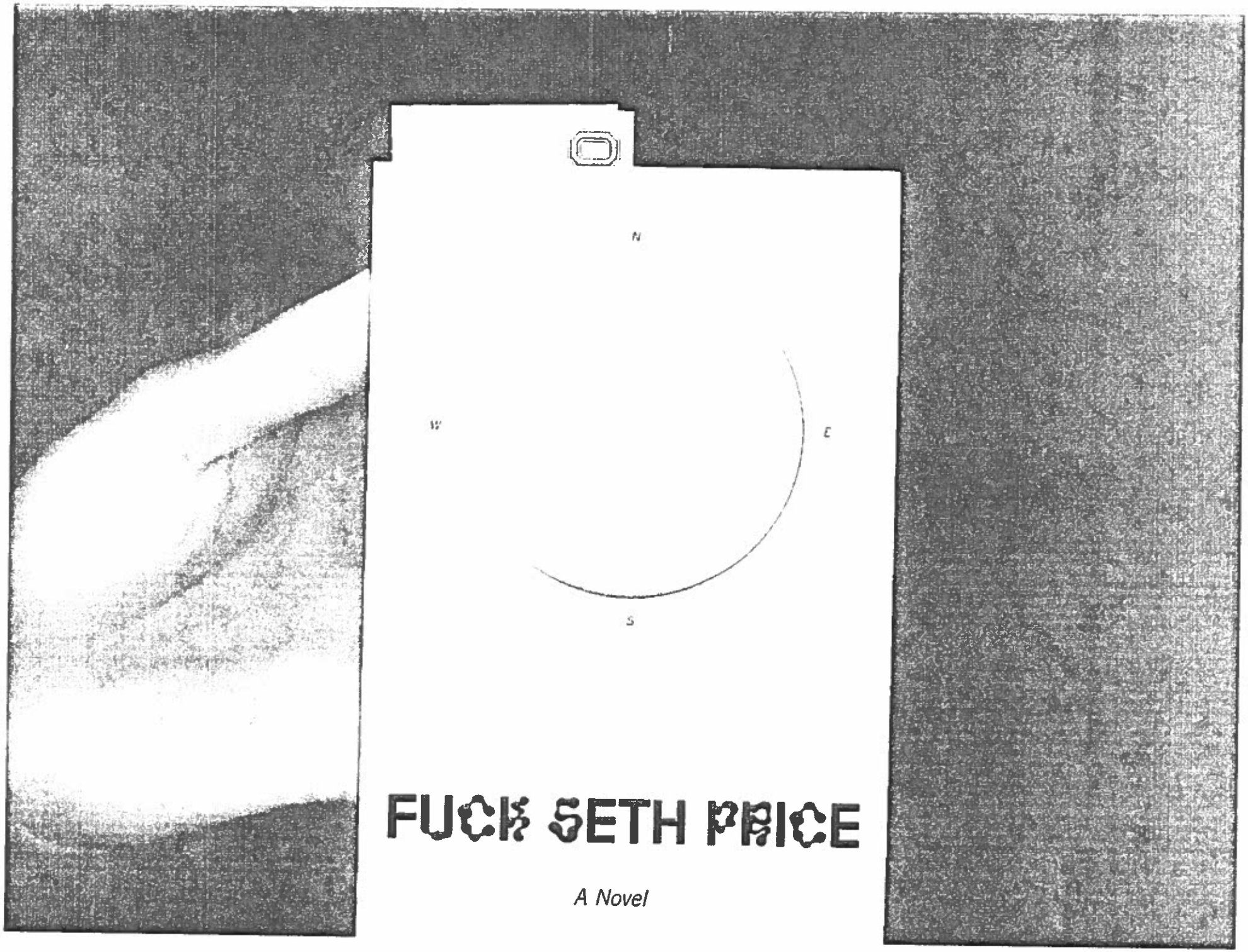
That work which seeks what Allan Kaprow called "the blurring of art and life" work which Boris Groys has called biopolitical, attempting to "produce and document life itself as pure activity by artistic means," faces the problem that it must depend on a record of its intervention into the world, and this documentation is what is recouped as art, short-circuiting the original intent. Groys sees a disparity thus opened between the work and its future existence as documentation, noting our "deep malaise towards documentation and the archive." This must be partly due to the archives deathlike appearance, a point that Jeff Wall has echoed, in a critique of the unenvyingly "tomblike" Conceptualism of the 1960s.

Agreement! A paragraph of citations, a direction, the suggestion that one is getting a sense of things. What these critics observe is a popular suspicion of the archive of high culture, which relies on cataloguing, provenance, and authenticity. Insofar as there is a popular archive, it does not share this administrative tendency. Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?



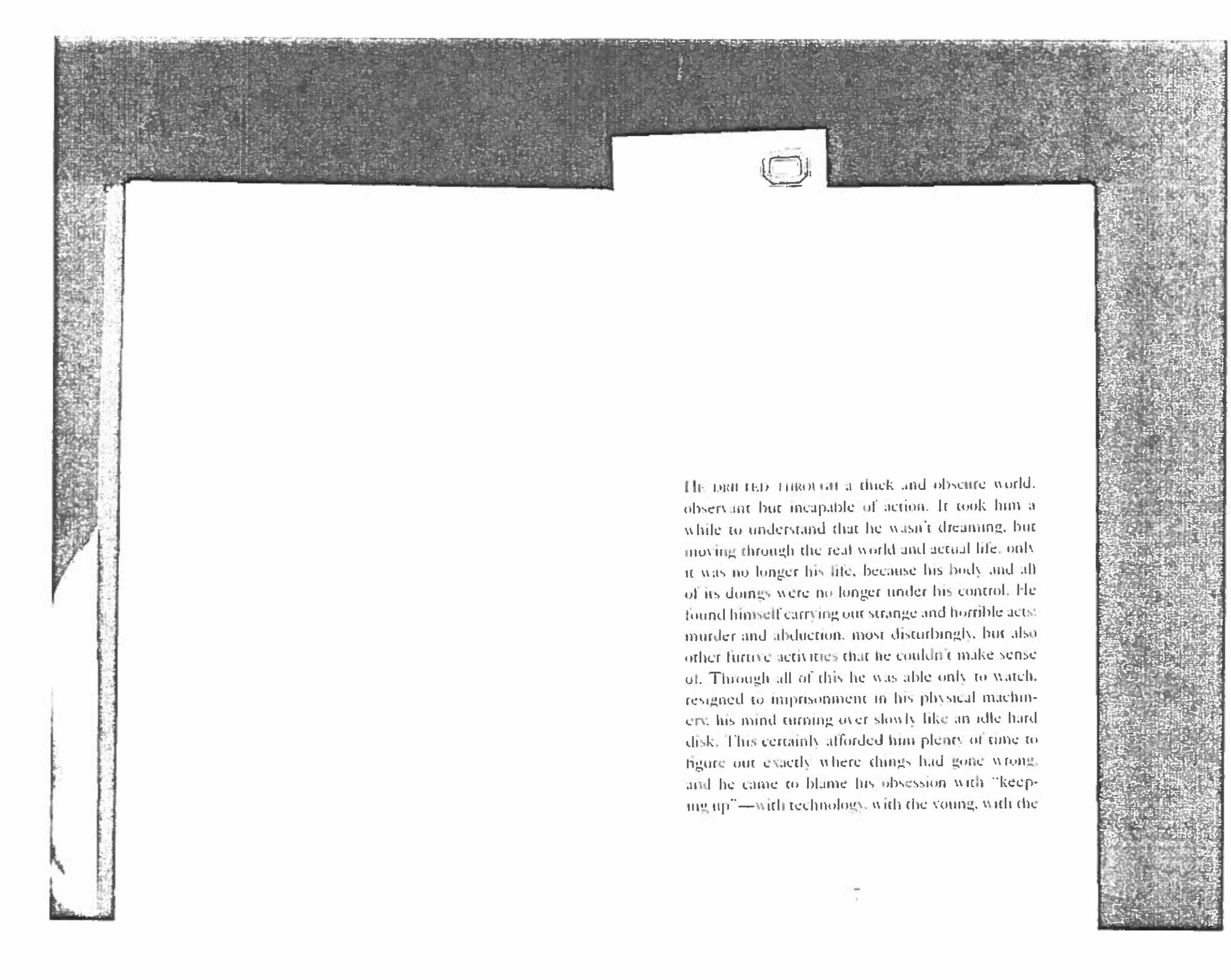
"Clip Art," 1985

SETH PRICE



FUCK SETH PRICE

A Novel



He drifted through a thick and obscure world, observant but incapable of action. It took him a while to understand that he wasn't dreaming, but moving through the real world and actual life, only it was no longer his life, because his body and all of its doings were no longer under his control. He found himself carrying out strange and horrible acts: murder and abduction, most disturbingly, but also other furtive activities that he couldn't make sense of. Through all of this he was able only to watch, resigned to imprisonment in his physical machinery, his mind turning over slowly like an idle hard disk. This certainly afforded him plenty of time to figure out exactly where things had gone wrong, and he came to blame his obsession with "keeping up"—with technology, with the young, with the

culture—a pursuit that had replaced even artistic production as his chief occupation, filling the vacuum that had opened up when he had more or less stopped making art.

It was easy to locate the moment of inspiration that had rejuvenated his painting career, making him rich and ultimately leading him to reject contemporary art. One day in the early 2000s, he'd been sitting in a new Italian restaurant, considering his supper. For decades now, he remarked to himself as he regarded a bowl of grated pecorino, Americans had possessed a sure idea of what Italian food was: what it tasted like, what it looked like, what it *meant*. For his parents' generation, and even within his own childhood, Italian food meant Italian-American food, an immigrant form, once alien but now ubiquitous, a way of putting dinner on the table, hardly a cuisine. Then the '80s happened, and everyone discovered real Italian food, food from Italy, and defiantly not Italian-American food, which consequently entered a kind of limbo. Spaghetti and meatballs? Yes, everyone still liked it and cooked it, it still had its place, but that place was not a trendy restaurant.

Recently, however, which is to say in the early 2000s, shortly before he'd had his revelation, some notable chef had realized that spaghetti and meatballs was what people had wanted all along, and why shouldn't they have it? This chef understood that you could give diners what they wanted without abandoning culinary invention and the associated high prices. What you did was trundle out lowbrow recipes and thematize them, burnishing them for a new audience too young to remember why the recipes had been discarded in the first place. To use a mid-'90s term, the old recipes were upcycled. Originally this had implied the redemption of waste material through canny adaptation and was widely associated with environmentalism and Third World do-gooderism; no one had previously thought to apply the notion to the world of conceptual food service.

It was a runaway success. Customers were excited and relieved to plunge into the frisson of the old/new, and restaurants all over the city, and then internationally, adopted the formula. Soon came high-end tweakings of meat loaf, mac and cheese, donuts, PB&J sandwiches, chicken wings, and even Twinkies: all cherished comfort foods that no one had previously thought to rework as pricey lifestyle fare. It must have been the times, he mused,

this exhilarating lie *believed* in it. And this tangle of contradictions was the greatest thing about art: it always meant the opposite of what you thought it meant, or wanted it to mean. Abstract versus representational, old versus new, pure versus corrupt, tasteful versus tasteless, all artistic values and categories were inherently unstable and might suddenly swap places.

Recalling his breakthrough into digital art-making a decade earlier, he suspected that the moment he'd grasped the fact that digital art's genius was to reconcile all opposites was the start of his disenchantment with contemporary art, and with the digital more generally, which was a condition predicated on reconciliation, leveling, and synthesis. Representational painting was just as banal and outmoded as its old foe abstraction, so why was it interesting to gesture at both of them at once? Who gave a shit? From the point of view of the machine he'd set in motion, all these oppositions of taste and style were merely marketing factors to be co-opted, the way Whole Foods might absorb a pair of rival local grocers only to preserve them as themed deli counters so as to share all the old clientele. Either/or was irrelevant, save as a gimmick to capture market share. It was a deep irony that the mechanisms of digital culture were built on a binary fundament even as that culture sought to eradicate all opposition, contradiction, and friction on an ontological level, steadily reducing human variety to a kind of affirmative mush.

It was not a coincidence that his disenchantment with visual art occurred right around the time when making simplistic, often digitally formulated abstract paintings became suddenly passé, as was discussing them, critiquing them, even satirizing them. These paintings amounted to societal self-portraiture, and an age grows tired of its own face. Casting about for something to do, he found himself newly interested in writing, which, in comparison to art, offered delightfully fresh challenges. He recognized the peculiarity of this: steep advanced painting since the Impressionists had jettisoned the aim of re-creating a recognizable, narrativized human world and had plunged into abstraction, whereas writing had remained in thrall to narrative and human psychology. Yes, there had been a modernist rupture in literature, and the achievements of Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett had been followed by generations of worthies, but the majority of serious

literary fiction, and all mass product, went right on pursuing the realistic concerns of "adult literature," in distinction to the serious art world, where there was really no going back to representational realism. As MoMA's founding doctrine put it: "Modernism is the art that is essentially abstract." The field of contemporary art was activated by cataclysm and relentless progress, while contemporary literature remained relatively staid. This was because it was a mass form, he reasoned: Who follows contemporary painting? The few. Who reads contemporary books? Everyone.

At this moment, however, he believed writing culture to be undergoing a tectonic shift and finally detaching itself from traditional narrative. No doubt this development was late in coming, trailing by a century visual art's own decisive innovations, but then again, for all that radical change, where was art now? Wallowing in hoary modes, patting itself on the back for having finally solved the evolutionary problem of how to be simultaneously good and bad, abstract and representational, popular and cutting edge, with the result that nothing was at stake but auction prices. Even much of the politically engaged work that positioned itself

in opposition to "market art" was obsessed with finance, aiming its critical guns at Bitcoin, bank logos, credit-default swaps, and the mythical 1 percent. Ultimately, this neurotic relationship to the market was an impoverishment.

Writing, on the other hand, which had little connection to money and power, was only broadening its already considerable mass appeal, thanks to the proliferation of texting, tweeting, blogging, and so on, even as those same forces were emancipating writing from its long-standing narrative conventions. In fact, it was less apposite to say "Who reads? Everyone" than "Who writes? Everyone." Maybe this explained why writing was becoming at the same time more popular and more abstract. In short, writing was becoming just plain *weirder*.

In this situation, and in distinction to the problems of visual art, *everything* was at stake: "the Novel," of course, but also "the field of literature," "the book business," "the future of the word," and communication itself. And no one knew what it meant. You could feel the charge of that anxious energy, it was the motor thrumming behind many recent novels and columns and articles and blog posts. He imagined this to be a historical echo of the

According to the digital way of thinking, anything could be transformed into anything else and no one need worry about being cheated because this alchemy relied not on cunning sophistry, economic sleight of hand, or cultural bad faith, but on the bland, automated, everyday magic of numbers. The hope was that everything would be reduced to a common currency, i.e., binary code, which would allow effortless transmission with no value lost on conversion. The dream of the cloud was complete meltdown, such that everything became liquid and to be pumped here, injected there, siphoned from me, and redirected to you. The aim of such a frictionless state was that anything, not only virtual but physical, might eventually be exchanged for absolutely anything else. Only not by you! The moment you snapped a photo, some force beyond you would transmogrify it into numbers, money, power; it might become a song, or a law, or a healthcare plan, or a disease vector, or a drone strike. The act of creating a thing therefore took on new stakes: producing a TV ad was no longer a matter of executing a short film—it concerned the minting of style and attitude, it meant cultivating a pirate mycelium capable of migrating across platforms; visual

was *fun*—funny, obscure, base, and senseless—in hopes of harnessing that raw force and turning it [illegible] lucrative and ubiquitous (which would of course deplete it and make it *suck* bad, at least until it was again up for redemption). Everything could be turned upside down, and was, and still made sense and who gave a shit? To take a strangely obtuse example, what did it mean that so many middle-class gay white men cultivated the speech patterns of lower-class straight black women? What it meant was an entrepreneurial opportunity. This culture knew only one word: meanings.

Something else occurred to him, and it was as if he were down, raising his eyes, gazing up from his own navel and out to the air around him, and then into the culture itself: ambiguity and confusion coalescing in a series of ever-wider rings, like the circles of hell. He briefly wondered if there were fresh material circles that couldn't have been dreamed of in Dante's time. Now he understood what linked all of these situations or conditions, what united his thinking and art's own present condition and American culture: it was "the digital," the digital way of thinking, that *Weltanschauung* that had seized his mind, his generation, and the world spun

media, social media, and any media that might succeed them. In the material world the constant was entropy; here, the constant was metamorphosis. The message was similar regardless of whether you were talking about advertising or finance or art or digital networks: values rise and fall; you can't count on liberty; all shall be fungible, morphable, and easily synthesized and ported and versioned and pirated; the lowest shall be highest and the highest, lowest, and you'll be a pauper if you can't surf this, play it, game it. *Everything all at once, all the time!* It sounded like a Christian idea but was probably the opposite, whatever that was.

Once again, what did it all mean? This was not only the big question—it always had been—it had metastasized into a kind of meta-question: what does that even mean, to ask what it means? The so-called digital age was, first and foremost, a tremendous challenge to the idea of *meaning* as a category. It was not yet clear if the category had been emptied out or filled up or mutated into something new, but there was tremendous anxiety about the shift.

He had developed a slightly off-the-wall theory about this shift to digital. Sometimes people talked about the shift in economic terms, where an

information economy had naturally developed from the *service economy*, which had displaced the *manufacturing economy*. We were in the middle of a societal shift, people said, in which you labored to create valuable information to be harvested by big data, and you were in constant communication but were at the same time increasingly alienated by all these transactions. There was some hackneyed truth to this, he supposed, but he thought it missed the bigger point, which was that we were changing from a society trying to understand World War II to a society trying to understand the digital.

Obviously this was a stretch. Normally you equated or analyzed historical factors within a matrix of either political history or socio-economy, but you didn't mix and match. Juxtaposing a historically bounded war and an amorphous technological shift made little sense. However, he understood these two phenomena as similar in that they were both points of noncomprehension, nodes of fluster, walls for a society to bang its head on. Just as the public needed its art to exhibit tremendous lack, societies wanted their central myths to be bottomless pits. Who doesn't love an abyss? Societies were like people: inconsolably fixated on that thing they



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