

The Readymade Novel

How conceptual art took over avant-garde literature.

By Shaj Mathew

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POSTMODERNISM IS NOW A RATHER unmeaning term, dulled by overuse, and unfit to describe a new group of authors of varying ages and nationalities who are often lumped together under its umbrella: Ben Lerner, Sophie Calle, Teju Cole, Tom McCarthy, Alejandro Zambra, Siri Hustvedt, Michel Houellebecq, Sheila Heti, Orhan Pamuk, and Enrique Vila-Matas, the sexagenarian Barcelona-based writer who, with over 20 novels to his name, is perhaps the most prolific yet least-known of them all.

Call them, instead, the *Reality Hunger* generation, after David Shields's ingenious and prophetic 2010 manifesto on contemporary writing. For Shields, novels that employ the traditional conventions of narration, plot, and story no longer make sense. Reality is fiction, and fiction is reality. For a more accurate reflection of our experience, we ought to think of novels the way we think about art. "A novel, for most readers—and critics—is primarily a 'story,'" writes Shields. "But a work of art, like the world, is a living form. It's in its form that its reality resides."

So if form is now all-important—more so than content—what is the form that contemporary works of art so often take? Collage. This also happens to be the form of *Reality Hunger*. In addition to outlining the future of artistic production, *Reality Hunger* doubles as a blueprint for it: It is a pastiche, a series of intentionally "plagiarized" aphorisms, presented without quotation marks. (The original sources are listed in the index for legal reasons, but Shields encourages the reader to cut them out.)

In the years since *Reality Hunger* was published, fiction has evolved and adopted its

own post-Shields specificities. This genre is marked by its generic porousness, its willingness to embrace a collage of forms. Zambra's *Ways of Going Home* and Lerner's *10:04* become poems, while other novels dialogue with music and theater. Many of these novels blend author and narrator, and include moments of essayistic prose or literary criticism. (This genre-merging technique may stoke the anxieties critics: How do you say something new about a book that writes its own criticism?)

Most significantly, these novels intersperse their prose with photographs and paintings—a kind of collage that is not merely textual. At first, these additions seem to pose a basic question of realism: Can the novel compete with the "reality effect" of the photograph or the feel of a painting? In this, the writers are channeling the novelist W.G. Sebald, who deploys visual art not as a supplement to the text, but as inspiration for it. Sebald's photographs, as Teju Cole put it in an interview, "create the uncanny, destabilizing mood of his books: it must all be true, we think, but we know it can't all be true." Sophie Calle's work *Suite Vénitienne*—a diary of photos she surreptitiously took of a stranger, published alongside the essay "Please Follow Me" by Jean Baudrillard—takes Sebald to another level: Photos provide the main action, while the text serves as an interlude.

In addition to the insertion of actual art, many of these reality-fictions feature scenes in museums or at contemporary art exhibitions. The opening of Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* takes place at the Prado, where the narrator finds the reluctance of the museum guards to close in on an erratic visitor more moving than the actual paintings. Sheila Heti spends three days at Art Basel in *How Should a Person Be?*, and Michel Houellebecq lampoons the contemporary art world in *The Map and*



A photo from Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*.

the Territory. Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* begins with the discovery of a painting, while her most recent effort, *The Blazing World*, lays bare the systemic bias against women in the art world. Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* literally became a museum in Istanbul.

Art hasn't just infiltrated the contemporary novel, it's gone the other way as well. Many art fairs include talks by writers. Hustvedt (also the author of a well-received book of art criticism), has lectured at the Prado and the Met. In an interview published this spring, the novelist Tom McCarthy described how falling in with a crowd of visual artists in his twenties gave him a more sophisticated understanding of literature's possibilities: "These people generally had a much more dynamic engagement with literature than most 'literary' people."

This coalescence around art seems de-creasingly coincidental and more and

The Illogic of Kassel By Enrique Vila-Matas | New Directions, 256 pp., \$16.95

A Brief History of Portable Literature By Enrique Vila-Matas | New Directions, 128 pp., \$14.95

more the entire point. The avant-garde writers of today aspire to be conceptual artists and have their novels considered conceptual art. This may be literature's Duchampian moment. Welcome to the readymade novel.

JUST AS MARCEL DUCHAMP ASKED IF A urinal could be art, the readymade novel asks what literature can be, and what it should be in the future. Instead of trying to understand reality via a slew of concrete details, omniscience, multiple viewpoints, or anything else that we've traditionally expected from fiction, the readymade novel poses an idea: It is more interested in the concept behind a work of art—behind itself—than its execution. The readymade novel underlines the chief virtue (or curse) of conceptual art: Unlike traditional visual art, you don't actually need to see a readymade to "get it." But if you do go see it, you're not merely a passive viewer, but an active participant in the artwork's formation.

Two newly published books by the Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas show just how deeply this literature-as-conceptual-art trend has permeated avant-garde contemporary literature. In Vila-Matas's latest novel, *The Illogic of Kassel*, the writer has literally become a contemporary art exhibition. The novel lightly fictionalizes Vila-Matas's real-life experience at the Documenta art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, where he was invited to participate in a weeklong writer-in-residence program in 2013. The curators of Documenta ask him to spend the week writing in the corner of a small Chinese restaurant. Vila-Matas finds this absurd, and spends most of his time at the (real-life) Dschingis Khan restaurant sleeping, inventing conversations between the German and Chinese people around him, and actively avoiding the one crazy person who approaches him. Despite seemingly wasting his time in the restaurant, Vila-Matas becomes the piece of performance art that the curators

of Documenta hoped he would be: "Art is art, and what you make of it is up to you," one curator tells him.

Vila-Matas is also the author of *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, originally published in 1985 and jointly released this summer with *The Illogic of Kassel*. *A Brief History of Portable Literature* is the more raw of the two books, a whimsical romp based on the peregrinations of a secret literary society of "Shandies" (as in *Tristram Shandy*). It is perhaps best (self-deprecatingly) described within its own pages as "a journey that sought no goal, no fixed object, and was clearly futile." This book is a catalogue of the avant-garde—with allusions to Duchamp, Walter Benjamin, Man Ray, Georgia O'Keeffe—that is composed in a style that teeters between funny and obnoxiously in-the-know. There is a mockumentary retrospective feel to it: a piecemeal investigation into the events that precipitated the demise of this gloriously short-lived secret society, which required its members to make portable art, i.e., readymades à la Duchamp's box-in-a-suitcase.

Read together, these two novels, published some 30 years apart, demonstrate the evolution of Vila-Matas's thinking on the relationship between contemporary art and literature. *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, on one hand, simply ventriloquizes this gaggle of Duchampian disciples. It's almost like highbrow fan fiction. But in *The Illogic of Kassel*, Vila-Matas doesn't merely tell us how great artists attempted to create portable art—he *becomes* part of the portable art. Sulking in the Chinese restaurant, writing or merely pretending to do so, Vila-Matas was an official exhibition at Documenta, where a writers' residency advertised its desire for "moments of 'chorality': instances of mutual commitment, whether loud or muted; the possibility that voices could meet and join together, without the outright demand that they should." The question—what if we make the solitary act of writing a public performance? Can we

have privacy in a public space?—outstrips the execution in importance.

That's not the sole project of the readymade novel, however: Vila-Matas also reminds us that we don't live like nineteenth-century French novelists anymore, so we should stop writing according to their *démodé*, quasi-scientific conventions of realism. "We loathe the realist ... who thinks the task of the writer is to reproduce, copy, imitate reality, as if, in its chaotic evolution, its monstrous complexity, reality could be trapped and narrated," writes Vila-Matas in *The Illogic of Kassel*. "We are amazed by writers who believe that the more empirical and prosaic they are, the closer they get to the truth, when in fact the more details you pile up, the further that takes you away from reality."

The means to the "truth" proposed by Vila-Matas lie in something closer to the processes of conceptual art. In *The Illogic of Kassel*, Vila-Matas repeats a line that the poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote in a letter: "Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces." In other words, the impact of art has now become more important than the canvas. Indeed, Vila-Matas demands an active reader: Just as the conceptual art installations at Documenta required viewer participation to form meaning, Vila-Matas asks the same of his readers. "Art is art, and what you make of it is up to you," a Documenta curator in his novel reminds us. Grappling with competing interpretations, processing your various associations, feelings, and theories—this is the work of art in the new millennium.

The "readymade" writers are, of course, still on the fringes of contemporary literature. Only Pamuk and Sebald are internationally famous. Cole and Lerner are on their way to greater recognition, but Sophie Calle may be perpetually too avant-garde, and Vila-Matas and Zambra will have to wait for more English-language translations of their work to get their proper due. Regardless of their varying commercial successes, the emergence of these writers suggests at least a small audience with an interest in how we experience art today. And it seems likely that the younger writers of this generation will continue to write similar books in the future. The readymade novelists may inspire a few readymade imitations of their own. ●

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