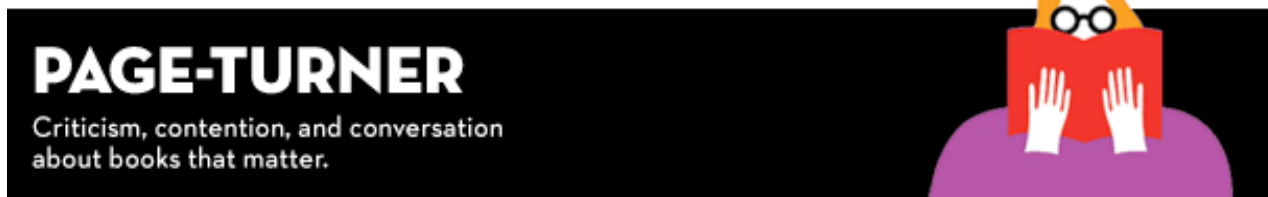


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March 5, 2013

The Art of Browsing

Posted by *Claire Barliant*

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A few months ago I was talking about research with a friend who is an academic. I told her I'd found a crucial text at the library: it was adjacent to the book I'd gone there to find. "Yes," she concurred, "it's never the book you want, *it's the book beside the book.*"

Remember that? Along with embossed hardcovers or tattered paperbacks, the "book beside the book" will soon seem quaint. You know the feeling: searching for something specific and stumbling on another book you've been curious about, then finding yourself, almost involuntarily, leaning against a wall or sinking onto a footstool, happily giving up the next half hour of your life. I'm sure some people think of browsing as an invitation to distraction, but I like to think of it an intellectual stroll. Some paths lead to meaningless cul-de-sacs, others to revelations. The tactile process of pulling out a stack of books and flipping through them is, to me, more stimulating than toggling between the windows open on my Web browser. Even the nomenclature "browser" is worth noting: it removes our agency. The software does the browsing. Not us. Browsing is fundamentally an act of independence, of chasing your own idiosyncratic whims rather than clicking on Facebook links or the books recommended by some greedy algorithm.



I write about art, so I spend much more time in galleries than bookstores or libraries. This requires serious looking, but in a managed way—the white-cube architecture dictates where I look and how. Picking and choosing books from a shelf offers more freedom, a chance for relaxed concentration. But lately I've been able to indulge my bibliophilia while on assignment. Both Art in General, a nonprofit gallery in Chinatown, and the EFA Project Space, a nonprofit gallery in Hell's Kitchen, feature non-circulating libraries in their current exhibitions.

At EFA Project Space, the curators David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska have carefully selected over a hundred novels by artists for their show "The Book Lovers," and displayed them on tables at the gallery where viewers can pick them up and read them. The eighty-three-year-old artist Yayoi Kusama, who had a Whitney retrospective last year, has written at least ten books; to produce at such a rate she must pick up her pen the moment she puts down her brush. The British artist Stewart Home, who wrote a book in 2002 called "69 Things To Do With A Dead Princess," is just as prolific. Writer's block is enviably foreign to these scribomaniacs. The collection includes experimental poetry and graphic pulp fiction, and promises many "wasted" hours of browsing. One caveat: the artist novel tends to be of the shaggy-dog variety, plotless and confounding, which generally means you can lose yourself in it all the more easily.

The Turkish artist Meriç Algün Ringborg, who is now based in Sweden, temporarily appropriated hundreds of books from the Center for Fiction's library and relocated them to Art in General's main gallery. These books share one thing in common: they have never been checked out. There are no due dates stamped on the inside covers. Most of the books were published during the golden age of book design, between the forties and seventies, suggesting that their selection was aesthetically motivated. This

makes for fun browsing. I have never heard of Judson Jerome or his book “The Fell of Dark,” but the cover is bewitchingly gorgeous: a watercolor of an orange sun tumbling into umber waves, on the verge of being overwhelmed by a swelling dark mass. While I browsed I found myself searching for flaws in the books that might have made them undesirable to library patrons—too many autobiographies thinly disguised as fiction?—but the little-known authors were mixed in with masters: books by Theodore Dreiser, Denis Johnson, Charles Dickens, and Franz Kafka are included in the show.

Ringborg’s “Library of Unborrowed Books” is not unlike the Brautigan Library in Vancouver, inspired by Richard Brautigan’s novel “The Abortion,” in which he envisions a home for unpublished manuscripts: “the unwanted, the lyrical and haunted volumes of American writing.” Incidentally, the Brautigan Library is the subject of another art work, by Banu Cennetoglu, on view at Artists Space in a show called “Frozen Lakes”—it is a large poster, free to take, bearing the library’s astrological chart. (The text, called “The Brautigan is a Taurus,” by Genevieve Jacobs, was published in 1992 in *The 23*, the library’s quarterly newsletter.)

Library-inspired art works aren’t new: Julia Weist, one of the artists in “The Book Lovers,” has a degree in library science and makes work using discarded library books (she also wrote a novel called “Sexy Librarian”), as does Andrew Beccone, who runs the Reanimation Library in Gowanus, re-cataloguing books that have fallen out of circulation. And two prominent New York artists Carol Bove and Matthew Higgs have been making art with books for several years: Bove, with her carefully arranged sculptures, prohibits viewers from perusing the books, while Higgs encourages it, attaching books to canvases with wires.

But with every trend, however modest, you have to wonder, why now? Is it possible that book browsing is already strange and unusual enough to be considered material for art? Everyone agrees that the future of publishing is electronic, with words beamed to us instantaneously. But in that case, what will happen to all of the books beside the book—and the places that store them? When they’re gone, where will we randomly stumble on the knowledge we didn’t even know we wanted to know?

Claire Barliant is a writer based in Brooklyn. She contributes art listings to the Goings On About Town section of the magazine.

“Meriç Algün Ringborg: The Library of Unborrowed Books” is on view at Art in General, 79 Walker St, through March 23rd.

“The Book Lovers” is on view at EFA Project Space, 323 W. 39th, through March 8th.

“Frozen Lakes” is on view at Artists Space, 38 Greene St, through March 24th.

Illustration by Lorenzo Mattotti.

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