

Writing Backwards

10 AUG.....9 SEP 2023
SCA GALLERY.....SYDNEY
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

CURATED BY

Emma O'Neill
& Alex Gawronski

PRESENTING FOUR SYDNEY-BASED INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS WHOSE WORK EMERGES FROM ARTMAKING. THIS EXHIBITION CONSIDERS THEIR PROCESS. BRINGING THESE DISTINCT PUBLISHERS INTO SCA GALLERY. *WRITING BACKWARDS* REVERSES THE TYPICAL ART-PUBLISHING PARADIGM BY WHICH PUBLISHED WORKS ARE RECONTEXTUALISED.

FEATURING

Hag Mag.....Pebble Press

Drita Ajredin, Margaret Barry, Rebecca Hall,
Michail Mathioudakis (aka Marcia Manhunter),
Adriana Musić, Ella Sanderson & Georgette Stefoulis

Mitch Cumming
& Mitch Cairns, what

Runway Journal...Stolon Press

Melinda Reid, Nicole Smede,
Toyah Webb, Yona

Simryn Gill
& Tom Melick

THE THIRD EXHIBITION IN AN ANNUAL SERIES AT SCA GALLERY FOCUSED ON INDEPENDENT ARTIST ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR INDISPENSABLY DYNAMIC, INVENTIVE, AND COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES.

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GALLERY MANAGER.....Liam Garstang
PREPARATORS.....Paul Greedy, Richard Kean, Dylan Batty
VISUAL DESIGN.....Janey Li

Positioning the exhibition visitor as a reader presents its challenges. Books, online journals, magazines, and pamphlets can be read in different ways: alone, aloud, from start to finish, link-to-link, or in sections. Reading is inherently different to viewing an artwork in a gallery. Still, exhibition catalogues and interpretive texts (like this one) typically come after an exhibition. *Writing Backwards* reverses this paradigm by centring published works as source material. Although the work of *Stolon Press*, *Runway Journal*, *Hag Mag* and *Pebble Press* is, in form, produced for intimate, private ‘reading’ experiences, the contents and collaborative nature of each lends itself to a communal ‘viewing’ experience. Here, art emerges from the varied containers of each publisher to take up physical space in the world of the gallery.

In the case of a publication in codex form, such as those produced by *Stolon Press*, it is not typically possible to read more than two pages at once, unless the decision is made to dis-bind the volume completely. Simryn Gill and Tom Melick’s *Bicycle Thief*¹ does just that. The work takes its name from Vittorio de Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), which also borrows from Luigi Bartolini’s novel, *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves, 1946). Inky photocopies of a dismembered bike trail across the gallery wall, recalling the film’s protagonist in his desperate search to identify stolen parts at a Roman flea market. Individually, the parts are alienated from their functionality. Arranged side-by-side, a sentence of images becomes legible as a complete bicycle — offering resolve for the film’s failed search, a gesture to the narrative’s return to its original book form and the negatives of a future *Stolon Press* edition.

For the epilogue of *Stolon Press’ Bicycle Thief*, a reproduction from Souchou Yao’s *The Malayan Emergency*¹ recalls a childhood bike accident with the author’s older, enigmatic and idolised Second Cousin. At large, the book recounts the guerrilla war between Commonwealth armed forces and communist insurgents in Malaya: a conflict that began the same year de Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) was released and concluded soon after the public dissemination of photocopy machines (1960). Overlaps between these histories extend beyond uncanny timelines. Yao’s chapter reveals the death of his factory-worker turned communist Second Cousin at the hands of armed forces, while Antonio, de Sica’s destitute protagonist, is failed by the state, church, and community and does not regain ownership of his bicycle: the key to upward mobility. Upon its public release in 1959 the Cold War technology of the photocopier was “co-opted by artists and media activists”² before it became a (seldom-used) office staple. Today, like Antonio’s bicycle, the Xerox has become central to Gill and Melick’s work and self-sufficiency as artists and publishers. The labour of pressing a bicycle between the jaws of a photocopier is at odds with the machine’s synonymity with ease and instantaneity. From this deliberate process arises the beauty and details of a friend’s borrowed bicycle threaded neatly from cover-to-cover with compelling personal, written and filmic narratives.

For *Runway Journal*, once printed and since 2012 exclusively online, a clicked link is a turning page. Each issue, centred on the collaborative vision of a guest editor and multiskilled board members, requires many of the same visual elements and decisions as printed matter (design, font, layout, cover image) to frame authored material. Gérard Genette termed such elements ‘paratexts’³ that guide reader experience. Where codex form is replaced by a string of code in the sprawling context of the web, decisions around these are particularly important. *Runway Journal* fully embraces audio-visual and interactive elements to guide reader interpretation. Works online remain true to the original definition of published editions: a democratic multiple, produced identically, again and again, with each reader’s loading screen.

Because the publication harnesses many of the technologies available in a gallery context, the possibilities of *Runway Journal’s* most recent *Issue 46: Ghost*, guest edited by Xanthe Dobbie, proved fertile for exhibition presentation. Still, though, how can new in-person ‘paratexts’ enhance interpretation or create an embodied experience in a new ‘reading’ environment? For Melinda Reid’s *The ASMR Touch* essay, subject matter becomes vehicle for the work’s second reading. The sensorial overload of ASMR is recreated within a cordoned-off confessional-like booth within the gallery. Beyond the curtain, videos (originally linked in-text) bubble from a home device while Reid whispers written content through headphones. The reader (listener, watcher) shares in the ASMR fantasy of becoming the reading device

(screen, journal). The narrative of Yona’s *ghost (girl)* is also recited onscreen: a digital spectre of the author, silently governed by an absent narrator who clicks through webpages on the gallery floor. The work cannot be further disconnected from its online format without risking dilution of the artist’s intent.

Toyah Webb’s musings on contemporary courtship, however, can easily be taken offline. An oblique rhyme of its original form, text scrawls down an LED marquee and is printed to be taken home. Even presented anew, the letter remains privately read and unanswered by exhibition viewers: “When I write you a love letter, I am demanding something from you. This demand vanishes at the moment of its appearance and is thus, unanswerable.” Nicole Smede’s animated poem, once spilling across the edges of a small screen, assumes more expansive real estate along with audio that swells through the gallery. The stirring sound connects the experience of all other works within *Runway’s* allotted corner. Here in lies the fundamental difference between reading online and seeing in person: encountering multiple works simultaneously allows the atmosphere of the publication and the editor’s vision at large to reveal itself more immediately, though no less meaningfully.

Speaking of love, Georges Bataille once wrote, “I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”⁴ Here, Bataille acknowledges the ‘irrational’, excessive passion of the fan, the collector, the fetishist, the ‘deviant’. At the same time, he recognised that this was somehow where art, given its implicit distancing from its object — no matter how impassioned — failed. It was down in the down and dirty that the B-Grade trumped Parnassus. Of course, this is something *Hag Mag’s* editors and contributors naturally realise: you want to get ‘real’ in a world of hyperaesthetic unreality, then aim for the bottom. Digging in the trash is going to exhume a whole lot of irrefutable experiences and desires that most would prefer to ignore or repress. Why be shy when you can confess? In any case, immersed in the hallucinatory miasma of the internet and social media, where all the ‘poor images’⁵ arise, can anyone really be sure who is confessing? And to what?

In this lurid cauldron, unrelated scenes, references, narratives, and identities swirl and intermix. Floating signifiers multiply, eagerly awaiting the chance to freely affix to the mind and imagination of anyone exposed. For better and worse. Whether in writing or pictures or both, the artists extracted from *Hag Mag* for this exhibition — Drita Ajredin, Margaret Barry, Rebecca Hall, Michail Mathioudakis (aka Marcia Manhunter), Adriana Musić and its editors, Ella Sanderson and Georgette Stefoulis — all enthusiastically embrace the freedom and absurdity of adopting alternative *unter* personas. They revel resistant in the language of the underground after we were told it couldn’t exist. They know that to be another is to be other than what the expediencies of everyday life would have us: functional, productive, useful, ‘normal’. The ‘Hags’ prefer shapeshifting in full gloss colour, confidently aware that, as they have said, “only the sexiest people read *Hag Mag*”.

Pebble Press, coordinated by Mitch Cairns and Mitch Cumming quietly defies a media landscape acclimatized to ultra-high definition. For them, doing-it-yourself inevitably gestures to alternatives, in this case — and somewhat akin to the aesthetics and intent of *Stolon Press* — the visual poetry of Black & White photocopies. Earlier the ‘alternative’ cinema of the *Nouvelle Vague* shot handheld cheap in the street. Cairns and Cumming publish with similar immediacy. This immediacy does not preclude subtlety, complexity, or elegance, in fact it enhances them. When the point is the poem, the paper is the ground. Like the pebbles plucked, sucked, and passed in rigorous sequence around the coat pockets of Molloy, the central character in Beckett’s novel of the same name — or the pebbles circulating noisily in the cement mixer gracing the SCA gallery entry — *Pebble Press* cycles the metaphoric pockets of its subscribers.

Likewise, *Ebb*, a new publishing endeavour by Cairns and Cumming, offers an artist’s novel... of one copy. *Casual Library Assistant* by Sydney artist what⁶ exists in its singularity ready to be circulated. It speaks to a potential mass of readers albeit one at a time. Obviously, this gesture contravenes entirely, cloying imperatives demanding infinite market extension. Indeed, now there is no market, only potential readers. The emphasis is on what’s important, the experience of the text and the pleasure of passing it on, for free. In the gallery, frustrations with the realities of work evident in what’s novel, surface in his series

of large prints. In them, the line “I want to kill myself” is obsessively repeated in impeccable cursive font, a paradox worthy of Thomas Bernhard (printed, we must remember these words were literally written backwards). In the entrance leading to this exhibition, what’s colourful portraits of library patrons, surreally comical, satirical, and unhinged, gaze over visitors.

In many ways, we often consider art publications the final resting place for the appreciation of art and its attendant ideas. *Writing Backwards* indicates alternatively that art in published form can be equally generative as art moves from its analysis and representation back to its physical and spatial manifestation. Particular to each of the publishers represented in *Writing Backwards* is an underlying inclination towards autonomy and self-sufficiency evident in different ways and to differing degrees: *Stolon Press* is simply but beautifully and thoughtfully produced; *Runway Journal’s* online presence makes it eminently accessible and virtually distributable; *Hag Mag* generates its own alternative fan club and growing community of dedicated ‘freaks’ and ‘weirdos’; *Pebble Press* adheres to the power and effectiveness of considered immediacy ‘curating’ individual editions through genuine connections and printing cheaply in small editions. Of course, the visual identity of each of these publications is also differentiated. The palm-sized quasi-miniaturist classicism of *Stolon Press* is worlds away from the online hyperlinked audio-visual intercreativity of *Runway Journal*. *Hag Mag’s* maximalist glossy colour spreads engaging trash and outré culture look very different to *Pebble Press’* minimalist-leaning, generously spaced A4 monochromaticism.

From the perspective of this exhibition, the art works produced post-publication specifically in relation to art publishing, indicate their eminent extendability. Printing a physical object like a bicycle is clearly different from printing ‘mere’ words. It is also strangely comparable because a bicycle, like any-thing, comes with all its potential reference points and symbolism. To make an object like a bicycle its own poem is to indicate the embodied-ness of text in its broadest understanding. Texts never end. They absorb and encompass everything and anything depending on where we cast our attention. The space of the computer screen or tablet is related but unlike the experience of a wall-sized projection enabled by the public architecture of a gallery. Similarly, the intimacy and experiential privacy of one-to-one online interaction feels considerably dissimilar when encountered in such a space. The discarded paraphernalia of some self-exposing low-brow bacchanalian performance mean something else entirely when confronted as objects in person, especially given awareness of their use(d) value. A description of river pebbles churning in a used cement mixer in an enclosed environment cannot approach the phenomenon of their actual audio-corporeal confrontation. All in all, *Writing Backwards* aims to show how independent creative initiatives continually self-generate both in words and in the world. Moreover, this generative movement occurs at the level closest to artists and to the originary impulse to creatively intervene in reality.

— Emma O’Neill & Alex Gawronski

¹Yao, Souchou. *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016.

²Nick Croggon, “Stolon Press: Publishing as a Collective Practice.” *Artist Profile*: Issue 59, 2022.

³Genette, Gérard, and Marie Maclean. “Introduction to the Paratext.” *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1991, pp. 261-72.

⁴ Bataille, Georges. “The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions.” in *Undercover Surrealism*. Dawn Adès and Simon Baker eds., Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. P. 242.

⁵ For artist-theorist Hito Steyerl, the ‘poor image’ is an image at its basest proliferating in particular, over the internet. Poor images are notable not only for their lo-fi technical standards but for their routinely awkward design and low-brow, often problematic or ‘inappropriate’, content. Examples include types

of internet pop-up ads and banners, and various varieties of memes but also, more ‘traditionally’, cheaply produced and often crass late night television advertisements. However, a poor image might also simply refer to low-resolution imagery technically overridden and rendered irrelevant, by the contemporary ubiquity of digital HD. See Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.

⁶ A donning tribute to Samuel Beckett’s character Watt perhaps?